"I am my own Identity"

The Black Gay Male Experience

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Abstract:

Our lives are multifaceted, shaped and manipulated by various factors such as economic status, communal values, culture, etc. Therefore, it is unsuitable to generalize the experiences of others by forcing them into binary structures such as White and Non-white, straight and non-straight, or male and female. Individualized experiences are a product of several integrated agencies and the fluidity or concrete structure of these agencies. The intention of this research design was to provide awareness to these unique experiences by utilizing an array of self-disclosures discussing how race and sexual identity and expression are intertwined and evaluating how the University of Illinois strives to accommodate these racial differences. For this particular study, I chose to focus on LGBT identify Black men on campus. Upon analyzing my ethnographic data, prevailing themes arose from interviews. Factors such as: religion, community, masculinity, media portrayal, and campus resources were all prevalent contributors and mediators to the Black queer culture on campus.

The University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana takes prides in classifying their education system and community as a diverse progressive institute and a central support unit that preservers towards cultural competence in all realms of their outreach programs. Lives of Black men, despite sexuality, unfold within a cultural context shaped by racism on the outside and conservative religious and shades of homophobia within their own communities. Therefore, one must look below the surface and to the roots of what archetypes and ideologies contribute to the definition of a *true Black man.*

Introduction

By jumping into such a sensitive broad top, it was necessary to narrow down what I would choose to focus on within my future. An intention to study Black culture as a whole would be futile. Through conducting ethnographic research, I had my interviewees do the writing for me.

Methods

In total, I interviewed 5 participants (5 Black males) who identified as gay. During the beginning of my recruiting attempts I found participants through word of mouth, but after I vocalized my studies intentions more I attained more through snowball sampling. As important as it is to relay how I found my interviewees, it is crucial to acknowledge my personal experiences recruitment. It seems that I was diving into an issue that is generally taboo and unspoken within the Black culture on campus, therefore I had to search within small knit groups and secret organizations. I would describe this as some sort of *underground* phenomenon repressed by silence. I choose to emphasize this because one can ironically link this prominent demonstration of oppression to that of slavery. Yet, this is occurring within one race demonstrating a form of black-on-black violence.

The silence was not only acknowledged within the qualitative data, but also influenced the data collection process. Because of this communal perception of silence, my recruitment process was somewhat under the radar.

Demographics

Five male-identifying UIUC undergraduate African American students who labeled themselves as gay and "out" were interviewed within a period of 2 months. 2 of the students were seniors, 2 were sophomores, and 1 a junior.

Procedure

Each participant went through an unstructured interview consisting of various organized and follow-up questions. Originally I structured my questions around the intrapersonal experiences of self-worth, self-esteem, and identity formation. For example, questions that were geared towards more psychological stability were disregarded. From the beginning it seemed

that asking straight-forward, "Has does your sexual identity intertwine with your racial identity?", were unnecessary after eliciting the first few questions. Straying away from leading questions and bias, I tried to stick to simple general questions because in the end the participant is co-facilitating this process. While constructing these questions, I assumed that I would have to dig in order to strike anything that supported my research topic and interpretation. I was proven wrong immediately. The fluidity of conversation led several themes and generalizations to be touched on. The finalized interview questions consisted of:

1. *Background information about hometown, family, friends, communal environment ("So tell me a little bit about where you're from?")*

2. *A comparison of university to hometown community/experiences ("How would you compare your friends/experiences at home to here at the university?")*

3. *If applicable, details of the "coming out" process to family and friends on and off campus. ("How old were you when you came out to your family? How did they react?")*

4. *Relationship with the African American community on campus ("Do you attend any events sponsored by predominately Black RSOs or Greek life?")*

5. *Perceptions of the African American community and tolerance (What are your perceptions of tolerance in regards to sexual orientation within the African American community?")*

6. *Religion ("What is religious affiliation?")*

7. *Resources ("What resources have you utilized on campus?)*

It is important to note that these questions were not asked as concretely as stated or delivered in the same order they were presented. In order to provide a comfortable interviewing atmosphere, it was important to strip away the formalities of an interviewer-interviewee relationship. Each question was preceded by follow-up questions for more detail on the various topics at hand.

Findings

Upon completing the interview process, there were prevailing themes that were discussed in a majority of my discussions regarding factors and concepts that influence not only the Black community as a whole, but the Black queer community as well. Masculinity narratives, media portrayal, community, religion, and resources were all significant concepts that impacted their experiences within the UIUC campus life.

Masculinity Narratives

The most prevalent concept articulated through all the interviews was the concept of masculinity and what truly makes a man, a man. A popular argument justifying negatives attitudes toward Black gay men is

that their male and masculine identities are incomplete or flawed, that their sexual identity has skewed their worth as men (McCoy, 2009). Several researchers have found that cultural beliefs about masculine identity influence health behaviors among men. Similar to the McCoy study, the participants emphasized actions taken that enact masculinity rather than personality, if a man is a man that he does these things. For example, *Diego* states:

"Like a man has to be this way and a woman has to be this way. I feel like I can do both. I can cook for myself, I can clean for myself, I can fix. I can put up drapes, I can fix a light bulb. I can learn how to fix a tire."

Though trying to state that he can fit into both gender roles, he always clearly differentiates what is considered *women's work* and what is considered *man's work* fitting them into American's structure of social expectations of "doing gender".

Another participant relayed his childhood upbringing of playing with dolls and watching *Sailor Moon* as "girl stuff". Lastly, heterosexuality was a key attribute to masculinity. They have internalized these narratives and applied them to how they define themselves on the spectrum of masculinity and femininity. So, though engaging in what would be perceived as "non-normative" sexual behavior, some still held onto the traditional masculine narratives.

Medial Portrayal

Drawing from this general category, masculinity, it was important to create a subgroup by focusing specifically on Black masculinity in particular. Doing this led some to jump in the medial portrayals as catalysts to stigmatization and internalized racism. It was clear that mainstream entertainment did little, if nothing, in uplifting the Black gay community. If

anything, it condemned it. Various homophobic language in hip-hop music and videos, such as, "no homo", portray Black men as the aggressive hypersexual buck that engages in unsafe promiscuous sex with women. Researchers compare this homophobia to the misogyny found in today's hip hop lyrics. A new level of consciousness around the use of women as props in videos and the language used to describe them has become a major focus, but no one seems to come defend the gays who are being equally targeted by many hip hop artists (Cannick, 2006). Many forget that this is not only a current portrayal, but also an historical one as well. Yet according to the data, these stigmas have been internalized but Black man and the community, leaving Black men who identify as LGBT in fear of coming out and being labeled as non-masculine for not living up to these attributions.

Community

Within the UIUC Black community, being gay is an attack against fundamental principles of Black culture. Many of the interviewees relayed experiences of non-verbal and verbal abuse and exclusion. Several stated that they were the lucky ones. *J. Smith* states:

"At home I like didn't want to go outside at all and risk being shot or attacked or something."

Safety was an issue and heavily influenced the lives of each participant. They describe this tension and connect it with a type of silence. Each interpreted these acts of silence differently. Some found it relieving and others found "other-ing", as if they were being treated as inhuman. This lead to significant feels of isolation and inadequacy. *Jacob* discusses his home-life stating:

"I'm very reserved at home. I feel like [my family] judges me. Black people tend to be more judgmental when it comes to like gay

stuff. That's why it's so taboo for a while. Like people knew about it but they wouldn't ask me."

Jacob interprets this notion of silence negatively, while *George* experiences exhibit a more positive outlook:

"[Friends] just assumed if I wanted to talk about it I'd say something."

Religion

Black churches hold a central and uniquely influential position within the black culture. Both directly and indirectly, black churches have been identified as fostering homophobia. The Black church has been widely recognized as the central oldest and most influential institution in the Black community (Ward, 2005). A medium reinforcing hyper masculinity, male dominance, and homophobic ideologies, churches are a significant element to the social lives and network of African Americans. Black church has been seen as a spiritual ark that has preserved and empowered people socially, psychologically, and physically before and after slavery. Most of the participants that were previously involved in church were no longer religiously affiliated, but more confused than ever. Many chose to distance themselves from religion than be involved in an environment where they did not feel comfortable. To note, none categorized themselves as atheists or completely severed themselves from spirituality, but mentioned that they will still strive to have a more intrapersonal relationship with God. Although church-projected phobia drives some black men from the black church, one participant endure the oppression. *Deigo* created his own niche in a traditional church as a choir member, a common stereotypical escape route for black gay men who try to remain in a traditional Black church. It is not

uncommon for some a preacher to be gay, a choir to be gay and the preacher condemns homosexuality as an abomination (Ward, 2005). This contradiction within the system, leaves those who are disadvantage associating religious institutions as purgatory.

Resources

A closing theme, was how these students utilized the resources on the UIUC campus. Many felt that outreach programs, such as the LGBT Resource Center and Pride, were either too structured or the exact opposite, too disorganized. They disclosed that these programs were geared more towards political and social aspects if LGBT issues and not the core LGBT day-to-day experiences on such a diverse campus. An organization, Colors of Pride, was established but is no longer active on campus; reasons were unknown. Interviewees felt that centers catered more towards those who were already "out". One participant states that they felt like "those resources who are like trying to find themselves or like trying to meet more gay people". Focusing on combatting personal acceptance of sexual orientation, resources do not vocalize that individuals have multiple integrated identities that aren't just relating to sexuality. During my interview with *Billy*, he states:

"I'd rather be a part of things that are more diverse. Like I don't like to be in things that are all black or all gay people. I like diverse groups."

Resources need to acknowledge that identify as LGBT is intertwined with so many other factors, therefore predominately focusing on merely sexual orientation can be ineffective.

Further Analysis

To further delve into the analysis of my data, I connected my findings with other complex concepts that were hidden "in

between the lines" of the interview transcripts.

Space

At the start of every interview, I asked each participant to describe their home town and compare it with the university environment. There were mixed responses to whether UIUC hindered or was conducive to the "coming out" process. Nonetheless, it was clear that geography played an issue in the experience of each individual. Some acknowledge that attending such a diverse campus, they were aware that were people that it was not common for some to be around openly gay people. A relationship between race and space was also pointed out in the interviews. Those who were from a predominately White suburb were more estranged from the African American community on campus therefore distancing themselves from a racial identity. *J. Smith*

bluntly describes himself as "more gay than Black".

Language

The complexity of language can by no means be simplified into just a few paragraphs because language is truly everywhere. Even the name of this article, "The Black Gay Male Experience" exhibits controversial forms of language. Terminology when discussing race, sexuality, and gender are still currently discussed; Black versus African American and Gay versus Queer or homosexual. All of my participants chose were more comfortable using terms that may seem derogatory to others. Some interviewees labeled themselves as a girl, but were biologically male, differentiating sex and gender identity. It was hard to interpret something this complex, but I do believe that the terms that they choose to identify

themselves plays a crucial roles in their experiences on campus.

Passing

The concept of passing was the last factor I wanted to touch on relating to these interviews. As previously discussed, the concept of silence within families and communities was prevalent in the data. The toning down of expression and vocalization of gayness with community and family members were outcomes of this silence. This passing was not only a set of performances, but also a set of demands society had made of me to minimize individuals gayness (Yoshino, 2007).

Conclusion

After conducting this research, it is clear that we cannot focus on one particular theme or concept when it comes to an individual

choses to identify themselves, particularly regarding sexually orientation. But if there is one thing we can ask from this qualitative data is: *Where do these men fit in? Do they need to fit in to a category or defined identity?* With the rigid structures and norms of the Black community and the lack of cultural competence within university resources, it can be a fairly lonely world for a LGBT identify African American man on the UIUC campus. It seems that implementing and proceeding from a position of male responsibility and the deconstruction of these masculine narratives rather than branching merely of sexual orientation and labeling may be more beneficial. Nearing the end of each interview, each participant affirmed a state of coerced independence, they are their own identity.

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