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Homosexual and Racial Identity Conflicts and Depression Among African-American Gay Males

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What does it mean to be male, Black and homosexual in the United States? In this study of 191 such men, William H. Alexander examines whether racial identity conflict and homosexual identity conflict contribute to depression in Black gay men. Alexander reports that being Black, a Black male, and a homosexual puts one in a vulnerable position that requires that he cope with a variety of stereotypes from every society with which he interacts. This pressure contributes to depression in this population.

African American homosexual males may encounter negative social attitudes directed toward them because of their color, their sex, and/or their sexual orientation. These negative attitudes stem from prejudices extant within our society as well as within the three mentioned reference groups (Beam, 1986; Cochran and Mays, 1994; Ernst, et al., 1991; Hawkeswood, 1996; Loiacano, 1989; Simmons,

1991; Smith, 1986; Smith, 1994; Soares, 1979). When exploring depression among African-American gay men, a number of factors can be considered; however, racist and heterosexist ideologies should be viewed as significant.

Racism as defined by Pinderhughes (1989) possesses power and this power is demonstrated when integrated with the "social structure" which she defines as "...the total social system in which policies and institutions interlock and reinforce one another in their capacity to deprive and cripple many people of color while offering preparation, support, and opportunity to Whites." (p.89)

Heterosexism is also intricately woven into our social structure and, thus, is as powerful as racism. Same-sex-loving (the terms homosexual, gay and same-sex-loving are used interchangeably here) individuals are largely deprived of benefits to which heterosexuals are entitled (e.g., marriage and its benefits, adoptions, public displays of affection, etc.). Further, it is automatically assumed that every child is heterosexual and subsequently only exposed to a heterosexual ideology (which, in some cases, may harbor anti-homosexual sentiments)(Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1993; Cass, 1979).

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McIntosh (1998) discusses how many White individuals are, in fact, oblivious to or fail to acknowledge the "White privilege, which puts them at an advantage." (p.165). Another "advantaging system" discussed in the article is heterosexism that alludes to the Pinderhughes (1989) association of power with racism . Heterosexism, like racism, is an "interlocking oppression system" because an established standard of heterosexuality is woven into our social structure. Heterosexuals, like Whites, are benefactors of an "invisible" social system that grants them certain rights and privileges (e.g., heterosexuality is an established norm, standard or socially acceptable model for living). While McIntosh (1998) distinguishes between racism,

sexism, and heterosexism, the common denominator among them is power, a perspective of superiority and the advantage of social dominance. What also becomes evident is that heterosexism, like racism, cripples and negatively affects the psyches of same-sex-loving individuals. Individuals who discover that they possess same-sex-loving feelings may experience internal conflict because of a heterosexual socialization (Cass, 1979), and subsequently struggle with the fear of being "found out" (Newman and Muzzonigro, 1993). This internal process, very often conflicting, can have a "crippling" effect on individuals who are attempting to develop a positive homosexual identity (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Dupras, 1994; Newman and Muzzonigro, 1993).

Heterosexism, its social dominance and overwhelming sense of normality has been largely incorporated within the African-American community as well. Because African-Americans have already encountered a very traumatic experience with oppression, one could safely assume that African-Americans would be more sensitive to socially oppressive practices (Hutchinson, 1997). Within the Black community, however, heterosexism is prevalent and many Black gay men, especially those who are African-centered or who live in the Black community, are often forced to conceal their sexual orientation (Simmons, 1991; Smith, 1986). Black same-sex-loving men who have achieved success or prominence within their communities have usually done so by maintaining their privacy and because the "don't ask, don't tell" position continues to prevail. Those individuals who choose to "come out" (i.e., decide to publicly share their same-sex-loving feelings) risk being castigated and/or are ostracized within their communities. Case in point: Bayard Rustin, one of the Civil Rights Movement's most prominent activists was forced to the background because he was openly gay and it was felt that his homosexuality could be both a source of embarrassment and counterproductive to the mission of the Civil Rights Movement (Hutchinson,1997).

The socially accepted racist and heterosexist behaviors (overt or otherwise) appear to be significant factors in the depression and development of unhealthy racial and homosexual identities among African-American gay men. The purpose of this study is to examine whether conflicts with racial and homosexual identity development contribute to the level of depression among Black gay men. It is predicted, that African-American gay males with positive racial and homosexual identities will experience less depression than those who report more negative racial and/or homosexual identities.

Homosexual Identity Development among African-American Males

Homosexuality has been widely viewed by society as abnormal, deviant and/or an abomination. Thus, the development of a healthy homosexual identity is often challenged because of these existing negative social attitudes towards homosexuality (Berliner, 1987; Cabaj, 1989; Cass, 1979; Loiacano, 1989).

Several studies (Brady & Busse, 1994; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Loiacano, 1989; Troiden, 1979; Zera, 1992) suggest a stage-progression in the development of a homosexual identity and that there are at least two but as many as six stages that one must experience before internalizing a homosexual identity as a fundamental part of the self. Further, the acquisition, acknowledgment and ultimate acceptance of a homosexual identity does not always ensure a positive self-concept. Other factors (including socialization) may play an important role in the development of a positive homosexual identity and psychological well-being.

Individual qualities and experiences that constitute the unique makeup of every human being are often overlooked as a result of social stereotyping. Gonsiorek (1982) asserts that the sexual preferences of both homosexuals and heterosexuals have nothing to do with a psychological "disturbance" and/or maladaptive behaviors. Cabaj (1989) posits that homosexuals only differ from heterosexuals because they: (1) are aroused and have "affectionate, sexual, sexual fantasies and/or social needs met more often by a same-sex partner"; (2) establish and

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acknowledge a "self-identity" that is "different from the majority" (the process of coming out); and (3), confront and manage the difficult challenges of heterosexism. Developing a homosexual identity is, however, not enough. Other factors (e.g., where one lives, works, and worships) are related to establishing a healthy homosexual identity (Brady and Busses, 1994). Additionally, variables such as gender, race, ethnicity and culture must be taken into consideration.

The psychological effects of heterosexism.

Walters and Simoni (1993) modified the Helms and Parham Racial Identification Attitude Scale and presented it to a group of lesbians and gay males. A moderate inverse relationship between identity internalization and self-esteem was found. The higher the internalization of a homosexual identity the lower the self-esteem (Walters & Simoni, 1993). Internalization was defined as the incorporation of a homosexual identity. The conflict of being homosexual in a predominantly heterosexual environment potentially had some adverse psychological effects. Realizing their sexual orientation sets them apart from what is considered the norm, especially during adolescence, homosexuals may experience an internal crisis or develop a confused identity (Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1993; Zera, 1992).

During adolescent development, major influences (e.g., parents and peers, education, employment, religion, and the legal system) can deter homosexuals from achieving a positive self-concept. Internalizing only heterosexual ideologies may result in homosexuals experiencing many inner conflicts (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1993; Zara, 1992).

Parents who observe homosexual tendencies in their children or hear them make reference to having same-sex-loving feelings (although rarely the case) may respond to their children in a manner that suggests that homosexual tendencies or feelings are just a "passing phase" that all children or adolescents experience (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1992;

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Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1993; Zera, 1992). Savin-Williams and Rodriguez (1993) suggested that some adolescents become aware of their same-sex attractions at an early age even without having engaged in homosexual activities. In any case, most gay adolescents "remain in the closet" for fear of being rejected and some gay adolescents go as far as to engage in heterosexual sexual activities in order to hide their true sexual orientation (Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1993).

Berliner (1987) found that the fundamentalist, heterosexist interpretations of religious scriptures by most religions are yet another major cause for concern. Religious interpretations are often biased and cause many homosexuals, especially those who discover their same-sex attractions at an early age, to develop a flawed concept of morality. Consequently, the development of a positive homosexual identity is even more difficult to achieve.

Self-destructive behaviors directly related to a negative self-concept are also the result of internalizing heterosexual ideology. High incidence of substance abuse, increasing rates of suicide, and risky sexual behaviors are the most common self-destructive behaviors exhibited by homosexuals (Cabaj, 1989; Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1993; Stevenson, 1994). While agencies within homosexual communities are becoming better able to meet more of their community's needs and are increasing in numbers, there continues to be a need for treatment centers that address difficulties faced by homosexuals. Such services are needed to help homosexuals resolve their internalized conflicts and achieve a positive self-concept (Cabaj, 1989).

Black/White Homosexual Male Differences.

Soares (1979) suggests that there are definite differences between Black and White homosexuals with regard to behavior and social interactions. White gay males tend to socialize at beaches, parks, bathhouses, and local drinking establishments (many "off limits" to African-Americans). African-Americans tend to socialize at small apartment gatherings and frequent bars that cater to predominantly

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Black patrons. Some of the more important factors in the Bell & Weinberg (1978) research on Black and White homosexual differences were: more Black homosexuals were "out" (open about their homosexuality) with their families; Blacks were more sexually active but with fewer partners; Blacks were less likely to have anonymous sex; Blacks participated in more anal intercourse; Blacks were more likely to cruise at private parties than on the streets or public places; Black homosexuals were less likely to be arrested than White homosexual males.

Racism and the African-American Homosexual Male

The negative social experiences of African-American homosexual men are more related to skin color than to their homosexuality. When skin color is the primary cause for negative social experiences, Black gay men are not treated any differently than their Black heterosexual counterpart. African-American homosexual males, especially those ranging between the ages of 18 and 25, experience the same racial injustices and indignities as African-American heterosexual males in the same age range. They are denied jobs, are the first to be laid off, are followed around in department stores by security personnel, are refused an apartment in certain neighborhoods, and stopped and/or harassed by the police because they are Black, *not* because they are homosexual.

African-American homosexual males also encounter a certain amount of racism from White homosexuals (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Greene, 1994; Icard et al., 1992; Loiacano, 1989; Smith, 1986). Even when they are clearly over twenty-one, African-American homosexual males are sometimes required to show at least three forms of identification before being admitted to many predominantly White gay bars (Bean, 1995). African-American

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homosexual men find it more difficult to rent apartments in predominantly White gay areas. The majority of money allocated for AIDS education, intervention and prevention goes to White organizations, even when the spread of AIDS has for a long time been increasing at a faster rate within communities of color (Williams, 1995). Further, AIDS education, because of its Euro-American tenor and lack of cultural sensitivity, may be less effective in African-American communities (Cochran and Mays, 1993).

Although White male homosexuals have to develop coping strategies for their experience with heterosexism, African-American homosexual males must cope with racism (from both gay and straight communities) as well as heterosexism. These factors, as well as the demographic and economic differences from White homosexuals, make the experiences of African-American homosexual men unique.

African-American Heterosexism and African-American Homosexual Males

As previously mentioned, African-American homosexual males must also contend with heterosexism within their own communities. African-American homosexual males are largely viewed by Black heterosexuals as: not really Black, deviant, a disgrace, an embarrassment and, worse yet, an agent of genocide aimed against their own race (Greene, 1994; Icard et al., 1992; Loiacano, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Simmons, 1991). In an interview with Bishop Carl Bean, founder of the Unity Fellowship of Christ Church, a minister to a predominantly African-American lesbian and gay community and who has created approximately 15 sister-churches throughout the United States, addresses heterosexism in the Black community in the following way:

> "Unless they [African-American gays and lesbians] attend a church that is gay-friendly, they run the risk of getting beat up from the pulpit [by the minister]... those [African-American homosexual] men who were ministers of music, choir directors

and/or members, (… you know… the ones who made you stand up and shout during the service?) …were shunned in their time of need because of the [negative] attitudes toward the AIDS virus. Some [African-American] families refused to care for their sons who were infected with the virus" (Bean, 1995).

Many Black churches have now become inundated with a "far right wing" ideology. This conservative ideology, with its extremely negative attitude towards homosexuality, is spreading throughout the Black church. The hidden agenda of the far right wing is espoused through encouraging the Black church to regain the "moral authority" that it once achieved during the Civil Rights Movement. In the June, 1994 issue of *Essence Magazine*, Nadine Smith, a "25-year-old open lesbian seeking office" in Tampa's largest Black district, wrote an article about her experience with the Far Right and a Black minister who announced he would "march with the Klan" to fight against laws protecting lesbian and gay rights. One such organization, the "Traditional Values Coalition, produced an antigay video called *Gay Rights, Special Rights* and distributed tens of thousands of copies in Black communities" (Smith, 1994). These groups have put volunteers and money into Black communities for the purposes of promoting their own agenda.

Smith (1994) reminds us that many of these same organizations and individuals are the same people who fought against integration in the fifties and sixties, and she anguishes over the fact that "many of the key spokespersons have a long history of actively opposing civil rights." She hopes that the day will not come when "Black lesbians and gays will have to choose between fighting racism and fighting homophobia." (Smith, 1994)

In addition, many Afrocentric and other Black organizations do not view African-American homosexual males as appropriate role models (Simmons, 1991). For example, despite the significant contributions he made to the Civil Rights Movement, Bayard Rustin was forced to the background because he was open about his homosexuality.

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With the ever-increasing AIDS epidemic within Black communities, African-American homosexual males are scorned and seen as the major cause for the spread of this disease within their communities. Ernst et al. (1991) measured the AIDS-related attitudes of over two thousand mental health workers and found that Blacks, because they were more religiously based and had tendencies toward believing in God's retribution for unacceptable behaviors, had more negative attitudes toward AIDS patients and AIDS-related subjects. In other words, the study suggested that Black mental health workers found it more difficult to be objective in their treatment because they felt individuals participating in unacceptable sexual practices were deserving of AIDS and AIDS related illnesses.

In her book, *Don't Believe the Hype*, Chideya (1995) indicates that African-Americans tend to be more conservative in their thinking than Whites. Further, Stevenson (1994) suggests that Black heterosexism and a negative attitude toward HIV/SIDS are the reasons for the misperceptions about the transmission of and treatments for AIDS. As a result, the development of AIDS Service Organizations, designed to educate and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS within Black communities have proven to be very difficult. Many African-Americans (gay and straight) infected with the AIDS virus remain silent and "die in agony [rather] than receive treatment if it means being treated less than human." (Stevenson, 1994).

> *Gay Black men tend to be open about their sexual preference and view themselves as primarily gay*

There has been some research (Icard et al., 1992; Smith, 1996) suggesting that two types of African-American gay men have evolved as a result of their experiences with negative social attitudes and psychological pressures: *Gay Black men* tend to be open about their sexual preference and view themselves as primarily gay. This group is estimated to be about 10% of the African-American homosexual male population. Gay Black men usually reside outside of the Black community and operate within a predominantly White or

mixed homosexual environment. In some cases, with the exception of establishing a positive homosexual identity, Gay Black men adopt more of a mainstream perspective. *Black Gay men*, on the other hand, usually remain and operate within the African-American community, and very often live bisexual lifestyles and many do not openly profess their same-sex

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preferences. Black Gay men identify more with their African-American heritage, and thus, may experience some difficulty in establishing a positive homosexual identity (Icard et al., 1992; Smith, 1996). In either case, however, African-American male homosexuals encounter both racism and heterosexism at some point during their lives.

Racial Identity Development

African-Americans and the Process of Negative Identity Development

African-Americans live within a social system that views them as "permanent outsiders" in their own country (Du Bois 1903; Oliver, 1989). It would be difficult for anyone to develop and maintain a positive self-image and successfully adapt to an environment that is hostile towards them. African-Americans, as a result of exposure to Euro-American social standards, may often experience some form of identity confusion and possibly develop a negative self-concept. Despite the fact that they too are American, their primary reference group (African/Black) is subtly and overtly portrayed in an unfavorable manner (Akbar, 1984; Cross, 1978; Oliver, 1989; Parham, 1993). When a society creates a standard for beauty closely relating to the dominant racial group (straight hair, blue eyes, fair skin, and keen noses), uses only one race to characterize deities, only offers a standard of education affirming Whiteness, constantly represents non-Whites as easily exploited and/or antisocial, and endorses a system that ignores the "real" causes for racial disparities, it is easy to understand the high probability of developing a negative self-concept (Akbar, 1984; Chedeya, 1995;

Cross, 1978; Oliver, 1989; Parham. 1993). Steele (1995) found that even when individuals of color appear unaffected by negative racial attitudes, their awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with their race can lead to performances consistent with the stereotypes. In other words, the performance of individuals of color can be impacted when awareness of their race and associated stereotypes are triggered.

An increasing sense of hopelessness felt among Blacks, especially young Black men, is another cause for self destructive behaviors; and these tendencies to behave in a negative manner make African-Americans likely candidates for the penal system, the psychiatric ward, or the morgue (Pearson, 1994). Many Black men, especially adolescents and young adults, have developed behaviors (high rates of substance abuse, partner abuse, crime and violence) that keep them stuck in an unjust criminal system (Collier, 1982; Ghee, 1990; Hunter and Davis, 1991, 1994; Josephs et al., 1992; Oliver, 1989; Parham, 1993; White and Parham, 1990). West (1993) views these behaviors as "nihilistic" and widespread within this particular population. What is worse, going to jail or becoming involved with the criminal justice system is developing into a "rite of passage" for many young Black men.

Further, this tendency for many African-Americans (especially young adults) to participate in self-destructive behaviors is demonstrated in another way. Many African-American young adults continue to engage in risky sexual behavior at a time when AIDS is epidemic in communities of color (Cochran and Mays, 1993; Stevenson, 1994). Risky sexual behavior in communities of color is another unconscious manifestation of the hopelessness and self-destructive tendencies among many African-Americans.

INTERVIEW STUDY

Little research has been devoted to the experiences of the African-American gay and lesbian population (Greene, 1994). In order to gather psychologically relevant information regarding the experiences of African-American homosexual males, a two-part study using both

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qualitative and quantitative analyses was conducted. The first part of the study involved asking several African-American homosexual males what were some of the significant challenges they experienced growing up as a Black and gay individual. From this information, a list of questions was developed and an interview study was conducted. The results were based upon personal interviews with 25 African-American homosexual males. Participants varied in age (20-61, mean = 39.64) and were from a wide range of backgrounds. All participants were at least high school graduates and over half had attended college, with a third of them graduating with a bachelor's degree. Six participants had obtained masters degrees. Their occupations ranged from student, package delivery driver, and bartender, to computer analyst, playwright, magazine editor, drug counselor and minister.

The questions developed for the personal interviews consisted of 40 open-ended questions covering childhood and adult experiences, and focused on three topics: Black experience (e.g., When did you first realize you were Black? How did you feel about that? What challenges do you face as a Black person?); Black male experience (e.g., What does it mean to be a Black man? What challenges do you face as a Black man? How do these experiences differ from those of Black women and White men?); and the African-American homosexual male experience (e.g., When did you first experience a same-sex attraction? How did you feel when you first concluded you were gay? What challenges do you face as an African-American homosexual male?). The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Participants were interviewed in a variety of settings (e.g., restaurants, their own home or office). All participants were informed that, although the interviews were anonymous, they would be taped, but after transcription the tape would be destroyed.

All of the men interviewed seemed to feel that African-Americans today continue to struggle with their identity because of the unreal images of Black men being portrayed by the media. All the men felt that it was very important for African-Americans to establish their own identity and not buy into the media's false representations of them.

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<u>Challenges</u>. "What challenges do you face as a Black person?" The general response to this question focused on racism and its impact. All participants felt that fighting racism was a major challenge for Blacks in America.

<u>Being a Black male</u>. When asked, "What is your image of manhood?" the majority of the men felt that Black men, in particular, were misrepresented by the media. The perception of Black men being "athletes" or "players of women" (Hunter & Davis, 1992, 1994) was affirmed by those interviewed in this study.   The majority of men interviewed felt this concept of manhood, which they believed to be the experience of many young Black males, is warped: "I think they [Black men] adopted a lot of what the White community told them Black manhood was... I think Black[s] were later even forced to take a sense of pride in adapting into believing the myth of virileness [sic] and the "baby maker." He was kind of forced to adapt to that because he couldn't be the man in public office, he couldn't be the man with the salary, he couldn't be the man who got the loan... All the other things that were manhood in America were not open to him."

Akbar (1994) provides a definition of manhood that dispels the myth of Black men being stoic, unemotional and insensitive and suggests that Black men explore and broaden their sense of humanity. Another of the men interviewed on the subject of manhood appears to echo Akbar's sentiments:

> Manhood is like the deepest of humanhood.   It is like womanhood.   It is being absolutely classy, and classy in the sense that you are always considerate of other people.   That's what being a man is, being able to enjoy a good cry because you are so happy with something, not putting up some boundary that says you can't do that...being responsible, being self-respected.

Responses to the question, "What were the challenges of being a Black man?" are best represented in a single sentence: "I think we're [Black men] facing the challenges of our own apathy."

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Most men interviewed felt that White men had an unfair advantage over them, and their advantage was simply because of their skin color. The majority of the participants felt Black men are required to prove their ability more often. In addition, they felt Black men had to work twice as hard as "the White man" in order to "get where they wanted to be in life." Most participants felt the challenges of Black women were similar to their own.

Being a Black Gay Man. The results indicated that the majority of these African-American gay men knew of their same-sex feelings before puberty. The mean age of "first discovering same-sex attraction" was 9 years. All of the men interviewed felt they had no one to discuss their same-sex feelings with. A few, however, indicated that they were about to "open up" to their mothers but the anticipated negative reaction toward homosexuality caused these men to reconsider:

> I was right on the verge [of telling her] and I think she sensed it. And there was fear and denial. She started relating an experience of a friend of hers, this woman whose son was gay...the mother was all you have, she is everything... to have her say she's going to disown you hurts and it's scary

One participant reported an attempted suicide and was institutionalized for approximately a year. The doctors decided that his home environment was too hostile towards him because of his sexual orientation and that his home environment would increase the likelihood of another suicide attempt. Several other men considered suicide when they finally concluded that they were homosexual. Example:

> I used to pray until I cried for God to take these feelings away from me. I would just break down and cry and I would be so hurt and miserable and so moody because I couldn't stand the fact that being a good Jehovah's Witness meant that I couldn't be homosexual. Yet that is what I was. I felt I was the only one... I felt suicidal.

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Religious beliefs are also a cause for a tremendous amount of pain and confusion. The majority of men interviewed came from religious backgrounds and their subsequent experiences in churches as well as within their families revealed an embodiment of heterosexist attitudes within both systems, usually viewed as supportive. Some parents went as far as taking their son to the minister for counseling because they felt their son was homosexual or admitted to having same-sex attractions:

> I hated myself, because I knew it was wrong because of my religious background. I was afraid to tell anyone because I didn't want my family to kick me out or be disappointed in me.

Most of the men interviewed kept their same-sex attractions to themselves because of peer pressure and fear of rejection. A few of those interviewed went as far as to participate in heterosexual sex, even marry, in order to avoid any suspicion by their families and peers that they might be homosexual.

African-American homosexual males experience a special dilemma because of the prevailing negative attitudes towards homosexuality, from society in general and the African-American community in particular. The results of the interview study suggests that these African-American homosexual men lacked any form of support, especially during early childhood and adolescence. The church has historically been a major source of support within the Black community. However, for its gay constituents, the Black church has not been a safe haven, especially for those who openly profess their same-sex orientation.

Cabaj (1989) pointed out that homosexuality is not easily identifiable and that there is no "uniform" pattern of behavior. As a result, most homosexual men are treated and viewed as heterosexuals unless they indicate otherwise. Their fear of being rejected and/or persecuted because of their homosexuality requires African-American homosexual males to keep their sexual orientation to themselves. In this way, their depression can be associated with their sexual orientation.

Nurius (1983) proposes that depression in homosexuals is not because they are ashamed of being homosexual, but because they must keep their sexual orientation to themselves. African-American homosexual males may also experience depression as a result of low self-esteem, difficulties with self-acceptance, and feelings of alienation and loneliness. Further, their experience of alienation from a large part of the Black community may also affect their racial identity. Fear of their same-sex sexual orientation being discovered may cause African-American homosexual males to develop a distorted sense of masculinity and experience concerns about how others evaluate them.

THE SURVEY RESEARCH PROJECT

T he survey research project was developed based on the results of the previous interviews, the existing literature on the African-American male experience, and the limited literature on the African-American homosexual male experience (Loicano, 1989),. The aim of this project was to explore the same general topics with quantitative data, using a larger and more representative sample of African-American gay men. A survey questionnaire was developed, based upon the above and designed to test a number of hypotheses. In previous research, depression has been identified as an important index of psychological well-being among gay men. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. Gay Identity Conflict and Depression. It is hypothesized that there will be a positive relationship between indices of gay identity conflict and depression level.

2. Black Identity Conflict and Depression. It is hypothesized that there will be a positive relationship between indices of Black identity conflict and depression.

3. Gay Identity Conflict, Black Identity Conflict and Depression. It is hypothesized that depression level will be better predicted by a combination of these two sources of conflict than either one alone.

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4. Demographic difference. It is hypothesized that the various demographic characteristics of the African-American gay men sampled will not predict depression level. The hypothesis underlying this prediction is that the negative impact of heterosexism and racism is broadly experienced by and more overwhelming for the population being studied than their demographic differences.

Method

Sample

The survey research questionnaire was distributed in two waves. In the first wave (1995) five hundred surveys were distributed around the United States by individuals attending the 1995 National Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum held in Los Angeles, CA; in addition, questionnaires were distributed to congregations of "gay-friendly" churches in various locations. From this wave 92 usable questionnaires were received from African-American gay men.

In the second wave (1998) another five hundred questionnaires were distributed throughout the United States. In this sample an attempt was made to gather information from individuals other than those at conferences or in church congregations. There was reason to believe that the first sample might have been over-represented by individuals active in Black gay-rights organizations. The investigator was particularly interested in receiving questionnaires completed by individuals in more entertainment-oriented settings -- e.g., bars and clubs known to be frequented by gay Black men. The total number of completed and usable questionnaires received from African-American gay men, in this wave, was 99.

Instruments

Depression level was measured by the Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS), which was devised by Zung in 1965 (cited in Robinson, Shavers and Wrightsman, 1991) and reviewed by Shaver and Brennan (1991). In 1973, Zung (cited in Robinson, Shavers and Wrightsman, 1991) reported a modest but adequate level of internal reliability (.73) for the scale. The validity of the scale was tested by correlating it with physicians' global ratings of depression (r=.69) by Biggs et al. in 1978 (cited in Robinson, Shavers and Wrightsman, 1991). The items include the following:

1. Morning is when I feel best.
2. I do not have trouble sleeping through the night.
3. I enjoy looking at, talking to and being with attractive people.
4. I find it easy to make decisions.
5. I feel hopeful about the future.
6. My mind is not as clear as it used to be.
7. My life is pretty empty.
8. I feel others would be better off if I were dead.
9. I am more irritable than usual.
10. I do not feel useful and needed.

In order to measure racial identity conflict, the Helms and Parham (1990) Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS) was used. The scale was modified for this study, but has been used in several research projects and has become the most widely used instrument for measuring racial identity in African-Americans. In the sample population of this study, however, the overall internal reliability of the scale was unacceptably low. Three individual items from the scale were, however, found to be significantly correlated with depression:

1. White people cannot be trusted.
2. I feel very uncomfortable around Black people.

3. Sometimes, I wish I belonged to the White race.

Social Support Scale and Self-Acceptance Scale (Alexander, 1995). One could reason from theory that social support (or the lack of it) has an impact on psychological well-being (Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). In addition, the same can be said about the relationship between self-acceptance and psychological well-being. Based upon these ideas, the author developed the Social Support and Self-Acceptance Scale. This scale was used to determine the respondents' homosexual identity conflict. The set of items which yielded a scale with good reliability included the following items (keyed appropriately so that higher scores equaled higher conflict):

1. In public, I do not act in any special manner to hide my homosexuality.
2. Being homosexual is just as natural as being heterosexual.
3. My life would be better if I were heterosexual.
4. I would prefer to keep my homosexuality a private matter.
5. I would marry a person of the same sex.
6. I have discussed my homosexuality with my family.
7. My job is supportive of my homosexuality.

The overall question was whether there is a relationship between either African-American homosexual males' racial identity conflict or homosexual identity conflict and depression level.

An initial correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship among variables (race, ethnicity, age, marital status, current relationship status, education, status of employment, city of residence, and church affiliation). In addition, participants' racial and homosexual identities will be included in the correlation analysis. Following that analysis, those variables with significant relationships will be placed into a linear regression equation.

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The hypotheses were tested by means of Pearson Correlation Coefficients and a hierarchical regression in which the dependent variable was depression level and the predictor variables were: Racial Identity Conflict items, Homosexual Identity Conflict level, and demographic variables (Age, Education, and Occupation).

RESULTS

T able 1 provides a summary of percentages on a number of demographic variables. Note that the data are presented separately for the two waves of data gathering (1995 and 1998). Considering the length of time between the two samples, it seemed reasonable to determine whether the samples were comparable on these variables. Although both periods of data gathering included a broad selection of gay Black men from various parts of the United States, it was important to determine whether the actual samples were similar. In fact, the samples differed on only two variables, Type of Work and Religious Affiliation. Type of Work was used here to represent one aspect of Socio-Economic Class (SES); the distribution across the occupational categories was significantly different for the two waves. It is worth noting that this is a very gross measure of occupational status and of SES. For example, the broad category of "Professional" may well have been interpreted in a variety of ways by the respondents. "Self employed" as a category may also represent a wide range of actual social standing. No information was gathered about income, which might have allowed a more precise indication of the status of the occupations. On the other hand, education is a somewhat more objective and operationally precise variable, and the groups were not different on this variable.

The meaning of the significant difference on Religious Affiliation appears to be primarily based on the much larger percentage indicating "nondenominational" among the 1995 respondents. It is not clear why this difference existed, but it is not apparent that it has influenced the other analyses.

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Finally, the respondents from the two data gathering periods were compared on age. The overall mean age for the combined sample was 35.09 (SD=10.11). The mean age of the 1995 sample was 33.73 (SD=8.81). The mean age of the 1998 sample was 36.36 (SD=11.10). This difference was not statistically significant.

The reliability coefficient for the Self Rating Depression was .64, which is modest but adequate. The reliability for the Homosexual Identity Conflict Scale was likewise at an acceptable level (.65). Because the Racial Identity Attitude Scale did not yield an acceptable reliability coefficient it was not used as a scale. Instead, the three items from the scale that significantly predicted the dependent variable (Depression Level) were used individually. Because the Gay Identity Scale is used here for the first time, this study must be considered exploratory and any interpretations offered are tentative.

As a first step in testing the hypotheses of the study, correlation analyses were carried out in order to determine the individual significant predictors of the dependent variable (Depression Level). Table 2 is a summary of these Pearson Correlation Coefficients for all hypothesized predictor variables. Three demographic variables (Age, Education, and Occupation) were added to the list as potential controls. As shown in the table, significant correlations were found between the predictor variables (Gay Identity Conflict scale and Racial Identity Conflict items) and the dependent variable (Depression Scale level). As hypothesized, the greater the Gay Identity Conflict the greater the level of depression. Likewise, as hypothesized, each of Racial Identity Conflict items significantly predicted level of depression. None of the demographic variables were found to be significantly correlated with Depression Scale level. Therefore, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4 were supported by the data.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the combination of the predictor variables would provide the greatest amount of predictive power. In order to test this hypothesis, a Regression Analysis was performed This approach allowed not only a test of each individual variable's predictive power but also tested the change in predictive power as variables were

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combined. The outcome of the analysis supported Hypothesis 3. That is, as each predictor variable was added to the analysis the strength of the predictive power significantly improved.   Again, none of the demographic variables added to the predictive power of the combined variables. These findings suggest that both Black Identity Conflict and Gay Identity Conflict independently predicted depression level. They also suggest that the combination of the two provides the best predictor of depression level.

Table 1
First and Second Wave Comparison of Demographic Characteristics

Demographics		GROUP – Early or Later			
		Early		**Later**	
Years in school		Count	Col %	Count	Col%
	8-10	3	3.3%	1	1.2%
	10-12	9	9.9%	9	10.5%
	12-14	22	24.2%	28	32.6%
	16 or more	30	33.0%	31	36.0%
Region of Country	1	48	52.2%	46	53.5%
	2	44	47.8%	40	46.5%
Employment	Yes	76	82.6%	78	91.8%
	No	16	17.4%	7	8.2%
Type of work [a]	Professional	42	48.8%	21	26.9%
	Management	17	19.8%	20	25.6%
	Clerical	10	11.6%	6	20.5%
	Self-Employed	6	7.0%	4	5.1%
	Other	11	12.8%	17	21.8%
Single or other	1	71	77.2%	63	73.3%
	2	21	22.8%	23	26.7%
Religious Affiliation	Catholic	6	6.5%	8	9.9%
	Protestant	27	29.3%	31	38.3%
	Non-denomination	27	29.3%	5	6.2%
	None	32	34.8%	37	45.7%
Gay Friendly*	Yes			30	42.3%
	No			41	57.7%
In a relationship	Yes	29	31.5%	34	39.5%
	No	63	68.5%	52	60.5%

*only asked in second wave.

[a] $\chi^2(4) = 9.95$, $p < .05$

[b] $\chi^2(3) = 15.41$, $p < .001$

Table 2
Pearson Correlations Between Depression and the Predictor Variables

(N=178)

Variables	Depression	
	r	$p<$
Gay Identity Conflict	.24	.002
Black Identity Conflict (BIC) 1*	.20	.008
Black Identity Conflict (BIC) 2*	.23	.003
Black Identity Conflict (BIC) 3*	.38	.001
Age	.01	NS
Educational Attainment	.01	NS
Occupational Status	.01	NS

*BIC 1 = White people cannot be trusted
*BIC 2 = I feel very uncomfortable around Black people
*BIC 3 = Sometimes, I wish I belonged to the White race.

DISCUSSION

The results from this study suggest that depression level is likely to be greater among African-American gay men who experience conflicts concerning their homosexual and/or racial identities. Recent findings from other studies investigating identity issues and self-perceptions among African-American gay men appear to be consistent with the results of this study. Crisp, Priest, and Torgerson (1998) conducted a two-stage study in which their sample, while very small, were asked to complete some self-attitude scales in addition to being interviewed. Their findings suggested that the self-concepts of those African-American gay men were closely associated

with their ethnic and sexual identities and that conflict may occur when attempting to "honor" both identities (Crisp, Priest, and Torgenson, 1998).

Another study, by Crow, Fok, and Hartman (1998) investigating work-related discrimination, found that African-American gay men were the least desirable candidates for employment opportunities. These findings appear to validate the particular challenges of African-American Gay men that are mentioned throughout this study. Repeated experience with employment discrimination will very likely increase internal conflicts and depression.

Herek and Capitanio (1995) conducted a telephone survey of Black heterosexual adults and found that heterosexist attitudes among Black adult heterosexuals were as prevalent as those among White adult heterosexuals. In addition to possessing a more negative attitude toward gay men than lesbians, Black heterosexual men, more than Black women, considered homosexuality unnatural. These findings appear to be consistent with this study's suggestion that the prevalence of heterosexism within African-American communities presents additional challenges for African-American gay men. Further, they suggest that there may be substantial risk for experiencing both gay identity and racial identity conflict.

Siegel and Epstein (1996) examined for psychological stress among an almost equal number of HIV positive African-American, Puerto Ricans, and White gay men. Their findings indicated that Black and Puerto Rican gays experienced more psychological stress as a result of "hassles" from heterosexuals in their communities. Further, it was found that heterosexism within the African-American and Puerto Rican communities caused more anxiety than a HIV positive diagnosis for Black and Puerto Rican gays. These findings further support the possibility of gay identity and racial identity conflict among African-American (and Puerto Rican) homosexuals.

The results of this study suggest that depression among African-American gay men may be linked to gay identity and racial identity

conflicts. Such risk factors have serious clinical implications. It is incumbent upon mental health professionals to explore these possibilities when working with African-American gay males who appear to be in psychological distress.

Mental health professionals must be cognizant of heterosexism and its effects. Heterosexism is as powerful and as devastating as racism. There are two salient factors linked to homosexual and racial identity conflicts: heterosexism and racism . The self-concept of African-American gay men and their self-world attitudes can be negatively affected by such heterosexism and racism. Black gay men must deal with hostility directed towards them because they are Black. Black gay men are first viewed as Black males; that is, Black gay men must deal with negative attitudes towards them as a result of the existing negative stereotypes associated with Black males. Black gay men must deal with negative attitudes towards them because they are homosexuals. Finally, Black gay men must deal with hostility directed towards them from many Black heterosexuals as well as from many White homosexuals.

African-American homosexual males face many difficult challenges. The challenges of being Black, a Black male, *and* a homosexual, place them in a vulnerable position and require that they cope with a variety of stereotypes leveled against them from almost every community that they encounter. In spite of these challenges, it is possible for African-American homosexual males to develop healthy racial and homosexual identities and experience optimal psychological well-being.

For a variety of reasons, the findings of this study must be considered exploratory. The conclusions and interpretations, although speculative, are consistent both with previous research linking negative social experiences to depression and other signs of psychological distress. I do hope that others will continue to do research that attempts to understand the psycho-social problems of gay Black men.

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