Lisa Oakley, MPH  
PhD Student Dissertation Defense  
Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University  

**Perceived relationship power, relationship characteristics and sexual risk taking among adult African American women**

HIV/AIDS rates continue to be substantially higher among Blacks than among Hispanics or Whites. Additionally, women are at a higher risk of HIV infection than are men. Black women carry a “double jeopardy” when it comes to HIV risk as they are at increased risk because of both race and gender. Gender-based power, relationship dynamics, and relationship context are important social factors in women’s sexual health choices and safer sex negotiations and yet there is a lack of understanding of power dynamics among midlife and older adults and the impact these relationships have on women, especially black women. A mixed-methods study was undertaken to examine the association of age with sexual health, including psychosocial risk factors, relationship characteristics, relationship-specific behaviors, and personal and relationship power dynamics among black women, to inform interventions than can be targeted for black women across adulthood, but more specifically for black women entering middle age (35-55 years old) and later life. Main themes from this dissertation include midlife black women’s relationship empowerment built through personal power and life experiences, women’s high sexual self-efficacy for sexual communication and condom use, and women’s reported low condom use with main or primary partners.

Findings emphasize the need to explore characteristics (such as concurrency, peer norms, future orientation, and self-efficacy) among midlife women that have been mostly investigated among younger (adolescent and young adult) populations to better understand and intervene on beliefs and behaviors that are putting midlife women at an increased risk for HIV and STIs. Additionally, findings serve to inform efforts to increase personal and relationship power as well as self-efficacy through programs and intervention research for preventive behaviors in an attempt to reduce the rates of new HIV and STI infections among midlife black women.