Gay Black Men at Midlife: Learning Self Acceptance

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Abstract: *This paper presents the findings of an analysis of three autoethnographies of Black gay men at midlife. The findings indicate that Black gay men experience themselves as silenced from an early age. Further, Black gay men actively work to conceal their sexual orientation in response to social expectations. Black gay men "evolve" to a point of self acceptance at midlife rather than abruptly "coming out" and Black gay men reach out to their communities at midlife in an apparent need to give back.*

Introduction

The literature in adult education has rarely addressed the adult development of gay men and lesbian women and how this development may differ from that of the dominant culture (Bettinger, 2007). This inattention to the development of gay and lesbian adults in the literature is a result of heteronormativity, a deeply ingrained assumption of the heterosexuality norm. Rich (1980) referred to this as compulsory heterosexuality. Burn, Kindle and Rexer (2005) defines heterosexism as prejudice against those persons who are not heterosexual.   The term heteronormative is the widespread notion that heterosexuality is normal and that everything else is somehow deviant. Grace & Hill (2001) further explain this concept by noting, "historically, in heterosexualizing culture and discourse, heterosexism has been a cultural expression of a public pedagogy of negation, erasure and violence that violates queer identities and assaults queer integrity" (p. 145). They suggest that we build what they call figurative knowledges as a part of any cultural discourse. Figurative knowledges are ways of knowing that are not under the jurisdiction of those in power who normally espouse a heteronormative discourse when it comes to gays and lesbians (Grace & Hill, 2001). Heteronormativity combined with the belief in the superiority of heterosexuality (heterosexism) are forces against which lesbian women and gay men must contend on a daily basis. The end result is that lesbian women and gay men are typically excluded (consciously & unconsciously) from full participation in society (Sears & Williams, 1997).

While some scholars have began to take note of the lived experiences of lesbian women and gay men, most of this limited attention has been directed at the lives of White lesbian women and White gay men. As a result, little is known of the lived experiences of Black lesbian women and Black men. Black gay men and Black lesbian women specifically have complained that these sexual politics deny them the right to participate in and be fully accepted by institutions such as the Black church, their families, marriage, health care institutions, higher learning institutions, and some mainstream Black organizations (Boykin, 1996, 2005; Hill-Collins, 2004; Constantine-Simms, 2001; Lorde, 1992). _How is it that Black lesbian and gay men learn to navigate the realities of double oppression in a racist and homophobic culture? The purpose of this research is to explore how self identified gay black men experience and navigate midlife within a racist and homophobic society.

Methodology

This paper utilizes an autoethographical methodological approach. Autoethnography involves an insider's perspective on a cultural event or group. The insider has intimate knowledge of the event or group (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). The authors identify as Black Gay Men and have lived as Gay Men for all of their adult lives.

Autoethonography connects the personal to the cultural using various methodological strategies (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). The strategy used in this study is a biographical method where "turning-point moments of individual's lives" can be presented and examined (Denzin, 1989, 13). When the presentations are done in the first person, they are autobiographies (Denzin, 1989). The two authors combined their own personal narratives along with one invited submission. These three narratives were analyzed for similarities and differences.

There are many benefits to using an ethnographic qualitative design. Some of these benefits include providing opportunities for respondents to share their life story and in doing so, explore how people make sense of their life experiences and assess the quality of the outcomes they produce in their lives. In addition, qualitative ethnographical methodology can most effectively capture Black gay male perspectives on life as understood from their personal experiences and as told by their life stories. This methodological approach may help adult educators better identify, and gain insight into the issues and problems Black gay men face in their daily lives (Bryant, 2008).

This study used content analysis to identify, code, and categorize themes and patterns in the data (Patton, 1990). This method provides a way of analyzing the structure of the data, allowing salient themes, patterns, and observations to emerge. For example, narratives aimed at extricating text related to homophobia allowed for sub-codes such as associated stressors, identity issues, and coping strategies to be identified. The two authors first read each of the autoethnographies individually and identified major themes and patterns using content analysis. The two authors then met for several data analysis sessions in which they compared and discussed themes and arrived at an agreement as to which themes were most prevalent in all of the stories.

Findings

Analysis of the autoethonographies revealed many themes which were common to each of the autoethnographies. Each of these themes are discussed below:

1. **Black Gay Men initially experience themselves as "silenced."** This feeling of silence is accentuated by a lack of an outer voice combined with inner silence. They experience feelings of being suppressed and powerless. These men often grow up never speaking of their sexual orientation until long after having reached the age of adulthood. Moreover, many often do not feel "safe" outside of their social comfort zones. They limit their social interaction to a selected circle of similar and understanding friends and conceal their sexual identity from all others. Each autoethnography revealed that participants actively worked to hide their sexual identity. For example, Lorenzo wrote: "I knew that I would be ostracized if my secret were ever revealed to my family and friends." Mitchell

states that he recalled wanting to be the choir director at an age when he did not understand his sexuality; however, he "kept it a secret" because he knew that the choir director was "gay" or at least effeminate in appearance; he did not want to be perceived as gay, or called a "punk" or "sissy." This type of "silenced" experience is similar to the "silence" some women use to make meaning of their lives at the hands of a sexist and patriarchal society (Belenky, et. al., 1986; Hooks, 1994).

2. **In an effort to maintain secrecy, Black gay men typically focus on and engage in activities that are socially acceptable.** Oftentimes, Black gay men socially disengage. Larry's story was the only one from the three in which his "secret" was revealed during the adolescent years. He left home after his "secret" was discovered by his family. He noted how everyone came to his "graduation except his father." This was devastating to him. Nevertheless, he decided to "press on" and put his energy into going to college and becoming successful because he "had something to prove." Lorenzo wrote of how he "avoided social scenes and dating." He buried himself in his studies – this made avoidance easier because it meant that he would be placed on an "academic track" that isolated him from most other students of color. Mitchell did not socially disengage. Rather, he took on a "heterosexual identity." However, it appears as if he was not consciously acting to conceal his identity; instead, he was fulfilling the role that was expected of him, so he dated women.

3. **Black Gay Men reject the dominant (White) Gay image out of necessity in order to conform to Black cultural norms and expectations.** Both Lorenzo and Mitchell noted how they associated "gay" acting men with a negative stereotype from an early age. Mitchell wrote of how he knew it was a negative to be called a "punk" or sissy." Lorenzo wrote that his parents painted negative images of gays and lesbians as people to be avoided – he viewed them as predators as a result. After discovering his "secret" Larry's father warned him to always conduct himself with restraint, dignity and self-respect. Therefore, each actively worked not to project this type of "gay" persona.

4. **Black Gay Men Evolve to a point of Self Acceptance rather than to abruptly "Come Out."** Black gay men evolve and mature to the point of self acceptance. At this point, there is no need to "come out." They are "who they are" and their sexuality is a part of that identity. People who matter in their lives are aware of this identity. Larry was the only participant whose gay identity was discovered at an early age. Larry's father, suspicious of a "friendship" that he had with another male, decided to search his bedroom in his absence. He found love letters that revealed that Larry was in a gay relationship at age 14. For Lorenzo and Mitchell, there was never a "coming out." Instead, their experience has been a process of self-acceptance and parallel openness. This means that as they developed and matured, they became more comfortable and confident in their sexual identity. Therefore, they now live as openly gay men among their families. Mitchell has not told his family that he is "gay" to date; but, he suspects that they know. Of the three ethnographies, Mitchell's identity is the most closeted. This is evident by his reluctance to disclose his name in this study out of fear discovery. Lorenzo tells anyone who asks. On the other hand, Larry openly discusses his sexual orientation as a part of his research endeavors and in mentoring others.

5. **Black gay men have an early awareness of being "different."** Both Mitchell and Lorenzo noted that they were aware at an early age that they were different from other young men in their age group. Lorenzo did not recall the exact age that he realized he

had a same sex attraction, but he did recall knowing that he was "different" at about age 5. Each autoenthnography revealed that although everyone played sports, each did so in order to meet societal expectations. Mitchell mentioned how he played Baseball and would strike out each time he came to bat – he didn't like playing. After one game, his father yelled at him (for not doing his best); he noted that he never played the game following that experience. For Lorenzo and Larry, playing sports provided an opportunity for male intimacy that each found enjoyable, even though neither enjoyed playing the sport for its inherit enjoyment.

6. **Black gay men live with a "fear" of being discovered starting from an early age.** Mitchell talked about "sneaking" to do things like put on his Mom's choir robe and being Choir director, he knew he had to keep this a secret because the Choir director was an "out" gay man and he did not want others to think the same of him. Lorenzo wrote about how his parents frequently talked negatively about men and women whom they suspected of being "funny" (Gay or Lesbian). Lorenzo feared that he'd be similarly ostracized; therefore, he actively worked to conceal his secret. Larry lived a "secret" life until age 14 when his secret was discovered. Prior to being discovered, he knew he had to keep his sexual attraction a secret. His father frequently punished him for staying out late. He noted that "I could never tell my father that the reason I was staying out late was because I was in love with a man. So, I suffered in my silence, enduring the pain until it just became too unbearable." This is why he left home at such an early age.

7. **Black gay male identity is significantly influenced by the Black Church and spirituality.** Each of the autoenthnographies revealed that Larry, Mitchell, and Lorenzo all were required to attend church on a regular basis. This speaks to the centrality of the Black Church in their lives. As such, each sought to make spiritual sense of their sexual orientation from an early age. It's interesting to note that no one considered rejection of the church and its teachings as an option until adulthood. During his freshmen College year, Lorenzo noted how he "rejected the teachings of my Mom's church regarding homosexuality and its view of sacred scripture." He sought other faith communities that nurtured his spirituality and fostered a healthy self identity. Mitchell similarly rejected the teachings of the Church regarding his sexuality. He researched the interpretation of sacred Christian writings and the Bible for himself and came to understand the "Bible" from a different more affirming perspective. He concluded that most of what he had been taught from the Bible was acontextual. Larry also had rejected the teachings of the church that had been given to him as a child. He searched for a church that was inclusive and that understood God as he had come to understand him based on his life experiences. He came to understand God as a loving and caring God that embraced his sexual orientation.

8. **Black gay men at midlife have a need to help others and give back.** Larry noted that he feels as if his "life has come full circle and that now I can use all of my experiences to give back to a world that I once took so much from. I want to make a difference in the lives of Black gay men . . ." Mark noted that he'd like to "mentor and advise young Black brothers and sisters to fulfill their full potential." Lorenzo felt a need to help other Black gay men and lesbian women by "speaking up." He noted that he now understands that "silence can be dangerous where oppression is present." Speaking up challenges the status quo and heteronormative assumptions.

Discussion and Implications

These findings have significant implications for adult educators who are concerned about social justice and inclusion. The field of Adult Education has done an insufficient job of alleviating social ills; this problem is an ongoing challenge for adult educators in keeping with our profession's purpose (Hill, 2007). According to Finger (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) "Adult education is in danger of losing its social action orientation as it focuses on helping individuals face up to the overwhelming economic and other challenges that threatened their identities and survival in the increasingly dense jungle of a post modern society" (p. 21). It speaks volumes that the "figurative knowledges" (Hill & Grace, 2001) of Black gay men and lesbian women are largely absent from the Adult Education literature. This work attempts to remedy this problem by adding an original contribution to adult education scholarship based on the lived experiences of Black gay men.

While there has been some positive action in the field in recent years through the inclusion of scholarship that has served to reveal the lived realities of lesbian women and gay men in our society, this scholarship has not typically addressed the unique realities of lesbian women and gay men of color. It is erroneous to assume that the experiences of all lesbian women and gay men are basically the same regardless of race or socioeconomic status. This paper has revealed that there may be significant differences. In teaching courses on this topic or in managing our classroom dynamics, we must realize that Black gay men and lesbian women may have a "way of knowing" and experiencing the world that is different from that of White gay men and women. The "figurative knowledges" (Grace & Hill, 2001) of Black gay men are apparently different from those of White gay men. As these findings have indicated, Black gay men have unique experiences in their development and discovery of the self that are bounded by a unique culture and particularly the Black Church that impedes the healthy development of the self.

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