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The Black barbershop : intersections of sexuality, masculinity and gender expressions : a project based upon an independent investigation

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Intersections of Sexuality,
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines to what extent African American gay males who frequent the black barbershop share in their expressions of sexuality and masculinity while in the barbershop. The study further investigates the influence of the black barbershop on African American gay males and their comfort with expressing their masculinity and sexuality in this setting and the notion that the black barbershop functions as a microcosm of the black community, by reinforcing heterosexist philosophies.

The participants, eight self-identified African American gay men, were recruited by word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. The researcher administered a demographic survey and interviewed participants about their experiences and how they express their sexual orientation and masculinity while inside the black barbershop.

Results confirm that African American gay men experience the barbershop differently than what the research suggest; in which sexuality becomes conscious upon entering the barbershop and behavior is altered while in the barbershop.

THE BLACK BARBERSHOP: INTERSECTIONS OF SEXUALITY, MASCULINITY

AND GENDER EXPRESSION

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study examines to what extent African American gay males who frequent the

black barbershop share in their expressions of sexuality and masculinity while in the

barbershop. This study also investigates the influence of the black barbershop on African

American gay males and their comfort in expressing their masculinity and sexuality and

the notion that the black barbershop functions as a microcosm of the black community,

by reinforcing heterosexist philosophies. On the contrary, Hooks (2001) suggests that anti

gay opinions of some in the black community are expressed in such a way that it may be

easily perceived as the black community is less tolerant of homosexuality. However,

Collin (2005) contends that the black community operates with double standards, in

which it stands against racism but fails to acknowledge the dynamics of sexuality from

both gay and straight members of the community.

Contrary to the literature, which documents that the black barbershop is one of the

few places where African American men interact regardless of class, education or

occupation (Malone, 2004), this study also articulates the experience of African

American gay males who alter or change their behavior while visiting the barbershop.

Marberry (2005) suggests the barbershop experience to be somewhat of a right of passage

for African American males. However, the literature doesn't indicate adverse experiences

African American gay males have due to their sexuality, or perceived there of.

Furthermore, Lemelle and Battle (2004) contend that there is very little empirical

research on African American gay males or gay men of color altogether. Moreover, Boykin (1996) suggest that African American homosexuals and bisexuals are pressured into hiding their sexuality and conforming to stereotypical heterosexist behavior that often leads to ridiculing anyone who does not fit into that stereotype.

The present study articulates the antithesis of the barbershop experience for African American gay males by interviewing them on their experience and how they express their sexual orientation and masculinity while in the barbershop. Eight African American gay men, varying in ages (21-29), were interviewed using a fixed set of open ended questions that were developed by the researcher based on the literature. The findings of this study will provide insight into an underrepresented, understudied and often misconstrued subculture. For the purpose of the current study, "African American" and "Black" will be used interchangeably and is defined as people of African descent and who identify as either Black or African American. The term "gay" or "homosexual" will also be used interchangeably and is defined as a social identity in which men have a primary attraction to other men.

This study also stands to enlighten and influence current literature and clinical practice around issues of cultural competence. Study results will aid social work practitioners working with persons who have multiple social identities, by helping the client integrate his/her different identities and conceptualizing a need for membership in a group(s) that reflects and supports each or all identities. Results will also influence barber schools to incorporate workshops and courses on diversity into their curriculum.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

"No longer voiceless, oppressed minorities struggling for meager social concessions, women, gays and people of color discovered personal empowerment in political resistance. Yet none of these movements embraced black gay men; one need only consider the rocky path of civil rights giant Bayard Rustin to witness the extent to which the topic of black homosexuality was either sidelined or silenced outright by civil rights leadership – regardless of one's heroism or tireless commitment to social justice."

-E. Lynn Harris (Harris, 2005, p.xiv)

The struggle for equality and liberation is a continuous voyage that evolves as time progresses. After each successful movement, in the name of equality and justice for all, we are faced with yet another opposition that appears to centralize on differences based on inaccurate conjectures. Thus, this study will articulate how difference is experienced in the lives of African American gay men in a place that is historically known for uplifting and bringing black men together, the black barbershop.

Although there is limited research on black gay men, the current literature does highlight many experiences of LGBT individuals in relation to themselves and the rest of the world. This study will focus on the sole experience of the black gay male's expression of masculinity, sexuality and gender while in the black barbershop, within the context of understanding the expectation of the black man in the black community, how he integrates his identity and other places of conformity.

Homophobia in the Black Community

In various cultures and communities around the world, there are unspoken expectations based on sex, birth order and even class. When those expectations are unfulfilled and negated in pursuit of personal happiness, hearts are broken, dynamics changed, communication ceased and often times individuals are exiled from families and even written out of the will. In her research as an ethnography strategist, Wise (2001) contends that many individuals in the black community see the role of the black man as significant and conducive to the black family and the black community. However, the author doesn't clarify the expectations or the black man's role in family or community. Is he expected to contribute financial, to head the household or marry and have children? So what happens when the "black man" is attracted to other men?   Although there is no research that proves that blacks are more intolerant of homosexuals (Lemelle and Battle, 2004), Hooks (2001) asserts that antigay opinions of some individuals in the black community are expressed in a way that it may be easily perceived that the black community is far more homophobic than other communities. For instance, Boykin (1996) suggest that several black intellects go as far as suggesting that homosexuality, much like drug abuse, is a cause for shame. Lemelle and Battle found in their study, aimed at documenting information on the attitudes and opinions on issues important to African Americans, that age, education, socioeconomic status and geographic region did not impact attitudes of African males toward homosexuals. On the contrary, Hooks, in her conversations with heterosexual black men, asserts that heterosexual black men admitted to often verbally berating homosexuals as a means of bonding in group settings. Although many Americans do not side with discrimination on the basis of sexual

orientation, a significant number indeed expressed a negative attitude towards homosexuality (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni and Soto, 2002). In a qualitative study conducted by Wise (2001), the author found that many straight black men expressed that they do not see black gay men as masculine, but rather as biological males who do not encompass the characteristics to be viewed as a "real man." Research indicates that this type of dynamic results in gay men placing a higher value on masculine characteristics and striving to appear more masculine themselves (Sanchez, Liu and Vilain, 2010). Boykin (1996) notes that in the black community, there is no fear of homosexuals, but an irrational fear that homosexuality will spread. The author goes on to suggest that African American homosexuals and bisexuals are pressured into hiding their sexuality and conforming to stereotypical heterosexual behavior and often ridiculing anything or anyone who lies outside of that stereotype. Although homophobic, this act isn't seen as such, nor is it considered heterosexist. It is simply revered as a skill that is paramount to survival. Whether this behavior is innate or learned, at the very least, Boykin (2005), in another study, asserts that African Americans were trained to internalize and repeat, on to other blacks, the same injustices used against them. Clarkson (2006) found that gay men oppress other gay men, who are considered effeminate, much the same way that heterosexual men have historically oppressed minorities in this country. The author goes on to suggests gay men who consider themselves to be overtly masculine, equate effeminacy in other gay men with weakness. Thus, it is no surprise that many gay black men see other gay men who are perceived to be effeminate as unattractive and considered "unmanly" (Christian, 2005). Crawford et al suggest that homosexuality in the black community is tolerated as long as homosexual behavior isn't overly explicit. The black

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community is a primary source of support for blacks. However, this support for the black gay male is jeopardized due to homophobic practices and beliefs (Loiacano, 1989). This results in many black gay men feeling isolated from the community, in which Boykin (1996) asserts that black gay men may feel distant from the community due to being ostracized and condemned by the same community that provides support. Loiacano found that his participants shared a common fear of loosing support for being gay. Like other minorities, homosexuals also face discrimination, oppression and are constantly denied access to resources (Crawford et al., 2002). But to be black and to be gay is cause for dual oppression. Boykin suggests that for black gay males to find solace in the white gay community isn't the same as having support from the black community. The author goes on to state that many black gay men reported being discriminated against and pressured to fulfill racial stereotypes when frequenting primarily white gay venues. Those stereotypes are perpetuated by the media, in which black men are portrayed as being overly sexualized. With the medias influence, black men learn to define masculinity as a tournament, objecting and sleeping with multiple women (Collins, 2005). The media also presents different representations of black masculinity that changes, contingent upon the audience. Collins contends that in urban arenas, again, black masculinity is depicted as being overly sexualized, in which this hyper-heterosexuality is an over generalized representation of all black men that is frequently associated with authentic black masculinity. On the hand, Lemell and Battle (2004) conclude that the media does indeed glorify and sexualize lesbianism, however, they found that black men have more experience with same gender sexual behavior. As a result, black gays have to confront sexuality and racism while continuing to regain the self-love that is threatened externally

and internally (Hooks, 2001). Sanchez, Liu and Vilain (2010), found that the stigmatizing of effeminate behavior in gay men, by other gay men, is a reflection of negative feelings about being gay. The authors go on to contend that these same men over compensate with masculinity in an attempt to suppress feelings of inferiority, which stem from their negative feelings around being gay.

African American Homosexual Males

One of the participants in Wise's (2001) study stated: "We black gay men must hide our sexuality to be considered real men by society's standards"(p.9). It is a belief that homosexuality effects the "black manhood," jeopardizing his physical strength, masculinity, his ability to procreate and head the black family (Boykin, 1996). The author goes on to suggest that many black gay men fear loosing their families and jobs due to being labeled a homosexual. Being gay is often perceived as weakness, less than and/or a reduced status as a masculine black man (Wise). As a result, black gay men are forced to live a divided life, in which they choose to reflect the identity that society values and hide the one society rejects (Crawford et al., 2002). Sanchez, Liu and Vilain (2010) also contend that childhood ridicule lead many gay men to conform to stereotypical masculinity to avoid being alienated. This type of negotiating and conformity is all too familiar to many minorities, particularly African Americans. It was Du Bois who introduced and synthesized the complexity of life experienced by African Americans. He asserts that no matter how rich, how smart or how high one may exceed, in comparison to whites, African Americans will continue to be viewed as other or different in this society (Du Bois, 1995). Thus, African Americans must go through life negotiating their identity

as African-Americans and as American. In his Black Identity Development Model (BID),

Jackson (2001) highlights the most significant stage of identity development as

internalization, in which each African American develops a healthy and positive identity

that is grounded in black culture and heritage. In understanding the importance of

receiving support from the primary support group and the development of identity, Wise

(2001) argues that black gay men have a triple consciousness; being black in a white

society, a black man in the black community and being a homosexual. The author goes

on to contend that the synthesizing of the three identities is a constant struggle in a

society that rewards behavior and ideas that mirror that of the majority and castigates

those behaviors and ideas that contrast. Harris (1995) asserts that the negotiation of

different identities and the intersections of racism and discrimination influence the

identity development in adolescent black males, thus creates a much more complicated

process. Sanchez, Liu and Vilain (2010) argue that for men, masculine ideals are central

to identity and affects self concepts and interpersonal relationships. Even at birth,

individuals are already assigned specific colors, toys and tasks that are based on gender.

Although it is no surprise, the authors go on to contend that these masculine ideals of

what men/males are suppose to "be like" do not include gay men, due to the "ideals"

prohibiting affectionate behavior with other men. In their study (Crawford et al, 2002),

the researchers found that African American gay men who had a positive self identity as

African American and as gay, reported higher levels of self esteem, greater social support

and high levels of life satisfaction, opposite to African American gay males who did not

have a positive view of self as an African American or as gay. However, developing a

gay identity may compromise ones black identity or the black community's perception of

one's identity as an African American. As a result, many black gay men feel partially accepted in the black community and in the gay community, in which they decided how much of each identity to disclose in order to assimilate and survive in each setting. Christian (2005) found that if given a choice, black gay men reported being black is more important than being gay. The author reported that the same respondants went on to describe that they, as black men, are better able to have stronger connections within the black community as black men, but not as gay men. Clarkson (2006) asserts that black gay men have difficulty synthesizing their identities. Are you black first or gay first? Clarkson also argues that being black and gay is more challenging than being white and gay.

The Black Barbershop and the Black Church

The black barbershop has a history of serving many purposes in the black community. Aside from providing a service that transcends across class, in which black men from all socioeconomic statuses keep standing appointments to maintain the perfect fade, cut, line and tape, the barbershop also serves a social municipal for the black community. Malone (2004) identifies the black barbershop as one of the few places where African American men interact regardless of class, education or occupation. The barbershop often provides a platform for discourse on local, national, international and political issues. Historically, in the south where economies flourished by keeping blacks inferior to whites, the barbershop earned recognition as a public space where black men had the opportunity to gain financial freedom (Malone). The author also suggests that the black barbershop serves as an important social and cultural institution. In an article on his play titled *Cuttin' Up*, the writer and director, Charles Randolph-Wright states that:

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"There are great stories to the barbershop experience. Black history gets passed on there. For black men, it's a place of comfort where you can get a shared experience that you don't get anywhere else" (Grener, 2005, p.19). Craig Marberry (*2005*) utilizes interviews to capture the essence of black barbershops across the nation in his book, in which he recites the experience of a mother taking her son to get a haircut for the first time: "So I took Isaiah to the barbershop. I know a boy's first haircut is a daddy thing. It's a rite of passage, like back when a father would take his son out in the woods to shoot his first buck. But daddy would do it. There's a whole ritual around a boy's first haircut. Isaiah's grandmother schooled me…"(p.8). The author contends that the black barbershop is a place where black men go to be amongst themselves, to be themselves and to unmask and feel free to subjectively discuss the impact of racism and other disadvantages experienced in day to day life. However, the barbershop also functions as a microcosm of the black community, in that it reinforces hetero-normative philosophies and behavior. Collins (2005) contends that the black community operates with double standards, in which it stands against racism but fails to acknowledge the dynamics of sexuality from both gay and straight members of the community. Collins goes on to stress the need for the black community to attain a liberal consciousness that moves the community from a hetero-normative stance to a more progressive position that holds both men and women accountable to the same standards and fully accepts gays and lesbians in churches, families and community organizations.

Much like the black barbershop, the black church also serves as a reliable source of support, socialization and affirmation for the black community. The black church is considered the pulse of the black community, meeting the psychological and social needs

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(Atkins-Bradley, Johnson, Sanders, Duncan and Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Although the black church has secured its position on the vanguard against oppression, it is also a palpable agent in the persecution of homosexuality. Despite the progression of many churches outside of the black community on issues such as sexuality, religion continues to be the main factor in black homophobia (Boykin, 1996). African American Christians in the black church, like other Christians, are taught that it is a sin to be gay (Hooks, 2001). Many black churches utilize the pulpit, that once stood for social justice, to repudiate, devalue, marginalize and condemn homosexuals and often prohibiting the ordination of self identified homosexuals (Miller, 2007). The black church dismisses the bibles rhetoric about black people, but earnestly hold on to the scripture that is interpreted as condemning homosexuality (Collins, 2005). The odds of attending the black church and hearing a sermon on love that transcends and surpasses all understanding, regardless of ones sexuality, is unlikely. Yet many African American gay men contend on being steadfast in their relationship and participation in the black church. Miller communicated that these African American gay men were raised in families that valued church participation and benefited from church involvement. Several of the participants in the authors study argued that they wanted to be heterosexual and even prayed that God would change them. But the absence of church involvement, created a salient void in their lives (Miller).

The same may be true for the black barbershop as well. Based on the sexuality and the perception of it, black gay men risk loosing valued memberships to institutions that have a legacy of uplifting and uniting black men.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Study Purpose

The present study articulates the antithesis of the barbershop experience for African American gay males by interviewing them on their experiences and about how they express their sexual orientation and masculinity while in the barbershop. The findings of this study provides insight into an underrepresented, understudied and often misconstrued subculture. Current research on African American gay males primarily focuses on the HIV epidemic or homophobia in the black community. Crawford, Allison, Zamboni and Soto (2002) assert the importance of having a positive reflective support group in the development of a healthy identity. However, institutions that are notably known to be resourceful, nurturing and supportive can also be places of petulant and insolent speech and behavior that is solely based on one's perceived sexuality. Thus, the primary research question asks, "Do African American gay males who frequent the black barbershop, alter their behavior while in the barbershop?"

For the purpose of the current study, "African American" and "Black" is used interchangeably and is defined as people of African descent born in the United States and who identify as either Black or African American. The term "gay" or "homosexual" is used interchangeably and is defined as a social identity in which men have a primary attraction to other men.

Knowledge gained from this study may include the influencing of current

literature and clinical practice around issues of cultural competence. Findings may also

stand to influence barber schools to incorporate workshops and courses on diversity into

their curriculum.

Research Method and Design

The study employed a qualitative fixed descriptive research approach, using the

interviews of 8 self identified black gay men, varying in age (21-29) and in geographic

region. Each participant was interviewed using a fixed set of open-ended questions that

were developed by the researcher based on the literature (see appendix B). Additionally,

a brief demographic survey was collected (see appendix B), allowing for a descriptive

analysis of the characteristics that participants represent (in terms of age, education,

urban or rural locations, and etc.).

The fixed descriptive design allowed for semi-structured interviews that posed

questions based on current literature and existing hypotheses. The open-ended questions

allowed new themes to emerge, articulating the manifestation of behavior and the

negotiating of multiple identities. The Human Subjects Review Board at Smith College

School for Social Work approved all materials, questions and procedures before the study

was initiated (see appendix E).

Sample

The study sample included 8 gay-identified African American men ranging in age

from twenty-one to twenty-nine (mean = 26) who identify as both African American and

gay. The participants come from a variety of social, urban/rural backgrounds and regions.

However, all participants were high school graduates with education post high school and

U.S. born, as the influences of immigrant or cross-cultural experiences and educational exposures may represent significant differences in personal experience that could not adequately be address in this study.

During recruitment, a non-probability convenience sample was employed, using email to distribute flyers and information to friends, advertising, via the Internet, on social networks such as Facebook. A snowballing technique was employed, using social and professional contacts to spread the word of the study and also asking study participants to recruit other individuals who met the criteria of being an African American gay male age 21-29.

Once participants were recruited, the researcher screened them via email or telephone. During the screening process the researcher offered to answer any general questions about the purpose and procedure of the study, as well as reviewing the inclusion criteria for participation. Once participants agreed to participate in the study, a mutually convenient and agreeable location was chosen for the interview. To insure validity the interview process was standardized. After a general introduction and an additional offer to answer any lingering questions about the study, the formal interview process began. For interviews conducted in person, each participant was given the informed consent form to read and sign (see appendix D). If the participant and researcher were not in the same city, the interview was conducted via telephone. For telephone interviews, each participant was emailed an informed consent form and was required to scan, fax or mail a signed copy to the researcher. Postage was not covered by the researcher, in which participants did not indicate having difficulty paying for postage. All interviews were recorded with a digital recorder (RCA VR5220-A) and by a voice

recording application on the researcher's laptop (Mac book). The same recording

technique was used for interviews conducted via phone, in which a cell phone with

speakerphone capability was utilized. The researcher reassured each participant that his

name would never be linked with the data, instead showing each participant the number

code that would be attached to his data.

Following the informed consent, the researcher obtained demographic

information from each participant, such as age, highest level of education achieved and

city of current residence. Once demographic information was obtained, the actual

interview began. The interviews ranged from 25 to 60 minutes (mean=35.05 min) as each

participant answered and expounded on the interview questions. At the end of the

interview, the researcher thanked each participant for his time and effort, gave him a copy

of the resource list that was developed by the researcher, and ended the interview.

Types of Data

Brief demographic information was gathered to create basics data on the range of

characteristics represented by the study participants. The guided interview focused on

how African American gay men behave and interact while in the black barbershop, how

they negotiate their identities and if they are conscious of perceived

stereotypes/assumptions put upon them based on sexuality, race and gender.

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher, which resulted in many pages of

transcribed data. The interviewer utilized notes, taken during each interview, to guide and

sculpt the transcription process. This allowed the interviewer to highlight the

commonalitites of each participant, such as major themes and behavior. All interview

data will be kept secure for three years as required by federal regulations. After that time, all data will be kept locked or destroyed.

In order to maintain interview times under one hour, eight questions were given to each participant, with 5-10 minutes allotted for him to respond to each question:

1.) What role does the barbershop play in your life?
2.) How long and how frequent do you attend your barbershop and why?
3.) Talk about your experience in the barbershop as a black gay man.
4.) Describe your relationship with your barber.
5.) Are you out to your barber?
6.) Have you witnessed derogatory comments or conversations about gay men while in the barbershop?
7.) Did you ever participate?
8.) Do you currently, or have you ever, altered your appearance or behavior (i.e. mannerisms or speech) while in the barbershop?

Data Collection

Study data came from a non-probability convenience sample and should not necessarily be seen as representative of the general population. Instead, the data may illustrate themes and ideas that suggest areas for further research, enhance clinical practice and add to cultural competence.

Data was recorded using the Mac book's built in microphone and a digital recording device (RCA VR5220-A). Each Participant signed an informed consent to have his interview recorded, and after each interview the conversation was coded using the number of each chronological interview. The interviews were then saved on the researcher's Mac book in a secured file then copied to a flash drive that was then stored in a locked safe space. The researcher conducted each interview with the Mac book and the digital recorder between he and each participant to carefully record the conversations and minimizing any possible feedback pick up. After conducting the interviews, using a

media and sound production software program (Garage Band), the researcher typed each interview verbatim into a word processing file, which was saved and stored securely. To assure validity, each recording was reviewed and compared to the verbatim text during the data analysis stage.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, the researcher looked at the range of responses for each question and identified emerging themes and notable variations, which will be discussed further in the findings chapter.

After gathering the responses and demographic data, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis looking at patterns of reoccurring themes and ideas that were articulated in the interviews. The researcher used the demographic information to analyze the responses and particular themes that may be influenced by certain experiences expressed in participants' interviews. These emerging themes were then organized and copied into a spreadsheet. Quotations from each theme were used to illustrate each identified theme, which will be discussed in the results and discussion section chapters.

Ethics and Safeguards

In considering the ethics of this project, the researcher had to consider the sensitivity of issues around identity (sexual and ethnicity) and emotions that accompany discussions about the experience of being in a marginalized group. The interview questions were developed to allow free discussion while still capturing the identified research interest. In developing the questions, it was important to consider the how discussing issues of discrimination, sexuality, behavior and identity negotiation might trigger or re-traumatize participants who may have strong feelings or upsetting memories

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around these topics. The approval from the Institutional Review Board (HSR), providing

each participant with a list of national and local resources (see appendix F), and

communicating to participants a clear sense of the study purpose prior to each interview,

should have controlled and minimized any triggering of traumatic memories and/or

feelings.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of data gathered from semi-structured interviews, with eight African American gay males, on their experiences and how they express their sexual orientation and masculinity while in the barbershop. In which the study sought to articulate the antithesis of the barbershop experience for African American gay males.

There were three major findings found in the data gathered from interviews with each participant. The first significant finding emerged when each participant was asked why they attended the black barbershop opposed to other barbershops or salons. All participants highlighted that if complete comfort ability could never be achieved, they would continue to keep standing appointments because it is important to be an environment where people "look like me," in which their identity as an African American can be reflected and that it is necessary to receive a "good cut" because physical appearance is important and makes them feel good about themselves (n=8).

The second finding emerged when participants were asked if they have ever altered their behavior or appearance while in the barbershop. Each participant reported being conscious of his sexuality upon entering the barbershop (n=8). However, the extent of the change in behavior and/or appearance, differed depending on each participant's view of himself as a gay man, either flamboyant or not, and how comfortable each was with his own sexuality. Participants who viewed themselves as "clockable" or easily

detected as a homosexual, communicated a change in physical behavior, dress, decrease in talking and avoidance of busy days (n=6). Where as participants who do not consider themselves to be as "clockable," communicated a change in speech, either speaking louder or not at all (n=2).

The third major finding emerged when participants were asked if they have ever witnessed derogatory comments or conversations about gay men while in the barbershop. All participants reported witnessing such conversations and/or comments (n=8). A common theme highlighted by many of the participants was a belief that the extent of negative speech is indicative of insecurity in sexuality and/or "closeted" homosexuals men trying to "fit in"(n=7).

The study considered participants to be experts in their own experiences. As such, the interview questions sought to bring forth the experiences of black gay men in a historically nurturing and resourceful environment. To more fully explore the participant's experience as a black gay male and how they synthesize their identities while in the barbershop, each participant was asked sub questions and/or to expound on several of their responses. In which each participant reported aspects or their history, which may have influenced their current identity and comfort levels. The participants who reported being most comfortable, either had early life experiences as a gay male or were relatively older in age (n=2).

The findings of these interviews are presented as follows: demographic data of participants (see appendix A); unwelcoming environment; conforming; relationship with barber; and "out" to barber or perceived sexuality.

Demographic Data

The sample for this study consisted of eight African American homosexual males who frequent the black barbershop. The geographic location of all participants (n=8) was varied from several states within the United States. The age range was between 21 and 29 years of age (m=26). The educational level of the participants ranged from the completion of high school to graduate level. One had a high school diploma, two had associate degrees and five had bachelor degrees – in which three of the five were pursuing graduate level degrees (see appendix A).

Unwelcoming Environment

When asked to talk about his experience as a black gay man in the barbershop, all participants reported the barbershop to be an unwelcoming and uncomfortable environment. Four of the participants described the environment as challenging due to being in a room full of assumed heterosexual sexual black men. One participant reported

As a gay male going into an environment where you know they are going to judge you automatically because you are different is challenging.

Another participant stated:

…My sexuality is pretty much suppressed when I'm in the barbershop. When I say suppressed I mean my individuality. You know, what makes me who I am. I'm not able to express that. I'm more so rigid because of the people, the environment around me, because its mainly heterosexual men. So I tend to be more…kind of like "butching" it up a tad bit. Or just more so suppressing my individuality, who I am and how I would normally carry myself.

Two of the participants went as far as to describe the experience as intimidating.

There is usually a brief period of intimidation when I walk in because all of the barbers talk as though they are seemingly straight. I'm far from obviously gay, but it still feels like all eyes are on me for that moment and I'm wondering what they are thinking.

On one occasion, when there were derogatory comments being made about a homosexual I was immediately irate. I thought to myself, "don't they know that I am homosexual, do not they care I found it very disrespectful?" They wouldn't talk about an Italian with one being the room, so why would they talk about a homosexual while I was in the room. I thought to myself, "maybe they didn't know that I was a homosexual," although the thought was very unlikely. My conclusion from this situation is that they did know or suspect that I was homosexual but they didn't care how I would feel about their idea of humor. Often people believe that homosexuals are on the bottom of totem pole. Heterosexuals are believed to be the norm and the superior. Anybody else is strange and doesn't matter in the real world. So of course with feelings like this it would be no problem for them to disrespect another homosexual in my presence.

Six of the participants commented on the environment not being welcoming due to not being able to participate or relate to conversations taking place in the barbershop and feeling left out.

> I don't watch sports at all…so lets just say when the guys in the barbershop start talking about women or sports, I feel left out. No I didn't watch the Lakers game. No, I don't know how many points Kobe Bryant has scored in the last ten games. And because I don't know these answers, I feel forced to just chuckle or nod when al of the other guys are talking. Just to pretend to be interested in the topic, hoping they will not ask me about the game.

Provided the descriptions of the barbershop environment, it is important to note that two of the participants also viewed this experience as a strength.

> …I think it's like a stepping-stone. If you can deal with that, then you can deal with anything.

Conforming

Seven of the participants felt as if they are forced to conform while in the barbershop to draw less attention to themselves as gay men, hoping to blend in. One participant described his experience as:

> I usually feel very uncomfortable. Although my Barber is very nice, I feel like everyone knew I was different…so I dressed and talked differently when I went to the shop.

Another participant also dressed differently upon entering the barbershop, in which he stated:

> In the beginning I would alter my appearance in the barbershop. I would wear clothes that were looser fitting. Not because I was shamed of myself or who I am, but because sometimes I don't want to be the talk of the barbershop. Sometimes I just want to fit in with the rest of the guys.

One participant described his feeling compelled to conform as such:

…frustrating and exhausting, considering all the guards that I have to put up to act more masculine.

Relationship with Barber

All participants described their relationship with their barber as strictly professional, never discussing issues or information relative to their personal life. Two participants in particular, were very descriptive of this theme, in which one described it as:

…Although he simply provides a service to me and I leave, I would say that our relationship is fairly good, although we have no outside communication. It's a really good business relationship. We talk about school a lot because he recently started school and he asks me questions about papers. Often times he shares personal information about his life, but its never personal when it comes to my life and what I do.

The other participants stated:

I wouldn't say that I have a strong relationship with my barber. For me, the barbershop is somewhat of a formal setting, because I feel as though I cannot be myself and that I must only speak when spoken to and answer questions appropriately. It makes me feel like I'm in a classroom.

In regard to the relationship with the barber, five participants commented on observations made regarding the different dynamic between themselves (as gay men) and the barber, and heterosexual men and the barber.

My barber greets me with a hello and goodbye. He doesn't even usually ask how I want to get my haircut because I always get the same faded taper. Sometimes I have to spark a conversation with him, just because it could sometimes feel awkward and quiet. But when it comes to everyone else, you can't make him be quiet to save his life.

Another participant described how the interaction changed between he and his barber.

I did notice a change in his demeanor with me after he found out that I don't follow sports and I've never been to any of the straight clubs in the city.

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Out to Barber or Perceived Sexuality

All participants reported not being "out," affirmative or even public about their

sexuality to their barbers. However, seven of the eight participants believe that their

sexuality is known based on appearance, mannerisms or an unspoken language that

focuses on what is not being said, oppose to what is said, verbally.

> I am not out to my barber, but I am certain he assumed that I was gay based upon
> my mannerisms.
>
> I'm not out to my barber because we never talk. But I believe my barber knows
> that I am gay which would explain why he is so short and dry with me.
>
> No, but I am always honest in my responses to questions he asks that may lead to
> him putting two and two together.
>
> Umm no. Again, we don't have those types of conversations. It's not that personal
> when it comes to my life and what I do. But I am comfortable with him. It's just
> that we've never had a conversation about sexuality or my sexuality in particular.

Summary

This chapter has presented findings from seven of the eight questions asked of

African American gay males in semi-structured interviews where open-ended responses

were encouraged. Question #1 ("what role does the barbershop play in your life?") did

not yield significant information. In fact, participants responded to the question with two

to three words at best. Perhaps this was due to the wording of the question. The question

aimed to inquire about the significance of the barbershop in each participant's life.

However, the implied question was answered when participants responded to question #

2. Further differences and findings among the participants in this chapter will be further

explored in the discussion chapter. Previous studies and theoretical literature considered

in the literature review will also inform conclusions drawn in the next chapter and will

provide a context for the findings of this study. Limitations of this study and

recommendations for further studies will be specified in the discussion chapter as well.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the following questions: 1. To what extent do African American gay males who frequent the black barbershop share in their expressions of sexuality and masculinity while in the barbershop and 2. What influence does the black barbershop have on African American gay males and their comfort in expressing their masculinity and sexuality. The findings indicate that participants collectively reported suppressing their sexuality while in the barbershop and altering their behavior to ultimately "blend in." The findings substantiated current literature regarding homophobia, the fear of compromising one's identity and rejection.

This final chapter presents a discussion of four major themes initiated by responses to the semi-structured interview questions from which findings were presented in the preceding chapter. Clinical implications for culturally competent social work services and potential relevance relating to theory for this particular population are discussed below. Additionally, this study's strengths and limitations will be described and recommendations for future research will be considered.

Major Findings and Implications

Subjects' responses to why they choose the black barbershop opposed to other

barbershops or salons, affirmed what Loiacano (1989) describes as the black community

being a primary source of support for blacks. The author goes on to articulate how the

very same support that is provided within the black community is jeopardized for black

gay males due to homophobic practices and beliefs within the community. The

participants in this study reported a need to be in an environment in which persons "look

like" them, even at the expense of leaving one identity at the door. The significance of the

black barbershop as a resource and a source of support is further emphasized by Malone

(2004), who suggests that the barbershop for black men, serves also as an important

social and cultural institution. Findings also support the current research on the

complexities of synthesizing identities for black gay males who are often forced to inhibit

parts of their identity. Every participant communicated being conscious of their sexuality

upon entering the barbershop, in addition to altering their behavior and/or their physical

appearance. This shift in behavior is indicative of research conducted by Crawford,

Allison, Zamboni and Soto (2002), which suggests that due to negative reinforcements

and adverse experiences, black gay men are forced to live a divided life, in which they

choose to reflect the identity that society values and hiding the one society rejects. During

the interviews, all participants communicated witnessing derogatory comments directed

toward men who were perceived to be homosexual. Although participants were not asked

directly as to why they altered their behavior, it can be implied that these men feared

being ostracized or ridiculed. Boykin (1996) reports that this type of altering behavior is

not abnormal. In fact, Boykin articulates that black homosexuals are pressured into hiding

their sexuality and conforming to stereotypical heterosexual behavior. Again, if not, one risks being ridiculed not only by members in the general community, but also by other patrons in the barbershop. Hooks (in Constantine-Simms, 2001) recounts this experience in her conversations with heterosexual black men, in which the men admitted to verbally berating perceived homosexuals as a means of bonding in group settings.

However, one notable finding that was not directly addressed in the literature review, was the participants who have a committed affiliation with church, communicated never or not wanting to visit the barbershop with another homosexual male (n=2). One participant in particular, stated "If I go to the barbershop with another homosexual, it can become a bit awkward because people begin to take notice." Although many inferences can be made about this particular participant, such as internalized self hate, the literature addresses the position of the black church on issues surrounding sexuality and could possible explain the influence of the church on many of its members in regard to their views and opinions on homosexuality. Hooks suggests that African American Christians in the black church, like other Christians, are taught that it is a sin to be gay. Miller (2007) discovered that many black churches use the pulpit to devalue and condemn homosexuals and often prohibit self identified homosexuals to hold clergy positions in the church. The researcher draws a comparison of the black church to the black barbershop to describe and articulate the significance of the barbershop in the black community. However, at the very least, Boykin (2005), asserts that African Americans were trained to internalize and repeat, on to other blacks, the same injustices used against them.

Demographic Data of Participants

Demographic data was collected from each of the eight participants. There are no conclusions drawn from this data, but it is notable due to the variance of participants and their similarities in responses. In the current study, there was no racial diversity or religious diversity, mainly due to the homogeneity of the population studied. All participants were African American gay males who identified as Christians. Participants who were chronologically older and those who had early experiences as black gay men, appeared to have a more healthy and positive outlook as a gay man in regard to interacting with other heterosexual males. Aside from being conscious of their sexuality while in the barbershop, these participants did not convey any shame or inadequate feelings around their sexuality. They also appeared more open and willing to discuss their sexuality with their barber, if the barber brought up the topic.

Summary

Participants lent their voices to share their perspectives for this research study. Although this sample was particularly challenging to assemble, the subjects who participated responded openly and honestly with the expertise of their experience. Initially, the researcher set out to interview twelve participants for the sample. However, the last four individuals scheduled to have an interview, continued to have scheduling conflicts with work (n=3) or multiple family emergencies (n=1). For the sake of time and deadlines, the researcher continued with the study and analyzed the transcribed interviews (n=8).

As anticipated by the researcher based on the literature and personal experience of the researcher, participants unanimously communicated being conscious of their sexuality upon entering the barbershop and altering their behavior while in the barbershop. The researcher also anticipated education to have a major influence on participant's comfort with expressing their sexuality. This was not the case. The education level of the participants varied from high school diploma to graduate level course work, and all participants responded the same when communicating their inability to be comfortable while in the barbershop. This concurs with Malone's (2004) description of the black barbershop as a place that transcends class, occupation and education levels.

The clinical implication found in this study was that of time. Quite possibly due to the emotionally charged subject matter based solely on each participant's experience, a significant amount of respondents attempted to exceed the 60-minute time frame. In which all participants were instructed that the interview had to cease and could not exceed 60 minutes for the sake of time. A significant amount of the participants also verbally requested to keep talking or to schedule an additional meeting to continue the interview. The researcher found this to be difficult. After seeking individuals to donate their time and personal experiences, the researcher feared appearing ungrateful of disinterested when denying requests to schedule additional meetings or continue. The researcher also feared that this gesture would have a negative influence on the participant's decision to participate in future studies.

Limitations

Specific limitations of the current study were the small sample size, disproportionate levels of education among the participants being interviewed, analyzing the experience of participants who were self-selected, middle class and residing in metro areas with access to community resources that may not be available to other African American homosexual males living in rural or less urban communities. It is important to note that all participants volunteered and could be the nature of the sample, which may reflect the characteristics of the group. It should also be noted that the characteristics of the sample and their responses, are not a direct reflection of the general population. The researcher's own experience as an African American homosexual male who frequents the black barbershop should also be considered in regard to his ability to directly relate to the participants on multiple levels (i.e. race, education, gender and sexuality). Other limitations of the study resulted from the selection criteria and research methods that may account for similarities in participants such as region, class and education level.

Although this research study gathered relevant and meaningful data, the number of participants was small. However, all participants witnessed other individuals having adverse experiences based on their perceived sexuality, which could have prompted them to participate. Given more time, it is possible that the researcher could have altered his recruitment strategies that would have afforded a larger sample. Had the researcher been provided with financial resources to assist with the recruitment process, he could have utilized other venues to recruit more participants and possibly offered incentives for participation. It is also important to note that time also directly correlated to the small number of participants in regard to the researcher operating within time constraints.

Provided more time, the researcher could have further explored the impact of childhood and family interactions on the synthesizing of multiple identities.

This study was intended to be an exploratory qualitative research project, and was not designed to be a comprehensive investigation of the narratives of African Americans or homosexual males' experiences relative to the clinical implications therein.

Implications of Social Work Practice

Given the vulnerability and magnitude of many of the respondent's experiences, it is noteworthy to mention that many of the experiences are reoccurring and may affect the participant's ability to completely feel safe, be it in the barber shop or in the world. It then becomes even more important for clinicians to consider those experiences and the resiliency as an essential part of treatment. However, it should also be noted that the research and literature demonstrates a very strong correlation between disparities and the lack of mental health treatment among African Americans. Thompson, Bazile and Akbar (2004) found that African Americans are less likely to ask for mental health services than White Americans. Clinicians should not only take the aforementioned into consideration when working with African Americans, but also encourage the current population studied to explore their needs with regard to culture specific beliefs, practices and structure. This may create the possibility for a more balanced power differential between therapist and client, and can also provide the client with a more complete and authentic dialogue while building a stronger therapeutic alliance. For instance, one may conclude that is would be far easier to just visit a more welcoming and affirming establishment to get a hair cut. However, it is not that simple. It is important to explore the meaning and significance of

the particular establishment. In working with the African American gay males, it is important to understand that being black and gay isn't the same as being white and gay. This is not to devalue or take away from the experiences of white gay males. However, there is something to be said about the dual oppression that one experiences for being black and for being a homosexual. History and research illustrates the oppression of African Americans, gays and lesbians in this country. Understanding this may require clinicians to complete double work in treatment – provided that resources are more accessible to black communities – such as understanding a need to have positive reinforcing experiences within the black and gay communities. Clinicians should also consider allowing clients to tell their story, while highlighting the strengths and triumphs.

Implications for Theory

Researchers have only relatively begun exploring and articulating the diversity within minority populations, the African American community in particular, specifically around issues of social justice or cultural competency. Aside from the works of notables such as Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro* or E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie*, the extent of research on the African American community has been misrepresented, in which members of the community have a long history of being exploited. Studies have been conducted "on" the community opposed to "within" the community. One need only review the Tuskegee Experiment of the 1930's to be reminded of this exploitation that is partly indicative of African Americans current unease with participating in studies that results in their under representation in theory and research. It should not be implied that there is absolutely no research on African Americans or African American homosexual males, but rather an opportunity to

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enlighten future researchers on the narrow scope of current research that focuses

primarily on the HIV epidemic and/or homophobia within the black community as it

relates to African American homosexual males. Such research may provide an erroneous

view of the community as "the problem." However, theory should focus more on the

manifolds of the community, highlighting the strengths and resiliency within it.

Theorists who specialize in narrative therapy agree that treatment must include

the voices of any marginalized population (Bird, 2001). Individuals who are struggling to

make sense of their existence, particularly in relation to others whom are considered the

norm, undergo treatment progress along a continuum of recovery where achieving safety

and creating a personal or mutual narrative, hopefully terminate with a sense of personal

power in their own lives or even a wish to advocate for others who are undergoing the

same experience (Bird, 2001; Herman, 1997; White, 2005). Narrative theorist also affirm

that the power differential between therapist and client must be neutralized as much as

possible in order for the process of discovery to occur (White, 2005).

Recommendations for Future Research

By studying this population, research gives once silenced voices a chance to serve

themselves and others alike. Thus, future research should include quantitative research on

the complexities of identities within different cultures. For instance, what it means to be

black and gay in this nation may be different when compared to what it means to be

white and gay in this nation.

In order to address the need for more research with African American homosexual males, further research should seek to venture and explore the impact on individuals who are unable to accept and hold multiple identities, possibly through the utilization of a quantitative study comparing heterosexual males to homosexual males within a specific culture, highlighting development and social norms.

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Appendix A

Table 1

<u>Demographic Characteristics:</u>   <u>Frequencies</u>

Age
21 years   1
23 years   2
27 years   2
28 years   1
29 years   2

Education Level
H.S. Diploma   1
Associates   2
Bachelor's   5
Graduate   3

Demographic Information

Age –
Highest level of achieved education –
City and state of current residence –
How do you identify ethnically (i. e. African American, Caucasian) and sexually (i.e. Homosexual, Bisexual, heterosexual) –

Interview Questions

1. What role does the barbershop play in your life?

2. How long and how frequent do you attend your barbershop and why the black
3. barbershop opposed to other barbershops or salons?

4. Talk about your experience in the barbershop as a black gay man.

5. Do you currently, or have you ever, altered your appearance or behavior (i.e.
    a. mannerisms or speech) while in the barbershop?

6. Describe your relationship with your barber.

7. Are you out to your barber?

8. Have you witnessed derogatory comments or conversations about gay men while
    a. in the barbershop?

9. Did you ever participate?

The Barbershop

How do expressions of masculinity and sexuality impact your barber experience?

Seeking African American, gay identified males, age 21-50 who attend or have attended a primarily African American barbershop. Individuals will participate in a 60 minute interview focused on the participant's experience as a African American gay male. Materials will be used for a Masters in Social Work thesis

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact Antwan Nedd, MSW candidate. Call (407) 367-9114 or email antwannedd@yahoo.com today.

Appendix D

Consent Form

Dear Potential Participant,

       I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work and I am conducting a study on the experiences of African American gay males while in the barbershop. Your participation is valuable and important for future developments in understanding of your unique experience as an African American gay male. Your participation in this study has the potential to create a platform for dialogue in which others alike can find solace in coming together and feel empowered to go back to their individual communities to initiate future dialogues. This study is being conducted for my Masters in Social Work thesis and possible presentation and publication.

       You are being asked to participate because of the unique perspective and possible experiences that you may have encountered while in the barbershop. To participate you must be an African American male, ages 21-50, and identify as gay. The risk of participating in this study may be that some interview questions could elicit difficult thoughts, feelings or memories. At the end of the interview you will be provided with a list of national resources to contact and speak with someone. At your request, you can also be provided with a list local psychotherapy resources that you may refer to if you experience psychological distress as a result of participation in this study. Should you have any questions or concerns, I can be reached via email at antwannedd@yahoo.com. Also, the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee can be reached at 413-585-7974. It is also advised that you retain a copy of the consent form for your records.

       If you choose to participate in this study, I will interview you about your experience in the barbershop as an African American gay male. The interview may be conducted in person or via telephone and will be tape-recorded. By signing this consent letter, you also give permission to be recorded. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. Unfortunately, I am not able to offer financial remuneration for your participation. However, participation will allow you to share your experiences and provide important information that may be used by professionals working with African American gay males. Your information will be coded and confidential. I will numerically code the audiotapes and interview notes instead of using your real name. Some illustrated quotes will be used for the thesis but will be reported without connection to identifying information. My Academic Advisor will be the only person, beside myself, with access to the data. I will lock consent forms, audiotapes, and interview notes in a file drawer during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. Should I need the material beyond the three year period, the data will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed. And should you request to withdraw from this study, all materials related to you will be destroyed immediately.

       Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any interview question(s), and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty

by indicating in writing that you are no longer interested in participating. You have until April 1, 2010 to withdraw from the study; after this date, I will begin writing the results and discussion sections of my thesis.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDCATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date

Appendix E

HSR Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

February 17, 2010

Antwan Nedd

Dear Antwan,

Your revised materials have been reviewed. You have done a very good job of clarifying your purpose and focusing your study. You also have taken care of almost all of the small revisions or corrections that we asked you to make. There were two that you missed in the Consent. You failed to say after that the study was for your thesis "and possible presentation and publication". If you don't say this and get their Consent, you really won't be able to present or publish and you may well want to.

Also, you continue to say "with your permission" about recording. Just say you will record and when they sign, they have given permission. You don't want to invite them to decide they don't want it recorded as it is very difficult to deal with qualitative materials without that kind of assistance.

We are happy to now give our approval to your study with the understanding that you will send a Consent with those two small revisions included to Laurie Wyman (lwyman@smith.edu) for your permanent file.

Please note the following requirements

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman / Chair

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor

Appendix F

National/Local Resources

211	First Call for help! Community resource directories
1-800-273-8255	Crisis Hotlines
866-4-U-TREVOR	The Trevor Project: A leading national organization focused on crisis and suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) person.
WWW.BLACKAIDS.ORG The Black Gay Men's Network	The Black Gay Men's Network draws its strength from Black gay men around the world who are committed to creating soulful, loving connections with other Black gay men to transform our society, improve our health status, and make the social change we seek. The Network is a community of successful black gay men who unite their collective expertise, vision and creativity to provide leadership within the Black gay community and society at large.
210-616-0300	Southwest Mental Health Center
210-731-0200	Bexar Family Solutions
210-912-8464	Healing Hearts Counseling Center
210-690-4144	Hardy-Holly Team Inc
www.waterloocounseling.org 512-444-9922	Waterloo Counseling Center Inc
210-223-6106	Diversity Center