

# THE BLACK WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS PROJECT:

## A NATIONAL SURVEY OF BLACK LESBIANS

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Black lesbians are relatively invisible in our society. Despite popular stereotypes, we actually know very little about their lives. Research on lesbians (see Peplau & Amaro, 1982 for review) has generally focused solely on Anglos. In a recent search of psychological research on lesbians using Dialogues and Psych Info databases, we found that only two of over 300 references contained "black women" in the title or abstract. Turning to the social science literature on black women also provides little assistance. In compiling a forthcoming bibliography on social science materials topically related to black women and mental health (Mays, forthcoming-a), there were over 2,100 references to black women, but not a single empirically-based article or review on black lesbians, other than those of the first author (Mays, 1985). Most written information on black lesbians is found (even here only rarely) in popular magazines, gay publications or in the form of published poetry, short stories or autobiographies.

Why is there so little psychological research on black lesbians? There are probably several reasons. First, social scientists have, for the most part, neglected sexual orientation as a variable of interest in psychological research in general. Psychology, while well developed in race relations research, particularly with black Americans, has not yet incorporated sexual orientation as a variable of interest to any great extent. Yet, like gender or ethnicity, sexual orientation represents a social status characteristic that may have important implications. Potentially, it can structure an individual's experiences of being in the world and expectations for social interactions (for a review see Webset & Driskoll, 1985).

A second possible reason for the dearth of black lesbian-related research is that much current research on the lives of lesbians arose out of feminist academic roots, which have been predominantly Anglo in focus. To address the topic of black lesbians adequately, one must meld both the issues of race and sexual orientation.

### CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Psychological research from the areas of stereotyping, status expectations, the contact hypothesis or social cognition can give us some potential insight into what happens when a person has one salient status or characteristic, such as ethnicity, social class or gender. Only in recent years have researchers begun utilizing clearly formulated ideas about the conditional relationship between two or more statuses (e.g. gender and ethnicity) in behavior. The thrust of much of this research has been to approach these statuses from the perspective of an additive model rather than examining the simultaneous contribution of these statuses as interactive, interdependent or interrelated (Kessler & Neighbors, 1986; Mays, in press-b). In the latter perspective, the goal is to investigate the complex web of hierarchical social

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arrangements generating different experiences (Zinn, Cannon & Dill, 1984), modified by combinations and salience of the status characteristics.

It is from this conceptual framework that the Black Lesbian's Relationship Project was begun. The survey is the first of four related studies that are now in progress. These include investigations of relationship issues among black heterosexual women; black heterosexual men, with a particular emphasis on their relationships with black women; black gay and bisexual men, with an emphasis on how AIDS has impacted upon their relationships; and the intimate relationships of black lesbians. This chapter will focus on the black lesbian we have surveyed.

Our black lesbian research adds the dimension of sexual orientation as a salient social status characteristic shaping the experiences of a subgroup of black women. Like gender and ethnicity, sexual orientation can be a status characteristic when it is an obvious or known factor about the person. Yet, it also differs from gender and ethnicity in that it can be, at times, a hidden characteristic. While we expect direct relationships between the various social statuses and women's life experiences (e.g., a direct relationship between race discrimination and mental health factors such as depression or drug problems), we are particularly interested in exploring the interactions among our status characteristics. For example, we believe that social support structures, so necessary to protect one from the psychological effects of discrimination, will be influenced by one's sexual orientation, and may differ depending upon the salience of the latter characteristic. Elsewhere it has been shown that we are most likely to receive help from similar others (Thoits, 1986).

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Early research on homosexuality and lesbianism tends to formulate questions, collect data, and interpret results in ways reflecting ethnocentric, male, heterosexist or class biases (Morin, 1977; Suppe, 1981). Obviously, we hoped to avoid making similar mistakes. Since social scientists have never had access to scientifically valid or nationally representative data on the lives of black lesbians, we were especially concerned about capturing the diversity present in this group of women. Our aim was to gather data on black lesbian relationships that would be both scientifically valid and sensitive to ethnic and cultural contexts. In structuring our research, we focused on developing both instruments and recruitment methods that would accomplish our goals.

#### INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT

There are several special issues of concern in devising an appropriate survey instrument for black lesbians. First, research on black Americans has been hampered by the inapplicability of standard measures and procedures of survey data collection (Jackson, Gurin & Hatchett, 1979). The National Survey of Black Americans clearly demonstrated the need for specialized procedures across all aspects of research design, data collection and analysis. For example, in asking about health problems, it was important to use the term, "high blood pressure," rather than hypertension, a term unfamiliar to many participants.

Second, survey research methods developed for use with black Americans assumes a heterosexual orientation of respondents while research instruments developed for use with lesbians targets primarily Anglo populations. Neither captures the unique concerns of black lesbians. For example, previous research has documented that the family of origin plays a central role in the lives of black women (Brown & Gary, 1985; Vaux, 1985).

Black lesbians, in contrast to white lesbians, may be more likely to remain a part of the heterosexual community, maintaining relationships outside of the lesbian population. This may happen for several reasons. First, black community values emphasize ethnic commitment and participation by all members of the community. Second, the relatively smaller population of black lesbians (a minority within a minority) puts more pressure on these women to maintain their contacts with a black heterosexual community in order to satisfy some of their ethnically-related social support needs. Third, black lesbians may contribute much needed financial and informational resources to their families of origin. This assistance may be critical for the maintenance of a reasonable standard of living. In contrast, for white les-

bians, there may be a sufficiently large lesbian population (a similar minority, but drawn from a larger population) from which to derive most ethnic/cultural, social and emotional needs. Also, distance from family of origin may be more achievable for a greater percentage of white lesbians due to greater financial resources within the family system. Thus, black lesbians may find that the need to juggle family of origin demands and their lives as lesbians is somewhat more complicated.

It was our goal to collect data that would allow for an exploration of how these sociocultural factors influence the development, maintenance and dissolution of lover, friend and community relationships of black lesbians. Most investigations of relationships have centered mainly on interpersonal or intrapersonal aspects. While this focus is important, our research team felt that other factors (such as availability of black lovers, perceptions of discrimination within the primarily Anglo lesbian community or perceived class discrimination within the black lesbian community) may be additional mediating factors in explaining relationship choices as well as overall psychological well-being.

Generally there is insufficient questioning in survey research whether or not underlying assumptions or universal applications of concepts, measures or procedures are appropriate (Schumann, 1966; Warwick & Lininger, 1975; Jackson et al., 1979). It was our strong belief that development of an effective questionnaire necessitated initial field work to establish even the types of questions that we needed to ask of our participants.

Development of the questionnaire incorporated a variety of methodological techniques. These included the use of focus groups, employment of a modified back translation procedure (Jackson et al., 1979; Warwick & Oberson, 1973) and random probes (Schumann, 1966; Jackson et al., 1979).

#### COLLECTION OF QUALITATIVE DATA

We began our research in 1984 by listening carefully to the experiences of black lesbians. A pilot study, using extensive individual interviews with black lesbians, gathered information on women's perceptions of how discrimination influenced their interpersonal relationships and participation in various community activities (Mays, 1988). Responses to open-ended questions were tape-recorded and later transcribed. These transcriptions served as one basis for development of the first pre-test instrument.

Next, we conducted two focus groups, one with single and one with coupled black lesbians, to help identify relevant issues in relationship values, social support, community participation and sources of discrimination. The focus groups were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere designed to encourage participants to talk openly about past and present relationship experiences. These focus groups supplied detailed information assisting us in decisions about appropriate language and meaningful concepts to be included in the questionnaire.

#### FINALIZING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A pool of questions was then written, aided by previous research on Anglo lesbians (Aura, 1985; Peplau, Cochran, Rook & Pedesky, 1978), Anglo gay men (Peplau & Cochran, 1981), Anglo heterosexual college students (Cochran & Peplau, 1986) and heterosexual black men and women (Jackson et al., 1979; Mays, in press-a). Many questions needed to be "translated" into culturally-relevant phrasing determined from the interview and focus group sessions. As an example, we found that the word, "lover," rather than the previously used terminology, "romantic/sexual partner" (Cochran & Peplau, 1986; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Peplau et al., 1978), was important when referring to a woman's sexual significant other. Unlike Anglo lesbians, black lesbians often use "partner" to refer to a good friend one travels about with to various activities (social, family visits, business).

From this process, we developed a 28-page questionnaire. The questionnaire covered a wide range of topics including questions about participants' friendships and love relationships, perceptions of support and discrimination, openness about being lesbian and problems experienced. Included also was the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale, a standard measure of depressed mood with norms for the black population (Radloff, 1977).

After the initial questionnaire was developed, it was piloted with a small sample of black lesbians. Attempts were made to have this pretest group as heterogeneous as possible. Women varied in relationship status (single vs coupled), age (ranging from 18 to 52), class background and whether or not they had children. After the women completed the questionnaire, they were then interviewed extensively regarding the meaningfulness of the concepts and the completeness of the items. This was done to assure ourselves that the instrument was clear and functioned as intended. We used a variant of the random probe technique to determine the shared meaning of items. This use of the random probe parallels the procedures of the National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson et al., 1979). It ensures the validity of questions. The questionnaire was then modified to arrive at our final version.

## COLLECTION OF SURVEY DATA

### SAMPLING

Sampling our subjects also provided its own set of special concerns. Random probability sampling of a gay or lesbian population is impossible (Gatozzi, 1986; Morin, 1977) although the larger and more diverse the sample, the more likely results will be externally valid. Recruiting a diverse, large sample of black lesbians from across the country was not an easy task. The black lesbian community is small, isolated and relatively invisible. However, we developed a variety of techniques that proved successful in finding black lesbians.

Participants were recruited using a variant of the "snowball" technique. We started with large mailings to potential participants. Several organizations and social and political groups, including the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, mailed the questionnaire to their lesbian members. Participants who returned the questionnaire to us were also given the opportunity to separately return a postcard requesting additional questionnaires for friends. These were then mailed to the participant who personally recruited additional participants.

Distribution of the questionnaire also involved less focused tactics. The questionnaire was handed out by volunteers at several major lesbian events throughout the United States. In addition, press releases were periodically mailed to lesbian and gay newspapers, such as the Gay Community News in Boston, Off Our Backs, or the Washington Blade, all of which have a sizeable black lesbian readership, inviting participation. Flyers and questionnaires were sent to lesbian and gay bookstores and bars around the country where black gay men and lesbians might frequent. And finally, announcements of the study were distributed to gay and lesbian radio programs throughout the country.

Approximately every three months during the field phase of this project, the demographic characteristics of respondents were tabulated. Those aspects of the community or geographic region that appeared underrepresented were then targeted for more concentrated recruitment efforts. For example, based on the U.S. Census statistics on the number of black women in the Midwest, we decided that our response rate for the major midwest urban areas did not reflect expected percentages. To correct this, the field phase of our study was extended. We remained in the field for approximately 18 months distributing approximately 2,100 questionnaires. Our final sample consists of responses from 530 self-identified black lesbians and 66 bisexual women.

### INCLUSIONARY AND EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA

Even after receiving the 612 completed questionnaires from potential study participants, decisions had to be made about whom to include and whom to exclude. At first, it may seem that the inclusion criteria for this study would be relatively easy. Yet, the measurement of ethnicity and sexual orientation is not always simple. We decided to include in the sample any woman who was black American, including two women from the Carribean. Additionally, the participant also had to self-identify herself as a lesbian or bisexual woman and report at least one prior sexual experience with a woman. Thus, a few women who had not had a same-sex sexual experience were dropped from our sample. Notice that our definition of lesbian or bisexual status refers only to those individuals who are currently or have been

sexually active with women. Obviously, it is possible to consider oneself a lesbian without ever having had a lesbian sexual experience (Peplau & Cochran, in press). However, for the purposes of our study, we felt that sexual experience was an important criterion; a lack of sexual experience might also indicate a relative inexperience with the lesbian lifestyle.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Turning now to a description of the sample, the focus will be on our lesbian respondents. Demographic characteristics of the 530 women are given in Table 1. The women ranged in age from 18 to 59 (mean age = 33.3 years). Most of the women were somewhat religious, although this varied considerably. They were also, by and large, fairly well educated. Nearly half reported having completed a college education or more. Most of the women held jobs, with approximately 84% employed at least half-time. Their median yearly income (1985-1986) was \$17,500. On the average, respondents categorized themselves as coming from the middle class. Approximately a third of the sample had children. While one-third of the women lived alone, another third lived with their partner or lover. Two-thirds of our sample were currently in a serious/committed relationship. Almost half of our sample came from the Western United States, primarily California; another 21.3 percent were drawn from the East Coast/Northeast, 14.3 percent from the Midwest and 14.3 percent from the South.

Clearly from our demographics, we have for the most part BLUPPIES (Black Lesbian Upwardly Mobile People); a group of black lesbians who are relatively well educated, have reasonable incomes and consider themselves as coming from class backgrounds considered middle class in the black community. While our sample is perhaps not representative of the black lesbian community as a whole, it does present us with an opportunity to examine in detail a particular segment of that community. One useful aspect of the sample is that these are women who, on the average, are in their thirties and have been lesbians for quite some time. Thus, their views and adjustments to life probably reflect those of women with a relatively committed lesbian lifestyle. On the negative side, we have too few respondents with lower incomes and less education. This could have resulted from several factors, including demand characteristics of the study instrument, such as reading level or sampling bias. Nonetheless, we do have a small group of this segment of the black lesbian community which will allow us to make some comparisons on the basis of income, education or class.

Looking at Table 2, we get a picture of the relationship experiences of the sample. The mean age at which they reported first being attracted to a woman was 15.8 years (median = 14.0 years). Their first lesbian sexual experience occurred at approximately 19 years of age. Almost all of the participants had had a sexual relationship with a black woman, approximately two-thirds with an Anglo woman and 39 percent with other women of color. In general, particularly with the number of West Coast women completing our sample, we were surprised by the relatively low percentage of sexual and committed relationships with other women of color. The median number of sexual partners was nine, which is similar to research on other lesbian samples (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Peplau et al, 1978).

Table 1  
Demographic Characteristics of the Black Lesbian Sample

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Mean age   | 33.3 years (range = 18 to 59)                                      |
| Religious background (in percentages)  | 33.3% Baptist<br>16.8% Protestant<br>16.3% Catholic<br>33.6% Other |
| Mean level of religiosity<br>(5-point scale where<br>3 = somewhat religious) | 3.9  |
| Socioeconomic background   | 3.0 (reflecting middle class)                                      |
| Mean years of schooling<br>(college)   | 15.4 (consistent with junior year in college)                      |
| Women possessing four-year college degree or more                            | 46.0% (in percentage)  |
| Annual income (1985-1986)  |  |
| Less than \$5,000  | 8.3%   |
| \$5,000 to \$10,999  | 17.5%  |
| \$11,000 to 19,999   | 34.5%  |
| \$20,000 or more   | 39.7%  |
| Median yearly income   | \$17,500   |
| Women employed at least 20 hrs/week<br>(in percentage)                       | 83.6%  |
| Geographic location of respondent (in percentages):                          |  |
| West/Northwest/Southwest   | 49.7%  |
| Northeast/East   | 21.2%  |
| Midwest  | 14.3%  |
| South/Southeast  | 14.3%  |
| Women who have given birth to at least one child                             | 33.1%  |
| Women who:   |  |
| live alone   | 32.1%  |
| live with relationship partner   | 35.1%  |
| live with others   | 32.8%  |
| Women who are currently in a committed relationship                          | 65.7%  |

Note. N = 530.

Table 2

Participants' Reports of Lesbian Sexual  
and Relationship Experiences

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Mean age of first attraction to women                                  | 15.8 years<br>(Range = 4 to 52 years)        |
| Mean age of first sexual experience                                    | 19.5 years                                   |
| Median number of sexual partners                                       | 9.0  |
| Women reporting at least one sexual relationship with:                 |  |
| a black woman  | 93%  |
| an Anglo woman   | 65%  |
| other women of color   | 39%  |
| Median number of lifestyle serious/<br>committed lesbian relationships | 3.0  |
| Women reporting at least one committed relationship with:              |  |
| a black woman  | 83%  |
| an Anglo woman   | 40%  |
| other women of color   | 17%  |
| Median length of longest relationship                                  | 42.0 months<br>(range = 1 month to 20 years) |

**Note.** N = 530.

While the means and medians give you some insight into our sample, they do not really capture the richness of our data set. On each of the variables we have discussed, we have a wide range of responses. There are unique possibilities that derive from the fact that our data are based on a large national sample of black lesbians. In contrast, the largest previous sample of black lesbians consisted of 64 young women recruited from the San Francisco area (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). To date, knowledge of the black lesbian community has been limited by our lack of information. Therefore, some of our most straightforward analyses will involve the simple documentation of relationships and the heterogeneity of black lesbians themselves in relation to such characteristics as age, economic status, social support networks, friendship patterns, problems and levels of psychological distress and openness of sexual orientation (Cochran & Mays, in press). For example, two manuscripts that are currently in preparation examine the mental health aspects of depressive symptomatology (Cochran & Mays, 1987) and drinking/drug use (Mays & Cochran, 1987) in this sample. Our focus in these manuscripts has been less on the documentation of pathology than the identification of subgroups of black lesbians that are at higher risk for depression and substance abuse. We know that our sample, as a whole, has levels of depressive symptomatology no different than the population of black women (as measured by the CES-D) (Cochran & Mays, 1987). However, some of our participants evidence considerable levels of depression. Preliminary

analyses suggest that black lesbians who are isolated from other black lesbians and participate more extensively in the Anglo lesbian community are more likely to suffer from depression. In contrast, women who are more integrated into the black lesbian community (in terms of sources of support, ethnicity of sexual partners and lovers) than the average woman in our sample are more likely to have drug and alcohol problems. In future analyses, we will be able to use our large sample to explore factors that put particular segments of the black lesbian community at risk for emotional problems. Our data can help to identify strategies for intervening with these at risk women as well as assisting therapists and other helpers by better identifying the role of structural factors (i.e. discriminations) versus intrapersonal dynamics in the development and maintenance of emotional problems. The need to document this heterogeneity is particularly important to aid in eradicating the negative stereotypes that exist about black lesbians.

Other analyses will tackle more complex issues. Two major themes in our dataset are social support and discrimination—concepts of particular importance for black Americans. Much of the research on black Americans has discussed the importance of the black family and social networks to the psychological well-being and survival of this group. Our data allow us to investigate the relationship between social support and sexual orientation. This can take many forms from the particular stresses of an interracial relationship (where the interracial pairing may make the lesbian status more salient to others), (Mays & Cochran, 1986) to the relative importance of ethnicity versus sexual orientation in defining social support structures (Cochran & Mays, 1986).

A final area of interest is in the factors that predict achieving and maintaining a satisfying close relationship. As with Anglo lesbians (Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1982), the black lesbians in our sample reported their relationships as generally satisfying and close (Peplau, Cochran & Mays, 1986). Further work in the area will seek to determine which factors are important in generating a positive relationship.

We are hopeful that this study will aid in bringing the lives of black lesbians out of the research closet they have inhabited for so many years.

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