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Power is enacted to oppress others, pursue wellness, or resist oppression. For Black people, societal and relational oppression influences racialized and gendered expressions of power within sexual encounters. The current study analyzed power dynamics within Black university students' first and most recent sexual encounters. Using narrative inquiry within a critical paradigm, five narrative strategies were identified within participants' interviews: 1) Offering a Peek into Powerlessness, 2) Detailing Disempowerment, 3) Privileging Stereotypical Power, 4) Reclaiming Power, and 5) Emphasizing Empowered Sex. Racialized, gendered sexual socialization among Black students is discussed. Counseling considerations to increase sexual wellness for Black people are explored.

*Keywords:* sexual power; black; empowerment; qualitative; college students

## Introduction

Power involves political and psychological processes (Prilleltensky, 2008), influenced by personal motivations as well as cultural influences. One domain where power dynamics become apparent is within sexual encounters. Individuals have three types of power in sexual encounters: “power to strive for wellness, power to oppress, and power to resist oppression and pursue liberation” (Prilleltensky, 2008, p. 121). In consensual, mutually pleasurable sexual encounters, participants share power to strive for and contribute to each other's wellness. Using power to oppress, participants non-consensually dominate or denigrate their sexual partners through manipulation, disrespect, coercion, or assault. For those using sexual power to resist oppression and pursue liberation, this may include subverting sexual stereotypes or reducing reliance on constricting gender roles. Ultimately, Prilleltensky (2008) argues that power is always present. For Black people, who historically and currently experience gendered, racialized oppression, sexual power is mediated by experiences related to marginalization.

Sexual power is expressed within three domains: personal, relational, and collective contexts (Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann, 2004). For example, the interaction between two

or more individuals in a sexual encounter involves the personal power of each individual (Connell, 2013). Furthermore, sexual encounters with others are by nature relational (Connell, 2013). In addition, politics of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities bring collective dynamics of power into sexual encounters (Bowleg et al., 2004). Specifically, in Black sexual encounters, there is an intermix of dynamics such as sex roles and beliefs (Bowleg et al., 2004; D. K. Lewis, 1975), gendered and racialized stereotypes (Givens & Monahan, 2005; Peterson, Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington, & Davies, 2007; Staples, 1978), and race relations within the context of interracial sex (Steinbugler, 2005)

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that manifest and impact the way Black individuals interpret and voice their sexual experiences. Sex positive literature focused on power in interracial sexual relationships is largely missing (Alexander, 2019; Loo, 2017). Further, research surrounding power dynamics and the impact sexual encounters have when the partners are both from marginalized groups is primarily negative (Bowleg, Valera, Teti, & Tschann, 2010). Thus, the narration and utilization of power in Black people's sexual encounters is an understudied phenomenon.

### The Current Study

For this paper, we define power as the ability, actual or perceived, to enact one's desires individually, interpersonally, and within society. We conceptualize a spectrum of power that ranges from powerlessness to empowerment, with the potential for positive and negative expressions and purposes of power. Negative expressions of power align with power to dominate and oppress. Positive expressions of power align with power to strive for wellness and/or resistance and liberation from oppression. Therefore, empowerment occurs when someone's ability to enact their power positively is enhanced.

The current study qualitatively explored gendered and racialized power dynamics within the sexual experiences of 18 Black collegians at a large southeastern conference university in the United States (US). We highlight participant portrayals of power dynamics within the narration of their first and most recent sexual encounters and provide an analysis of the spectrum of powerlessness to empowerment these Black students experienced and how racism and gender roles informed those experiences. We then connect these power dynamics to the model posited by Prilleltensky (2008) described above.

### Literature Review

#### Critical Sexuality

Few studies address how power defines and shapes the sexual experiences of Black individuals (Bowleg, Belgrave, & Reisen, 2000; Bowleg, 2004; Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Empirical depictions of Black sexuality are often stereotypical, enforcing tropes of Black sexuality as threatening and dangerous (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; L. J. Lewis, 2004) and neglecting to explore healthy and empowered Black sexuality. Fahs and McClelland (2016) propose a critical sexuality framework to study sex and power, which (a) is attuned to the participants' definitions and explores the experiences of sex and power, (b) recognizes the impact of socialization and intersectionality, and thus (c) challenges the universal definition of empowered sex that is devoid of socio-political context, history, and privilege. Pairing Fahs and McClelland's (2016) critical sexuality approach with Prilleltensky's (2008) power framework facilitates both a sexuality-specific

and power-focused analysis across personal, relational, and collective domains. Further, we discuss the spectrum of powerlessness to sexual empowerment of individuals with racially marginalized identities and highlight the impact of gender socialization.

### Sexual Empowerment and Gender

The experience of sexual empowerment may differ across genders (Bay-Cheng, 2011; Lamb & Peterson, 2011) and can be curtailed by cultural norms (Harvey, Beckman, Browner, & Sherman, 2002). As an example, Lamb and Peterson (2011) highlight the gendered experience of power among adolescent girls: (a) the particularly gendered pressure to please one's partner, (b) the influence of media on the sexual objectification of women, and (c) the power difference and vulnerability inherent in age. The authors challenge the idea of women's ability to engage in empowered sex when restricted by gender norms, age, media socialization, and potentially unrealistic conceptions of what healthy or "good" sex is. They question whether women ever truly have the "power to resist oppression and pursue liberation" (Prilleltensky, 2008, p. 121). This form of power is linked to sexual autonomy, or the ability for someone to determine under what circumstances they have sex (Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985; Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012; Smith, 2007).

Sexual autonomy translates to a subjective and objective sense of sexual empowerment. Subjectively, sexual autonomy occurs when someone feels they are able to engage in sex in ways that align with their values and decisions about how they want to have sex (Lamb & Peterson, 2011). However, objectively, systemic and institutional power, including access to resources and the ability to influence and determine behaviors of others, may enhance or limit one's sexual autonomy (Lamb & Peterson, 2011). Therefore, sexual autonomy is restrained by gender, which may ultimately limit the experiences of empowered sex.

In heterosexual or heteronormative contexts, men are constricted to roles of proactive power (seeking out women, initiating; Orbe, Johnson, Kauffman, & Cooke-Jackson, 2014) and women to reactive power (accepting or refusing; Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985). Stereotypically gendered sexual socialization is constrictive for men and women because it prevents them from having a full sexual experience (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2014; Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005). Further, these dynamics of sexual autonomy may only partly apply, or may apply differently in those contexts that are not heteronormative. While these data clarify the impact of gender on sexual empowerment, it is important to consider how gender intersects with a racially marginalized identity to influence sexual empowerment.

## Impact of Gender and Racial Socialization

Empowerment enacted within gendered sexual norms (Bay-Cheng, 2011) are further shaped by the historical and contextual experiences of racialized Black individuals and power dynamics occurring at the collective level (Prilleltensky, 2008). Historically, Black men and women have been stripped of power to choose, discover, and engage in empowered sex (Collins, 2004). They continue to be socialized to embody both racialized and gendered sexual stereotypes (Townsend, 2008; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). This begs the question: how empowered can a choice be when an individual's power is inherently limited and oppressed by the confines of socialized gendered and racialized contexts?

For Black men and women, sexual stereotypes connected to the intersection of race and gender are prevalent in society (Collins, 2004, 2005). For Black men, these stereotypes include being hypersexual and dangerous or having high sexual prowess (Beasley, 2008; Crowell, Delgado-Romero, Mosley, & Huynh, 2016). For Black women, these stereotypes include the "Jezebel" and "Gold Digger," which represent Black women as hypersexual and transactional sex agents, respectively (Cowan & Campbell, 1994; French, 2012). These stereotypes were created and reinforced during colonization, enslavement, and segregation eras to dehumanize Black men and women as a means to justify those three White oppressive structures and behaviors (McGruder, 2008; Nagel, 2000). Subverting social norms that dictate limited acceptable sexual expression for Black men and women may have consequences that can manifest as social sanctions. Therefore, racist and sexist stereotypes limit sexual expression and experiences "because 'performing' gender in the bedroom robs them of the spontaneity needed for sexual satisfaction" (Sanchez et al., 2012, p. 172).

Consequently, the majority of existing research exploring power in the sexual experiences of Black US citizens is rooted in or reinforces stereotypes of Black sexuality (C. Hargons, Mosley, & Stevens-Watkins, 2017; Jones, 2018). Literature solely addressing risky sexual behaviors can be helpful for prevention. However, doing so without also exploring healthy and empowered Black sexuality is problematic for two reasons. First, Black bodies become racialized and portrayed as contaminated bodies (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), thus contributing to the stereotypes of Black bodies as dangerous. Second, in the absence of highlighting and exploring empowered and healthy Black sexuality, interventions lack empirical grounding and are informed by the subjective perspectives and beliefs surrounding Black sexuality (Jones, 2018). This study aims to contribute to the literature by exploring the full range of power in sexual experiences, including healthy and empowered Black sexuality.

## Methods

As part of a larger study on Black university student sexual narratives, this narrative qualitative study highlighted the positioning of power in participants' sexual narratives about their sexual debut and most recent sexual encounters (Deppermann, 2013). This paper examines sexual debut and last encounter narratives through Prilleltensky's (2008) description of power and a critical sexuality paradigm (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). A critical paradigm recognizes the power relations underlying thought and behavior, allowing power relations to be brought to conscious awareness and providing space for the questioning and transformation of power relations (Tracy, 2013). Furthermore, we used narrative inquiry, which recognizes how the stories participants tell shape their experiences and meaning making (Tracy, 2013). Utilizing a critical paradigm within a narrative inquiry framework allowed us to explore participants' positionalities on how their identities inform their experiences of sexual power in a more nuanced and intersectional way. The paradigm also guided us in setting the context for our qualitative approach towards interviews with participants in which five narrative strategies were identified (Ponterotto, 2005).

## Subjectivities Statement

Different individuals contributed to this project at various stages. During initial data collection and analysis, the research team consisted of seven members, two identifying as Black women, four White women, and one White man. Due to changes within the research team, further analysis and write up of power within the narratives for this paper incorporated additional team members. These additional members included two Black women and two Black men. At the stage of manuscript creation and revision, two Black women and one White woman joined the team and revised the manuscript. The research team members predominantly identified as heterosexual, with two identifying as bisexual. All research team members were cis gender.

As researchers seek to understand the stories of their participants, it is important to evaluate their own narratives (Carter, Lapum, Lavallée, & Martin, 2014), as all identities included influence the interpretation of results. Utilizing a narrative inquiry framework, the power and data analysis included researchers coding participant's transcripts individually then collectively to capture the full story. Given the varied social locations of the research team, all members were trained on Black sexuality and narrative research methods during yearlong weekly research team meetings and two six-hour long training workshops led by the first author. The first author specialized in sexuality, Black sexuality, sex therapy, and various qualitative research methods, including narrative inquiry, through a decade of coursework and clinical training before undertaking this study. Throughout the research



process, the team discussed how its members' cultural identities may have influenced members' reactions and the co-construction of the research narratives. For example, conversations regarding intersectionality and reflexivity were ongoing to ensure an intersectional, sex-positive, critical sexuality lens remained at the forefront of the recruiting, interviewing, analyzing, and interpreting processes. Having gender, racial, and sexual identity diversity on the research team enhanced the research process overall.

There were no differences in the quality of the data elicited by White and Black research team members, but there were differences in content on occasion, particularly when the participant shared an interracial sexual encounter. We believe this difference was because White researchers were advised to name their Whiteness in the room and briefly acknowledge the possibility that the racial power dynamics may be uncomfortable given the racist history of White researchers and Black research participants. Aligned with a critical research paradigm, this self-disclosure and research reflexivity seemingly increased comfort for participants and permitted participants to disclose the negative aspects of their interracial sexual experiences.

### Participants and Recruitment

Eighteen Black students at a large southeastern conference university consented to participate in this IRB-approved study. Participants were undergraduate and graduate students; all identified as Black, with three identifying as Black biracial and two identifying as Black with immediate African heritage from Zimbabwe and Nigeria (see Table 1).

In terms of gender, nine participants identified as women, eight as men, and one as a queer femme man. One participant identified as a gay male, one participant identified as a pansexual woman, and the remaining 16 participants identified as heterosexual/straight. Social identity labels used here, and throughout the results, reflect the autonomous language choices of the participants. Participants were recruited via flyers posted in locations around the campus that catered to Black students, listserv postings by Black student-focused organizations, and direct recruitment by handing out flyers in person on campus.

### Procedures

Audio-recorded, semi-structured in-depth interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes. The study was broadly focused on Black students' sexual experiences, thus no questions explicitly inquired about power dynamics. However, an inductive coding process revealed both content and narrative strategies related to power dynamics. Interview questions included asking the participants about their identities and how they describe themselves. Next, participants were asked to recall the first time they had intercourse and gave details about the experience with questions like: How was

it? What sensations do you remember? Was it good to you? Next, they were asked to recall their most recent sexual experience and to give detail with prompts like: What was it like? What emotions come to mind that you think of it? How would you describe the experience based on intimacy, satisfaction, and overall? Finally, participants were asked to process the interview and give feedback about the process.

Upon completion of the interview, the research team member who conducted the interview transcribed the interview verbatim. Pseudonyms were used in the transcription of interviews to substitute identifying information and protect confidentiality. Data collection was concluded at the point when no new patterns of narration arose relating to the initial patterns created for the study. However, for a narrative study, saturation is not the primary criterion for ending data collection, as the focus is centered on how participants describe their sexual narratives as much as it is what they share (Hiles, Čermák, & Chrz, 2017).

Data were analyzed using a narrative inquiry framework (Hiles et al., 2017), but constructivist grounded theory methods provided an analytic guideline for initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). For example, each interview transcript was coded line by line initially, and the transcripts were reviewed by all members of the research team (Guest, 2008). Once research team members demonstrated competence in coding, transcripts were coded by individual research team members; however, all research team members were given the opportunity to review and add additional codes in this phase. During the focus coding phase, the research team began looking for overarching narrative strategies in the initial codes. The team constructed content-based patterns, including pleasure, power, and intimacy, while participant narrative strategies focused on the purpose behind what was and was not shared by the participants, as well as how certain aspects of content were used by participants to position themselves in their narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The current study represents participants' positioning of power for themselves and their sexual partners in their first and last sexual encounters, with some narratives addressing sexual experiences that were intermediate when participants wanted to emphasize an aspect of their identity, power, and position.

### Results

Participants described the myriad ways they experienced the spectrum of power within their first and last sexual encounters. Throughout the interview, participants were able to give meaning to the power dynamics in their sexual narratives. Participants described their experiences of sexual power using the following five narrative strategies: 1) Offering a Peek into Powerlessness, 2) Detailing Disempowerment, 3) Privileging Stereotypical Power, 4) Reclaiming Power, and 5) Emphasizing Empowered Sex (see Table 2).

Table 1  
Demographics

| Pseudonym | Age | Race   | Gender                  | Sexual Orientation                              | Class-related Self-disclosures              |
|-----------|-----|--|-------------------------|---|---|
| Aaliyah   | 24  | Black  | female                  | heterosexual                                    | "I buy what I want and what I need"         |
| Binda     | 23  | African-American                                     | female                  | straight with prior same sex experiences        | doesn't "see" class                         |
| Cliff     | 18  | African-American                                     | male                    | straight  |   |
| Devin     | 21  | Black  | male                    | straight  | lower middle class                          |
| Eve       | 20  | Black  | female                  | heterosexual                                    | foster system upbringing                    |
| Freedra   | 20  | Black Nigerian American                              | woman                   | pansexual                                       |   |
| Gabrielle | 19  | "half Black half White"                              | female                  | straight  |   |
| Harry     | 22  | Black  | male                    | straight  |   |
| Isabelle  | 23  | African-American                                     | woman                   | heterosexual                                    | middle class family/<br>lower class herself |
| Jack      | 21  | African American                                     | male                    | heterosexual                                    |   |
| Kevin     | 18  | African American                                     | male                    | heterosexual                                    | middle to upper class                       |
| Lorna     | 21  | African-American                                     | woman                   | heterosexual                                    |   |
| Mario     | 18  | African-American                                     | man                     | straight  |   |
| Neal      | 18  | Mixed: African-American and White                    | male                    | straight  | middle class                                |
| Olivia    | 18  | Black  | girl                    | straight with "gay person tendencies sometimes" | upper middle class                          |
| Penelope  | 19  | Black  | woman                   | middle class                                    |   |
| Que       | 18  | African-American                                     | male                    | straight  | middle class                                |
| Ralph     | 22  | Black (dad is white, mom is black and from Zimbabwe) | uses masculine pronouns | queer   | upper middle class                          |

### Offering a Peek into Powerlessness

Describing their first and most recent sexual encounters, participants shared their experiences of powerlessness. In sharing these experiences, participants showed their vulnerability, sometimes crying, with the interviewers. Offering a peek into powerlessness often came as participants disclosed experiences of sexual coercion. Eve, 20, described her first sexual experience as "the guy kinda forced himself on me," and she shared multiple factors that contributed to her feeling powerless in the moment:

I was scared, but I felt like I couldn't do nothing because, one, I wasn't in my own city, I wasn't in my own car, my phone was dead, and I didn't want to call my mom because I would get in trouble.

For Eve, as a 20-year-old Black heterosexual woman, being in an unknown situation and other external factors led to her feeling trapped, which increased her sense of powerlessness. Eve's narrative aligns both with gender stereotypes, but also with the history of vulnerability and victimization

that women face. Similarly, Gabrielle, a 19-year-old biracial heterosexual woman, shared moments from her first and last sexual encounters when she decided prior to the sexual encounter that she would forego sex and then felt unable to stand by her decision in the moment. Gabrielle stated, "it's like I let it happen. I go against what I decide in my head, and I just let it happen." Gabrielle offered the interviewer a peek into powerlessness by describing the feeling of betraying herself and her decisions. Coercion, unwanted sex, and sexual assault were an unfortunate reality that these women faced, and their narrative strategies represent the myriad ways their sense of powerlessness was imposed.

Isabelle, a 23-year-old Black heterosexual woman, described how social pressure influenced her decision to have sex: "Just because like one, all my friends had done it, and then, like, two, I kind of felt like if I didn't have sex with him then like he'd probably like find somebody else to go have sex with." Not only did she disclose her fear of being left out among her sexually active peers, she also indicated a level of vulnerability in disclosing fears of her partner finding someone else. Women traditionally have not had the power in sexual encounters due to patriarchal norms and sexism, and

Table 2

*Definitions and Examples of Power Narrative Strategies*

| Narrative Strategy                 | Definition and Example  |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Offering a Peek into Powerlessness | <p><b>Definition:</b> Participants sharing moments of feeling a lack of power. They talked about instances of sexual coercion and abuse, and willingly (whether consciously or subconsciously) distancing from the “strong Black woman” or “John Henry” tropes.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> “I was scared, but I felt like I couldn’t do nothing because, one, I wasn’t in my own city, I wasn’t in my own car, my phone was dead, and I didn’t want to call my mom because I would get in trouble.”</p>   |
| Detailing Disempowerment           | <p><b>Definition:</b> Detailing a moment where power was taken away from the participant. A reflexive process.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> “And so, we were just hangin’ out and then he kind of started making some moves like kissin’ on me or whatever. And I was just like ehh. . . I don’t think I’m ready for this. . . . And then I wouldn’t say peer pressure but kind of peer pressured me into having sex, and we end up having sex. And I actually didn’t bleed, which was surprising, but it was extremely painful.”</p>   |
| Privileging Stereotypical Power    | <p><b>Definition:</b> Participants discussed how the weight of their assumed power actually stripped them of it, otherwise preventing the exertion of that power (i.e. the pressure of racist sexual expectations).</p> <p><b>Example:</b> “It does feel like, sometimes, white girls are like fetishists, you know. . . so, (pause) yeah, it kinda de-humanizes us to like, to be sexual objects. . . that’s why whenever I have sex with a white girl, I have to like wow her. . . but it doesn’t always have to be like that, I guess.”</p>  |
| Reclaiming Power                   | <p><b>Definition:</b> Moments when the narrative space became a platform to retell the story in a way that reclaimed the lost power from their encounters. They may have reflected on insight gained since that experience to talk about what they learned, or they may have highlighted small moments where they did something that attempted to regain their power.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> “Yes. When I first started having sex, I thought that the boy was supposed to take charge. Yeah, I can slow down, and he does whatever he wants to do. That’s totally opposite now. I feel like if I want to have sex, I have to pleasure myself too. He can’t just be the one at the end of the day pleased.”</p> |
| Emphasizing Empowered Sex          | <p><b>Definition:</b> Mention of positive, empowered sexual encounters, where they experienced pleasure, autonomy, and agency. Their joy in those experiences came through in the way they emphasized how they asked for what they wanted, said no for what they were not interested in, and shared mutual pleasure and typically connection with their partner.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> “I feel like sex is, if I could sum it up, it would just be that sex is really about having fun, and, at least, in my opinion, and helping someone else have fun.”</p>  |

the above narratives show how that context informed these women’s sexual power.

For these participants, offering a peek into powerlessness allowed them to be vulnerable. This vulnerability prevented participants from emotionally distancing themselves from their experience or minimizing their experience during the

interview. In this way participants, either consciously or unconsciously, distanced themselves from the “strong Black woman” and “John Henry” tropes, which position Black people as unaffected by, or strong despite, pain and powerlessness. The “strong Black woman” trope is an internalized agency, seen as a double-edged sword that emphasizes re-



silience, perseverance, and the act of silence thus creating double-binds for Black women in higher education (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018). Whereas, the “John Henry” trope is a tactic utilizing high amounts of energy to cope with the chronic subjection to stressors such as discrimination which promotes elevated physiological risks (i.e., high blood pressure, exposure leading to hypertension and/or cardiovascular disease; Bennett et al., 2004). By subverting these stereotypical expectations of strength, participants were willing and able to express moments of confusion, pain, fear, and powerlessness.

### **Detailing Disempowerment**

Participants who typically felt sexually empowered recounted moments where their power seemed to be taken from them. Different from offering a peek into powerlessness, detailing disempowerment involved greater detail and information about the event due to its salience to participants. Through detailing disempowerment, participants engaged in reflection and used the interview to create meaning of the event for themselves. For some participants, such as Devin, disempowerment was experienced because of race. He discussed a sexual encounter with a White female partner:

Afterwards she was putting her clothes on, and she was saying “it’s gonna suck the day I have to stop having sex with people of color.” . . . I was like “how come,” and she was like “because how you guys do with marriage and how you don’t ever stick around.”

For Devin, a 21-year-old Black heterosexual male, a sexual encounter he was enjoying suddenly changed, and his power was taken from him as he realized the racist beliefs of his sexual partner.

Other participants experienced disempowerment related to manipulation. For instance, Aaliyah, a 24-year-old Black heterosexual woman, described her first-time partner as a “cookie snatcher; he took everybody’s virginity.” However, she did not know this about her partner beforehand and found out during the relationship. Aaliyah detailed the relationship:

Before, he was pursuing me, but then I think the connection ended up being mutual. I really started to like him; this is my first everything, so he was just it for me. . . Even though he was still doing 99 things [having sex with other people], I didn’t know unless somebody told me.

Aaliyah described the importance of this partner and her attachment to him. However, learning about his reputation, and that “all six years he was having sex with other people” left her feeling disempowered within the relationship.

Finally, detailing disempowerment also included emotional abandonment. For example, on one hand, Binda, a 23-year-old Black heterosexual woman, felt sexually empowered when it came to her sexual decisions; however, she reported feeling hurt and disempowered after she became pregnant and her partner abandoned the relationship. Ralph, on the other hand, a 22-year-old biracial queer femme identified man, experienced disempowerment in his last encounter. He described:

I was like, “I don’t do my whole bag of tricks unless I’m in a relationship.” So, he asked for the bag of tricks, and like I said, I was the magician. The fact that he did the stuff that I said I’d only want to do if I was in a relationship, and then he just disappeared, I was like wow. . .

Ralph felt empowered by setting clear boundaries with his partner before sex, but when his partner “disappeared” after leading Ralph to believe he was interested in pursuing a relationship, he then felt stunned and disempowered.

### **Privileging Stereotypical Power**

Several Black male participants spoke of experiencing pressure, whether self-imposed or imposed by an outside factor, to fulfill stereotypical expectations of sexual prowess. Unlike the former two narrative strategies, individuals still felt a sense of power to dominate. However, participants explained how the stereotypical basis of this power was paralyzing and prevented them from exerting their power for liberation in the sexual encounter. Racial and gender expectations regarding how the sexual experience should be, and the roles Black male participants were supposed to assume, imparted pressure to perform in ways that satisfied their partner.

For example, Devin, a 21-year-old Black heterosexual man, highlighted both the pleasure and power he feels when he is able to fulfill expectations of sexual prowess. He stated, “it’s about always being the best. So, to make sure that I am the best that she has ever had includes making her come at least twice. . . Unfortunately, I only made her come once.” When Devin shared that he did not achieve this expectation, he began to examine how media such as pornography informed his beliefs about who he should be as a sexual partner.

However, another participant, Kevin, an 18-year-old Black heterosexual man, expressed wishing his first experience had been more pleasurable for his partner by sharing, “since I didn’t know what I was doing, I couldn’t really like fulfill her needs, because I was clueless. I didn’t know what to do, like anything. . . how to really please her.” For Kevin, his lack of experience and knowledge during his first sexual encounter limited his ability to enjoy his first time because of imposed beliefs about how he should have been able to perform.

Lastly, Harry, a 22-year-old Black heterosexual man, described his first sexual experience stating, “I remember thinking about you know, how she gonna judge me and like my performance anxiety and stuff was all getting to me.” Harry went on to describe that he felt that his partner, who was a White woman, likely did not expect him to be a virgin and, “she probably had the expectation that I was gonna be, like amazing, just because it was like a White girl... so, like... I’m Black..so...” When having sex with a White woman, the cultural stereotype of Black men being sexually experienced created pressure to perform. He stated, “that’s why whenever I have sex with a White girl, I have to wow her.” The intersection of Harry’s gender and race contributed to privileging stereotypical power that created experiences of performance anxiety when he was with White women.

For the narrative pattern of privileging stereotypical power, the relationship between ascribed stereotypes and lived experiences influenced these Black men’s ability to exert their own power to liberate during sexual encounters. For these participants, anxiety seemingly emerged from the responsibility to use their power in stereotypical ways. This anxiety was paralyzing to their ability to sexually perform, support pleasure for their partners, and see themselves as more than a person expected to surpass others’ sexual expectations.

### **Reclaiming Power**

Participants, either consciously or subconsciously, recognized that in their narratives they may not have appeared as sexually empowered as they wished they had been in the moment or wished to be perceived by the interviewer. The narrative space, then, became a platform for them to retell the story in a way that allowed them to reclaim the power they lost from their experiences of the encounters. This included distancing from their disempowered past self and asserting their agency in the context of the research study through sharing their narrative. For example, Olivia, an 18-year-old Black heterosexual woman, reflected on instances where she prioritized her partner’s needs over her needs, and then expressed a newfound sense of agency in saying “no” when she does not want to have sex. She initially stated, “So, I’ll forget my needs and we would just have sex a lot. I’m ok with having sex, it feels good...” However, to reclaim her power, she said, “I don’t have to have sex every day. It’s something that I probably won’t do no more, because I can do something else with my time rather than have sex all day, 24/7.”

Eve, a 20-year-old Black heterosexual woman, shared that her first time was not consensual and was forced by an older man she had just met. When asked to reflect on what she would tell her first-time self, she shared, “you can let in whoever you want to let in, but it’s your choice, and no one can make that choice for you.” Eve shared her first time where she was powerless in her situation. However, in the interview

space she was able to then reclaim her power by emphasizing her ability to choose and say no to subsequent sexual interactions.

Further, Aaliyah, a 24-year-old Black heterosexual woman, reflected on her last sexual encounter with a partner she was irregularly engaging in sex with. Aaliyah shared moments of feeling pressured to have sex with her first-time partner. However, during the interview, she sought to reclaim her power by emphasizing how she asserted power to dominate her most recent partner. She saw him cuddling with someone else at a party and decided he was not going to be with anyone else but her that night, even though she reportedly did not like him. She stated, “so he did what I said ‘cause it wasn’t no other option... I made him get up, and then we ended up going back and laying down afterwards and having sex.” Feeling pressured to engage in sex limits a person’s agency and power, regardless of gender; it serves as an act of domination. For Aaliyah, in her narrative retelling of her most recent experience, she wanted to reclaim her power and emphasize the power to dominate she used in choosing when to have sex and with whom her partner would have sex. Interestingly, she also indicated that she prioritized his pleasure in this dominating act, indicating that although she used the sex to reassert her power, she had an allergic reaction to the condom that prevented her from enjoying it. She “didn’t want to leave him like that,” so she offered him oral sex to ensure he had an orgasm. Using both power to dominate and power to liberate through pleasure exemplify the complex process of reclaiming power.

### **Emphasizing Empowered Sex**

Lastly, participants shared their positive, empowered sexual encounters. They discussed their experiences of pleasure, autonomy, and agency during their first and most recent sexual encounters. Some discussed how they shared pleasure with their partners, how they connected with their partners, and how their perception of sex has changed. Lorna, a 21-year-old Black heterosexual woman, expressed how her current long-term relationship helps her to feel comfortable and empowered when they are having sex. Because of the trust and comfort within her relationship, Lorna shared, “I feel so comfortable with my body and just doing anything, and so I go ‘you know, let’s try this.’” The connection with her partner and her positive body image empowered Lorna to ask for what she wants during a sexual encounter. The sexual relationship provided power to liberate.

Participants also emphasized how they gained feelings of empowerment over time or have increased their ability to emphasize their power in sexual encounters. For instance, Freeda, a 20-year-old, Black Nigerian American pansexual woman, shared that learning and becoming empowered to ask for her needs and wants during sex came with time. At her most recent sexual encounter, Freeda reportedly initi-

ated sex by saying, “I was horny. I was like, ‘let’s have sex!’” Freeda had previously learned that the person with the most experience takes the lead during sex. Her current ability to initiate sex regardless of experience showed growth in Freeda’s understanding of power within sexual encounters.

Comparatively, Olivia, an 18-year-old Black heterosexual woman, related to Freeda’s found sense of empowerment. She noted, “I feel like we can have sex when I want to have sex. I don’t want to just have sex because you want to have sex. I don’t want to feel like you can just call me whenever you want to have sex.” Olivia spoke to the level of empowerment she felt that allowed her to decide if she would like to have sex or not. This increased autonomy allowed her to more thoroughly enjoy the sexual experience.

Emphasizing empowered sex allowed participants to identify the joy in sexual experiences where they felt empowered. These moments typically came from asking for what they wanted, saying no to what they were not interested in, and sharing mutual pleasure and power with a partner with whom they feel connection.

## Discussion

This research described how dynamics of power manifested within the sexual experiences of Black collegians and how they narrated their experiences across a spectrum of power. By examining the first and last sexual encounters of Black college students, our results were able to portray three different ways that power was used to oppress individuals, and how some participants were able to reclaim their power through several different means, one of which may have included the act of retelling their story on their terms.

As noted previously, power is a multidimensional construct defined by its paradoxical ability to inflict, as well as combat, oppression (Prilleltensky, 2008). When power emerges in sexual relationships, contextual (e.g. political) factors such as systemic and institutional oppression, access to sexual resources, sexual knowledge, and “notions of sexuality that are socially constructed” may also be present (Bay-Cheng, 2011, p. 715). Structural bias and socially constructed sex roles can work to oppress individuals who are marginalized based on their racial identity, sexuality, and gender, to name a few. The results from this study additionally demonstrated how contextual factors pertaining to marginalized identities affected power and oppression within the sexual relationships of our participants.

Power involves allowing one’s needs to be met or preventing one’s needs from being met, thus rendering individuals vulnerable (Prilleltensky, 2008). Our sample offers rich data on the spectrum of sexual powerlessness to empowerment of Black collegians. For participants in the current study, their needs for safety, autonomy, and respect in sexual and romantic encounters often went unmet. For women, this often related to sexual coercion by a male partner. For men, this of-

ten related to the interpersonal imposition of gendered, racial stereotypes. As a result, they were vulnerable and forced into a position of either suffering from powerlessness or channeling strength to resist disempowerment, whether immediately or through their meaning-making processes. Extant research on college students of color has found that Black students experience vulnerability due to minority student status stress (e.g., academic stress, race-based stress, social stress, environmental stress) at rates higher than American Latinx and Asian students (Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013), and specifically, that their race-related stress is associated with relationship and dating worries (Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei, 2012). Given that Black students are experiencing significant minority status and race-related stress, our findings indicated that they also experience vulnerability in their intra- and interracial sexual relationships.

## Gender Socialization Among Black Collegians

For all of our participants, issues pertaining to stereotypical gender norms were a critical piece to their sexual relationships. Moving beyond stereotypically gendered sexual socialization was key to reclaiming power for several participants. For women in our sample, gendered sexual socialization impacted their ability to feel empowered in their sexual relationships. For Eve, 20, sexual assault thwarted her ability to choose when, where, and with whom she had sex. This assault goes beyond the typical feminine gendered norms that ask women to be the gatekeepers of sex (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). However, Eve did not let her sexual assault impede her desire to remain a sexual gatekeeper. She reclaimed power by reclaiming her gatekeeper status. In this regard, being a gatekeeper in the face of unwanted sex or coercive sex is empowering.

Other women struggled with the role of sexual gatekeeper, and the use of submissive, passive, or suggestive means for exercising their power (Geary, Baumgartner, Wedderburn, Montoya, & Catone, 2013; Harvey et al., 2002). Aaliyah, 24, described being “pursued” by her partner and dating him for six years despite his repeated infidelities. She was the gatekeeper because she let him pursue her until she was ready to have a sexual relationship with him based on her feeling ready to have sex for the first time. For Olivia, 18, she described feeling just “OK” with having sex with her partner because he enjoyed it. Eventually, her sexual empowerment grew to enable her to prioritize her own needs, which entailed determining how often they have sex. She transformed from a more passive recipient of sex (Geary et al., 2013; Grauerholz & Serpe, 1985) to a proactive sexual being who prioritized and articulated her own needs. Lastly, Binda, 23, gave the sense that her sexual power came from her ability to choose when and with whom to have a sexual relationship, but it was also subverted by her partner’s ending of their relationship after she became pregnant. For Binda, 23, her power

to choose when to reproduce was not curtailed by a man's aggression, force, or manipulation, but the lack of support she felt afterwards was disempowering and hurtful.

For many of the men in our sample, adhering to masculine ideology contributed to their feelings of power within their sexual relationships (C. N. Hargons, 2019). Many of the men, including Jack, Devin, and Harry, were the active initiators of sex and pleasure (Harvey et al., 2002), as they endorsed wanting to be an "alpha," using sex as a means to gain popularity, and a desire to "wow" their partners and be "amazing" in bed. This desire to please their partners could be empowering if achieved, but it was also disempowering when it failed or was subverted by racial stereotypes. Conversely, one participant who did not initiate sex, Kevin, 18, was inhibited by his partner's advances and had trouble becoming aroused when sex was suggested by his partner. For Jack, 21, the desire to attain intimacy became a way to achieve a form of power and pleasure that went beyond the gendered norm that suggests men gain power by sleeping with many different women.

These disempowering experiences in sexual relationships, complicated by broader dynamics of racial oppression, may overwhelm Black students' capacities and lead to trauma reactions (Rederstorff, Buchanan, & Settles, 2007). For our sample, participants experienced paralysis and silencing, often lacking ways to reclaim their power within the sexual dyad and increasing the significance of our interview with them. However, through their interviews, participants were able to provide a testimony of their experience that allowed them to position themselves as more agentic and, hence, reclaim power.

### Future Research

Future research should continue to investigate the intersection of race and gender on sexual socialization for Black college students. More broadly, both researchers and clinicians should call on an intersectional framework to seek to understand the way power is experienced in sexual relationships of Black people. While the literature on barriers to wellness for Black collegians is growing (Chao et al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2013; Whaley & Dubose, 2018), the current study introduces gendered racialized sexual disempowerment as an area of vulnerability to be explored by counselors interested in this population's wellness. It may benefit Black collegians if further research on sexual empowerment is conducted within a critical sexuality (Fahs & McClelland, 2016) framework.

Additionally, although much of the existing scholarship presents a monolithic view of the Black community (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012), it is important to recognize Black people are not a monolithic group carrying the same lived experiences. Though some experiences may be similar, other experiences can weigh a heavier toll depending

on the individual's intersecting identities. Previous studies have shown biracial individuals are in constant battle with their "racial identity work" and deciding their preferred racial identity to showcase (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Some authors have also suggested that once Africans are cognizant of society's racial hierarchy containing American Black people at the bottom, they may choose to distance themselves by emphasizing their ethnic identities (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012). Although our study asked participants to describe these identities, we did not explicitly ask them to consider how they may have affected sexual power. Future research should more intentionally investigate how these racial and ethnic identities influence sexual socialization and sexual power dynamics among Black students.

### Implications for Counseling

By making the power dynamics that contribute to vulnerability in sexual and romantic relationships for Black collegians visible, counselors may be able to uncover pathways to increasing or celebrating sexual empowerment for this marginalized group. We suggest a key area of inquiry for counselors and other professionals invested in the study of Black sexuality and/or in engaging in therapy with Black collegians: gender socialization among Black collegians. Counselors engaging in therapy with Black students should create space for processing sexual experiences, perhaps utilizing narrative approaches such as therapeutic journaling or interviews (Neimeyer, 2004). Additionally, therapists may consider exploring the way misogynoir, in the form of boundary violations or gendered racialized stereotypes, reduces power for their Black women and femme clients. As Lamb and Peterson (2011) posit, one's capacity for empowered sex is limited by sociocultural and environmental factors. Increasing client consciousness about how power has influenced their sexual relationships may facilitate more empowered sex for all Black people. As noted by participants in this sample, empowered sex is possible and happening among Black students. Continuing to highlight these stories is another important area of empirical and practical focus.

### Limitations

This narrative inquiry study elicited important strategies about how participants discussed, experienced, and responded to power in their first and last sexual encounters. However, there are some limitations to the study. The identities of the diverse research team influenced both the content of the interview data that was obtained, as well as its interpretation. Despite efforts made by White research team members to reduce power differentials and address racial differences, our Black participants may have been more guarded in their interviews with these researchers. Relatedly, having higher numbers of cisgender women and White people on the research team also may have shaped the interpretations



of the data. These dominant identities of the research team have the potential to influence the researchers' interpretation and explanation of the data. However, this was accounted for through our data analysis processes wherein the team stayed close to the data, engaged in memoing, and had ongoing discussions about our positionalities with respect to the narratives and our potential blind spots. This study also lacked diversity in the sexual orientations of the participants, therefore limited information about LGBTQIA+ power dynamics was gleaned. An additional limitation involves the indirect focus on power. Because this study did not have power analysis as its central purpose, but participants repeatedly and representatively described sexual power dynamics, there were no explicit questions in the interview protocol about power. Future research on this topic may expand upon these findings through the use of direct questions about how Black collegians ranked themselves within the power hierarchies and experienced sexual agency and autonomy given their positioning.

### Conclusion

To be a Black collegian who engages in sex is to be a racially marginalized person navigating complex power dynamics both in and out of the bedroom. The narratives explicated in this study describe how participants disclosed their sense of powerlessness, share the truth of their disempowerment, privilege identifying with tropes associated with their race and gender, work to reclaim previously lost agency through narration (Froyum, 2010), and engage in empowering sexual behaviors. By amplifying the voices of our participants and attending to the narrative choices they made in their interviews about their first- and last-time having sex, this study explicates the wide range of sexual experiences of Black students. Prilleltensky's (2008) power analytic helps counselors and others concerned about Black collegians' sexuality recognize the differential needs and concerns of a vulnerable, though not powerless, population. Whereas some participants experienced their sexual partners' use of power to oppress them, participants also articulated their process of using the sexual space as a site of power to resist oppression and enhance wellness.

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