


Let's Really Talk About It: A Lesson Plan for Teaching About Black Women and Sexuality

Ashley Townes & Debby Herbenick


To cite this article: Ashley Townes & Debby Herbenick (2020) Let's Really Talk About It: A Lesson Plan for Teaching About Black Women and Sexuality, American Journal of Sexuality Education, 15:2, 149-157, DOI: [10.1080/15546128.2020.1712288](https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2020.1712288)


To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2020.1712288>

 View supplementary material [↗](#)

 Published online: 21 Jan 2020.

 Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

 Article views: 405

 View related articles [↗](#)

 View Crossmark data [↗](#)
CrossMark



Let's Really Talk About It: A Lesson Plan for Teaching About Black Women and Sexuality

Ashley Townes and Debby Herbenick

Center for Sexual Health Promotion, Indiana University-Bloomington School of Public Health, Bloomington, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

This lesson plan is designed to help students understand and debunk myths and stereotypes about African American/Black women and their sexual lives. This lesson plan is intended for adult learners.

KEYWORDS

Sex education; Black sexuality; pleasure; orgasm; debunking myths

Goals and objectives

Goals


This lesson plan provides data that is often under-represented in sexuality education materials. It provides evidence-based information and aims to assist sexuality educators in increasing cultural sensitivity as it relates to the sexual experiences of Black women in the United States. Specifically, this lesson plan provides an overview of Black women's sexuality, including historical and contemporary research, in an effort to use sexuality research to inform sexuality education. Given the nature of this lesson plan and its contents, it is recommended that the sexuality educator implementing this lesson be a part of the African diaspora and have a female identity. The intent behind this recommendation is to provide an educator who may be able to understand the cultural, societal, and gender beliefs referenced and have insider knowledge or experiences that may be similar to African American/Black women participants.

Objectives

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

- Identify how myths and stereotypes impact views about Black women's sexuality

CONTACT Ashley Townes  atownes@indiana.edu  Center for Sexual Health Promotion, Indiana University-Bloomington School of Public Health, 1025 E. 7th Street, Suite 116, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA.

 Supplemental data for this article is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2020.1712288>.

© 2020 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

- Introduce sex-positive data related to Black women's sexual lives, including the occurrence of orgasm and sex rated as pleasurable, based on current research data

Timing: 75–90 mins

Rationale: Sexuality education in the United States tends to reflect majority populations. Research dedicated to understanding African American/Black women's sex lives have identified myths and stereotypes, as well as influences on values and attitudes toward sexual relationships and experiences (Kowalski, 2009; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016; Staples, 2006; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Ware, Thorpe, & Tanner, 2019; Wyatt, 1982). In 2018 we conducted the first U.S. nationally representative probability survey that was focused on sexuality and included an oversample of African American/Black women across the lifespan. Our data include a range of aspects about Black women's sexual lives, particularly sexual response and function (pleasure, desire, orgasm, and painful intercourse), that are often under-represented in sexuality education materials. Data from the 2018 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior includes prevalence of sexual/response functions, contraceptive use, and interactions with health-care providers.

Description of intended audience: This lesson plan has been used with collegiate-level students and adult participants during a conference workshop. The intended audience is adult learners.

Materials needed: Notecards, pens, or pencils; Worksheets A and B

Detailed, numbered procedural steps:

1. **Introduce the lesson.** [Note to educator: You may use the following suggested language and/or add context from additional sources, see [Supplementary material](#)] (3 mins)
 - a. Research related to Black women and their sex lives has often focused on identifying behaviors related to sexual and adverse reproductive health outcomes, such as unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV. Most of this research has been conducted by recruiting participants from community, college, or clinical based samples. Information gathered through research has been used to identify myths, stereotypes, and behaviors related to Black women's sexuality.
 - b. This lesson is intended to promote exploration and knowledge related to Black women's sexuality; it is not intended to reinforce or support myths and/or stereotypes that are discussed. This lesson plan is designed to help provide understanding in order to debunk myths and stereotypes about Black women and their sexual lives.

[Note: Some of the information discussed may cause students to feel uncomfortable or upset. It would be helpful to establish ground rules to create a safe environment for all participants.]

2. **THINK-PAIR-SHARE Activity** – Pass out the notecards and pens (or pencils) to each participant. Ask participants to brainstorm all the things they have heard about Black women related to their sexuality or sexual health. Tell participants this can include things they have heard, read, or seen in the media. After about 5 minutes, ask participants to pair up with 1–2 other participants and discuss what they wrote down and why. After another 5 minutes, ask the participants to have one person from their group share with the large group what was discussed. (10 mins)
3. **Explain the difference between a MYTH and a STEREOTYPE.** (2 mins)
Ask the participants, what is the difference between a myth and a stereotype? After eliciting a few responses, read the following definitions or display on a screen:
 - a. A myth is a false belief or idea that has been passed down from person to person throughout time. Myths are often exaggerated, misrepresentations of the truth.
 - b. A stereotype is an image or idea *of a particular type of person or thing* that is widely “known” and accepted. Stereotypes are often unfair and incorrect beliefs.
4. **Historical influences and views of Black women’s sexuality in the United States:** (5 mins)
 - a. Black history in the United States, emerges from elements of enslaved Africans brought forcefully to America beginning in 1619 and acculturation of African cultures, religions, and languages into Euro-American society (McAdoo, 1988).
 - b. The enslavement period created patterns of behavior that impacted the way sexual relationships were formed among Black women and children, particularly due to racial injustices, sexual exploitation, and economic oppression. For example, when the Slave Trade Act of 1807 ended the slave trade, slave owners allowed “slave breeding,” in which enslaved women (of childbearing age) were pressured into conceiving children or were forcefully raped to produce children who would then become additional slaves for their owners (Sublette & Sublette, 2016).
 - c. Early literature explicitly about the sexual experiences of Black Americans was focused on understanding the dynamics of the Black family, including marriage and gender roles (Bernard, 1966; Staples, 1973) rather than the impact of multi-layered systems of

oppression that Black women face (e.g., race, class, gender, and sexuality), which has influenced the development of Black women and their sexual lives (Hill Collins, 2004, 2009; Staples, 2006).

- d. In addition, research related to Black women's sexual lives has been associated with understanding and developing interventions for sexual risk-taking, condom use, unplanned pregnancy, and the transmission of STIs and HIV (CDC, 2013, 2017; Harling, Subramanian, Barnighausen, & Kawachi, 2013; Kim, Dagher, & Chen, 2016; Ware et al., 2019).
5. **Myth Activity** – Pass out Worksheet A to all participants. Ask the participants to read and think about each statement and write a reaction to each one. Next, ask the participants to do the following: put a circle around the number if they have heard the statement before, put a square around the number if they think most people believe the statement, and put a star (or asterisk) next to the number if they think the statement is offensive. Give the participants about 5 minutes to share their reactions and responses with 1–2 additional participants. Next, ask the participants to share with the large group, which statements they found to be offensive and (if comfortable) explain their rationale. [This will give participants an opportunity to hear various reactions.] You may want to spend another 5 minutes discussing that these statements were identified by researcher, Gail Wyatt, as myths related to Black women's sexuality in the early 1980s, and then ask participants to identify which statements might still be believed today and why. (20 mins)
6. **Stereotype Activity** – Refer back to the definition of a stereotype, if needed, to remind participants that stereotypes are images or ideas about a particular type of person or thing that are widely accepted or known. Notify the participants that for this activity, images will be shown as examples of stereotypes related to Black women and sexuality. Show the images (see Figures) and ask if the participants can identify them. (10 mins)
 - a. The **Mammy** is the portrayal of an obese, Black woman who cared for and loved her White family. She was seemingly happy and loyal in servitude. Although her features included large breasts and buttocks, she was often desexualized and known as being content as a caretaker (Kowalski, 2009; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). In addition to the Mammy, the Aunt Jemima is an image of the Black woman who had household tasks, primarily cooking (Kowalski, 2009) and was displayed on pancake boxes and syrup bottles. Modern-day portrayals of the Mammy include Hattie McDaniel's

role in *Gone with the Wind*, Tyler Perry in *Madea*, and Martin Lawrence's role of Big Momma from *Big Momma's House*.

- b. The *Jezebel* is portrayed as a young, promiscuous, sexy woman with a light skin tone and long hair. She is very sexual and uses sexual seduction to get attention and material possessions. Her ability to get attention and materialistic possessions through her sexual seduction was often used, historically, against her to justify the rape of enslaved women by slave owners (Hill Collins, 2000). Modern-day portrayals are seen in music videos and reinforced in mass media often, including television shows, movies, and magazines that show images of young, Black women.
- c. The *Welfare Mother* is the portrayal of Black women as breeders of children. She does not have adequate support for her children. She is portrayed as being lazy and relying on government assistance to survive (Hill Collins, 2000; Stephens & Phillips, 2003), thus perpetuating a cycle of poverty in the Black community.
- d. The *Sapphire*, also known as the Matriarch or Angry Black Woman, is portrayed as being controlling, emasculating, and angry (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Many women have been subject to depictions within the media including Serena Williams, and even former First Lady, Michelle Obama.

[Note: If time permits, you could play a song or show video clips from contemporary mainstream media that reinforces stereotypes about Black women, and then discuss.]

7. **Large Group Discussion** – Give the participants about 1–2 minutes to reflect on how myths and stereotypes about Black women might play a role in dating, relationships, and sexual behavior. Then ask participants to share their thoughts. (5 mins)

Probe: Do you think these beliefs about Black women are harmful? Why or why not?

Probe: Do you think it causes people to believe that Black women engage in certain sexual activities more or less compared to other women?

8. **Statistics based on the 2018 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior.** Pass out Worksheet B to the participants, explain the following: (15 mins)
 - a. There were 980 African American/Black women in the sample, ages 18–83. The majority of the women identified themselves as being heterosexual or straight (91%).
 - b. For each sexual activity, ask the students to write down the percentage (or range) of Black women who reported engaging in the

sexual activity during their recent sexual act. After giving them time to write down their guesses, present the actual data:

• Kissing	75%
• Breast touching/nipple stimulation	71%
• Penile-vaginal intercourse	68%
• Cuddling	60%
• Hand-penis stimulation (“hand job”)	49%
• Vaginal fingering	45%
• Received oral sex from partner (“cunnilingus”)	40%
• Performed oral sex on partner (“fellatio”)	35%
• Rubbed genitals together	16%
• Anal fingering	6%
• Penile-anal intercourse	2%

- c. Of the 574 Black women who responded to the question, nearly three-fourths indicated that their most recent sexual experience was quite or extremely pleasurable.
 - d. 68% of Black women reported experiencing an orgasm during their recent sexual act.
 - e. 21% of Black women used a male (external) condom with their partner in the last six months and 2% used a female (internal) condom. The top five reasons for not using a condom include:
 - 49% said they are not worried about sexually transmitted infections (STDs)/STIs
 - 28% said they’re not at risk of pregnancy
 - 24% said they were using another form of birth control to prevent pregnancy
 - 13% said they got caught up in the moment and forgot
 - 12% said they are trying to become pregnant
 - f. Black women most commonly described their most recent sexual partner as being a spouse (42%) or significant other (33%). Also, about half of Black women had talked to their partner about STIs before sex.
 - g. Give the participants time to reflect on the data and write down their thoughts based on their estimates and the actual data. They will record this on Worksheet B.
9. **Large Group Discussion** – Discuss the role of respectability politics. Respectability politics involves policing behavior to reflect societal norms rather than challenging these views to embrace diversity. Within the American society, Hill Collins (2004) argues that racism and heterosexism build strength upon one another as systems of oppression among African American/Black women (and men). When sexuality is policed, either by society or by other members of one’s community, it creates status positions where one identity is greater

than or less than the other (e.g., homosexuality is subordinate to heterosexuality). Ask participants their thoughts on how respectability politics may have contributed to the data, considering that 91% of the sample reported being heterosexual or straight. (5 mins)

Probe: How might Black women's sexual behaviors (or lack thereof) be impacted by respectability politics? [Note: The myths and stereotypes mentioned earlier in this lesson may contribute to the endorsement of respectability politics.]

Probe: When it comes to respectability politics, why might it be important to have data that is representative of gender and sexual minorities?

10. **Summarize the key points.** Throughout history, Black women have been unfairly judged and subjected to myths and stereotypes about their sexual lives. The enslavement period as well as preconceived thoughts about Black women (perhaps based on images presented on television, in movies, in magazines, or other forms of media) have had a long-lasting impact on several generations of Black women in America. The data presented provides a positive view of Black women and their sex lives, indicating that Black women engage in a range of sexual activities, most find their recent sexual experiences pleasurable, most experienced an orgasm, and the reasons women did not use condoms (including not being worried about STIs, possibly due to being with a significant other and discussing STIs with their partner prior to sex). (5 mins)

Commentary on experiences using the activity

The lesson plan has been utilized as part of a workshop with adult learners during a workshop at a sexuality conference and has been included in collegiate-level Human Sexuality courses. In both scenarios, the participants were highly engaged in the activities and discussions. One way to ease into the lesson and help break the ice is to play contemporary music that has sexual lyrics or identifies sexual stereotypes in the lyrics. For example, as "Thotiana" by Blue Face played in the background, participants sang along if they were familiar with the song. Depending on the age group and setting where the lesson plan will be used, it may be important to choose songs that include lyrics appropriate for the setting and the audience. Participants of all ages and backgrounds were able to identify myths and stereotypes. After the data portion, participants at the conference expressed being surprised by the high prevalence of pleasure and orgasms reported, while college-aged participants were surprised by the low prevalence of oral sex (both performed and received) reported. In both instances, participants

did not expect the low percentages for use of male (external) condoms, and most of the participants were unaware of the female (internal) condom. Overall, participants were unaware of this data, specific to Black women, and questioned why this type of data hasn't been available in the past. This lesson plan provides data that is often under-represented in sexuality education materials. It provides evidence-based information and aims to assist sexuality educators in increasing cultural sensitivity as it relates to the sexual experiences of Black women in the United States.

Funding

Data are from the 2018 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, supported by Church & Dwight Co., Inc. The development of this lesson plan is supported by a grant from the Patty Brisben Foundation for Women's Sexual Health.

References

- Bernard, J. (1966). *Marriage and family among negroes*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2013). CDC health disparities and inequalities report. *Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report*, 62(Suppl 3), 177–181.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2017). "STDs in Racial and Ethnic Minorities". Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats17/minorities.htm>.
- Harling, G., Subramanian, S. V., Barnighausen, T., & Kawachi, I. (2013). Socioeconomic disparities in sexually transmitted infections among young adults in the United States: Examining the interaction between income and race/ethnicity. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 40(7), 575–581. doi:10.1097/OLQ.0b013e31829529cf
- Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (2009). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kim, T. Y., Dagher, R. K., & Chen, J. (2016). Racial/ethnic differences in unintended pregnancy: Evidence from a national sample of U.S. women. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 50(4), 427–435. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2015.09.027
- Kowalski, J. (2009). "Stereotypes of history: Reconstructing truth and the Black mammy." *Transcending Silence*, Spring Issue. Retrieved from <https://www.albany.edu/womensstudies/journal/2009/kowalski/kowalski.html>.
- McAdoo, H. P. (1988, March). *Changes in the formation and structure of black families: The impact on black women*. Paper presented at the Economic Condition of Black Women Conference, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA.
- Staples, R. (1973). *The black woman in America: Sex, marriage, and family*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Publishers.
- Staples, R. (2006). *Exploring black sexuality*. Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Stephens, D. P., & Phillips, L. D. (2003). Freaks, gold diggers, divas, and dykes: The socio-historical development of adolescent African American women's sexual scripts. *Sexuality and Culture*, 7(1), 3–49. doi:10.1007/BF03159848

- Sublette, N., & Sublette, C. (2016). *The American slave coast: A history of the slave-breeding industry*. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Ware, S., Thorpe, S., & Tanner, A. E. (2019). Sexual health interventions for black women in the United States: A systematic review of literature. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 31(2), 196–215. doi:[10.1080/19317611.2019.1613278](https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2019.1613278)
- Wyatt, G. E. (1982). Identifying stereotypes of Afro-American sexuality and their impact upon sexual behavior. In B. A. Bass, G. E. Wyatt, and G. J. Powell (Eds), *The Afro-American family: Assessment, treatment, and research issues*. New York: Grune and Stratton.