

The Impact of Perceived Discrimination on the Intimate Relationships of Black Lesbians

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the effects of perceived racial/ethnic and sexual orientation discrimination on African-American lesbians' relationships with friends, lovers, family, and community support systems. Data for this exploratory study were gathered from a series of semi-structured ethnographic interviews with self-identified Black lesbians. Results suggested that those who had been in relationships with White lesbians reported more frequent experi-

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ences of discrimination that influenced their later decision to seek a Black lesbian partner for their next love relationship. Reactions toward lesbian community events ranged from avoidance to determined participation in response to feelings of alienation and racism. Also, Black lesbians perceived the African-American community to be conservative in their views on homosexuality. Nevertheless, for half of the women their interest in participation in the African-American community overshadowed their concerns about negative reactions to their homosexuality. Data from this exploratory study isolated questions that need further empirically based exploration in order to understand how race/ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation influence the development, maintenance, and dissolution of intimate relationships in the lives of African-American lesbians.

While the study of close heterosexual relationships has witnessed tremendous growth over the last decade, researchers have paid less attention to the influence of ethnicity or sexual orientation on the formation of intimate relationships (De Marco, 1986; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Examining how race/ethnicity and sexual orientation affect the initiation, development, and dissolution of close relationships could enhance our general knowledge of relationship theories by testing both their limits and generalizability (Peplau & Cochran, 1990). Some have begun to question the applicability of current models of close relationships to the lives of gays and lesbians (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Peplau & Cochran, 1990) and to ethnic minorities (Staples, 1981; Mays & Cochran, 1988). African-American lesbians, members of three social groupings (Blacks, women, and lesbians) each at times subject to discrimination, represent a particularly relevant population for examination of these issues.¹

In seeking social support from friends and lovers, African-American lesbians may face a dilemma. Black lesbians have ties to an African-American community that is often non-accepting of homosexuality (Bogus, 1978; Mays & Cochran, 1987; Shockley, 1979). For some African-American lesbians, acceptance in the Black community may occur at the price of concealing their identification as lesbians. At the same time, African-American lesbians also confront a lesbian community that is predominantly Euro-American in its culture and value system. Participation by Black lesbians in the larger, predominantly White lesbian community may raise the risk of rejection based on race/ethnicity, exposure to racism, or may pressure women to minimize their own African-American culture.

Overt discrimination does not have to occur in the immediate moment to influence individuals' behavior. Expectations that discrimination is likely to occur in particular environments is a generalized expectancy referred

to as perceived discrimination (Mays, Jackson, & Coleman, 1991). Perceived discrimination may also influence both attitudes and behavior as individuals seek to minimize negative consequences of potential occurrences of discrimination (Becker & Krzystofiak, 1982; Becker, 1980). For example, perceptions of the prevalence of racial discrimination influence African-Americans' attitudes toward work, participation in the labor force, and occupational aspirations (Becker, 1980; Becker & Hills, 1981; Becker & Krzystofiak, 1982; Mays et al., 1990). For lesbians and gay men, regardless of ethnicity, anxieties related to the potential discriminatory behavior of heterosexuals exerts an influence on their behavior (Herek, 1984).

Black lesbians face potential racism, sexism, and homophobia in their encounters with others. For them, perceived discrimination may be a potent factor in shaping their relationship choices (Sears, 1988). However, little is known about the role of perceived discrimination in close relationship development. When studies of close relationships are conducted, sociocultural factors are often neglected (Huston & Levinger, 1978). Yet, we do know that the development of any relationship is influenced by the social context in which it is embedded (Forgas & Dobosz, 1980). Typically, however, friendship formation and romantic involvements are explained by personality characteristics or interaction patterns, minimizing the role of social context (Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983). This may result in an incomplete explanation of how relationship choices are determined. If African-American lesbians expect romantic involvements with Anglo lesbians to subject them to racial discrimination, they may be unlikely to view Anglo women as appropriate relationship partners. Instead, they may choose to relegate Anglo lesbians to an "acquaintance" level of friendship and select their closer relationships with other African-American lesbians, gay men, or heterosexuals.

We present here results of extensive interviews with eight Black lesbians. Our goal was to explore the impact of perceived discrimination on their relationship choices. We expected that their comments would reveal complex attitudinal and behavioral responses to the dilemma of coping with three discriminatory statuses.

METHODS

Sample

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight African-American lesbians. All self-identified as a lesbian of African-American heritage

and were in a relationship of at least one year's duration with an African-American lesbian. Women were recruited through the use of a referral network of other African-American lesbians. To obtain a diversity of perceptions, precautions were taken not to select individuals from close social networks. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 50 years. Several had had previous relationships with Anglo women.

Procedure

All participants were asked individually a series of open-ended questions designed to allow exploration of perceptions of discrimination and how those perceptions affected their behavior in interpersonal relationships and in using familial and community support systems. Interviews were about 30-45 minutes in length. The research assistant who conducted the interviews was a self-identified, African-American lesbian. She did not know any of the women prior to the interviews. The interviews were taped and later transcribed. All names and places have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

The women were presented with a series of questions regarding their views on discrimination and their relationship choices. Women were asked if they felt discriminated against because they were African-American, female, or lesbian. They were also asked how they felt when they experienced each of these discriminations, if ever, and how their feelings affected their relationships with their lovers, friends, and families. Queries were also made of their thoughts about the attitudes of the African-American community toward African-American lesbians. Finally, they were asked about their participation in events in the lesbian and the African-American community and whether their participation was in any way affected by their perception of discrimination in these communities.

RESULTS

The Experience of Discrimination

As might be expected, some women experienced less ethnic/racial discrimination than others. Of the eight women interviewed, three said they were not aware of being discriminated against because they were African-American; a fourth, said she did not feel it because she approached individuals as a person and felt that she was dealt with as a person rather than as an African-American person. Three of these same four women were

also not aware of discrimination because of their gender; a fourth, Charlene, did perceive gender discrimination at her place of employment, as did the other four women interviewed. In contrast, only one woman reported personal discrimination based on sexual orientation. Women reported experiencing an absence of homophobic discrimination because they were not "out" in their work settings or because they had revealed their sexual identity only to select friends. Only Sadie, the oldest woman interviewed, described a loss of some very dear people when she "came out" as a lesbian late in her life.

Those who reported having felt discrimination for some reason were then asked how it made them feel. Answers varied and included anger, frustration, wanting to strike out, confrontation, condescension, and internalization of many of these feelings. The feelings differed not only from woman to woman, but also across situations. Charlene, for example, responded:

Depends on what day of the week it is. Sometimes I pay no attention to it at all, and it depends on what the remarks are. . . . If it's something that I feel they're just saying because they feel overpowered by women and because there are more women [present] than me, then I usually disregard it. If I think it's a personal vendetta against me, I generally will respond by saying that, "Hey, I'm qualified, and if you have a problem with that, that's your problem."

Another, Sadie, said:

The other day I heard a comment, and I said to a fellow—it was really an anti-gay comment—and I said, "You know, you never would have said anything like that about African-Americans with me standing here. Why would you feel free enough to say that to African-American gays?" And he said, "I just think of you as a regular person." And I said, "Most of us are. As with every other group of people, there are some people who are not regular, but most of us are regular people." . . . But, I think, for the most part, I think—in terms of any discrimination—you feel powerless. I feel as if this is the way it is, but what can I do about it? There certainly isn't a challenge I can make to it or if there is, under the circumstances, what could I do? I don't like feeling powerless. I don't like feeling as if there is nothing I can do.

Interfacing with the African-American Community

Community attitudes. In the interviews the women were asked what they thought the attitudes in the African-American community were to-

ward Black lesbians. The perceptions of most of the women confirmed the literature's descriptions of the African-American community's conservative attitudes toward homosexuality.

Mary Jo suspected that her African-American male friends, if they knew she was a lesbian, would not even want to talk to her. She felt that most Black lesbians were not "out" in the African-American community. She lamented that, although her straight friends, who knew she was gay, accepted her as a human being, she had a problem with her family:

Instead of accepting me for the person I am, they look at me as being a lesbian and look at me as being with another woman, and they see that as being very sinful and very bad. I told them to not judge me because I am gay, to look at me for who I am inside and not just judge me on . . . what they've heard on the news or what they've heard from other people or what they've read in books.

Both Brenda and Linda thought the attitudes in the Black community were hostile, Linda adding, ". . . especially from the male gender, very hostile." Stephanie's perception was similar:

I think women are a little more open-minded than men. Men are you know, of course, on an ego trip, and they feel intimidated and threatened and all that, so I think that women can accept a little bit more. . . . [African-American men] feel that they're being threatened if it's not from one of their equality, and of course, they don't feel that African-American women are equal to them, much less a African-American gay woman.

When asked what she thought the Black community's attitude was about Black lesbians, Sadie's response was:

"Just haven't found a good man! Just haven't found the right man!" Homosexuality in the Black community is always hated, but it's always thought of in terms of men. So I think women and their sexuality are just something people in our community don't even consider. It's like, "Well, there are not enough good men around, or they haven't found the right man. Because obviously if they had, they wouldn't be in this relationship." So I think it's kind of a put-down. It's like they've settled for this because they can't get the real thing.

In terms of her own family, Sadie related an incident about a niece being told to stop interacting with her. Sadie's sister-in-law threatened to

report Sadie to the police. Exceptions were Renee and Elaine who had insufficient contact with other African-Americans in contexts that would stimulate discussion of the topic.

Relationships with lovers and lovers' families. None of the women reported negative effects of the African-American community's attitudes on either their current love relationships or their relationships with their lovers' families. Both Linda and Mary Jo were treated well by their lovers' families and felt even if their relationships were overt, it would make no difference to the families. Several others had no dealings with their lovers' families because of geographic distance. Charlene and her lover were open about all aspects of life.

In contrast, when women had been in ethnically mixed relationships, they experienced the effect of the African-American community's attitudes. For Elaine, there were fewer family gatherings or situations that she and her lover attended together. And Sadie's story may be typical of many other interethnic relationships where such ethnic differences create a saliency of the women's relationship interfering with tendencies to minimize or "closet" the relationship:

Just recently we went to Denver to see my brother, and it was kind of a different experience for me, because I had never taken a lover around the family. That had to do with racism—I mean the fact that when I was with the other woman she was White, didn't give them a chance to make a choice. I made the choice for them. . . . So they never met her unless they came here and saw us on our territory. I never put us into their territory. With F. [who is Black], I made the choice to do that, and I think I made the choice because I really hope that I have a lifelong partner, and if my family is going to be a part of my life, then she's going to have to be a part of their lives.

Many of the women currently spent holidays with their families or their lovers' families. In these contexts, the women tended to characterize their love relationships as friendships, though they all acknowledged that their families knew the nature of these "friendships." The true nature of their relationships was not to be openly discussed.

Friendships with heterosexual men and women. Generally, the women reported that they did have heterosexual friends and they felt their lesbianism had little effect on their friendships, especially with close friends. Elaine said that the heterosexual African-American women she knows have been acquaintances of hers for years, and they all know about her homosexuality. Her relationships with heterosexual African-American

men have been very limited, and the men usually did not know of her sexual preference.

Sadie's experience gives another view. When she came out, relatively late in life, most of her friends were heterosexual. She lost some very dear, long-term friends at a painful time in her life:

And yet there were other people whom I hadn't known as long and who I just kind of thought of as on a surface level . . . but never really thought of as "my friend," that is, as persons I could turn to in need—and those persons were there. And so it was really kind of a sobering moment. It kind of let me know that just because you've known people for a long time, you don't really know them.

Participation in community events. Had homophobic attitudes in the African-American community affected the women's participation in community events? Renee and Elaine did not participate in African-American community affairs, but not because of any perception of negative attitudes toward their homosexuality. Sadie, although she said she was just not someone who joined in, intimated a withdrawal because of fears of retaliation from the African-American community. She related a story of discouraging her lover from talking to a neighborhood teenage girl to avoid any accusation that they were attempting to seduce children, a common heterosexual stereotype of homosexuals.

The other four women expressed willingness to participate in African-American community events despite any perceived discrimination on the basis of their lesbianism. Their assertiveness in this setting contrasts with their tendency to withdraw from the perceived racism inherent in the lesbian community. Mary Jo:

Even if the friends that I have found out I was gay and they didn't accept me, that still wouldn't stop me, 'cause these are my roots, and nothing can stop me from participating if I want to.

Charlene, too, said that having a gay lifestyle had not restricted her and her lover:

We live as part of the community, and we participate in several activities whether they're gay oriented or not, and we haven't experienced [problems]. I don't know if our relationship is unique or not . . . I'm uninhibited, and so is she. I think it's because we have such positive attitudes about ourselves, it doesn't matter what our sexual preference is, and it doesn't affect our way of life, because we're going to do what we want to do.

Stephanie was more cautious. Although the purpose of the event guided her wanting to be in it or not, she would not go with her lover to some situations because:

That added tension is not necessary. . . . If I'm there to support the purpose of the event, I'm not going to bring in my lover to cause this extra tension, because a lot of straight people aren't able to accept that, and it's not necessary to subject them to that, just because I'm in a gay relationship . . . But that doesn't stop me if I'm participating . . . If it was a type of thing where both of us could be effective in the event, we would go together, but not necessarily go as lovers or, you know, hand in hand, saying we're together . . . because that's beside the point. We're there supporting the issue.

Interfacing with the White Community

Effects of racism on love relationships. Since all of the women interviewed were involved in relationships with other African-American women, we expected that questions about the impact of racism on interracial love relationships would elicit a limited view of the issue, perhaps more negative than the Black lesbian community as a whole. Nevertheless, their attitudes and beliefs may help to articulate issues of race relations within the lesbian community.

Except for some apparent indifference on Renee's part ("I never went with a White girl, and I have nothing against them. I like 'em all"), the interviewed women were fairly unanimous in their attitudes about the influence that racism had on their choice of lovers. Charlene never thought about being with an Anglo woman. Brenda said that racism made it easier as she had known from day one that she didn't want anything but a Black woman. Stephanie said that, having been raised in an all Black town, she never regarded a White lover as a possibility and even now, though she was not militant and had White people as friends, she considered a White lover as "far and beyond [her] call of duty."

Three of the women had been in prior relationships with Anglo women, were now in relationships with Black women, and were united in preferring the latter kind of liaison. Mary Jo said she liked having an African-American woman to whom she could relate:

In the gay community, I feel that the majority of the White women are prejudiced just as much as they are in the straight world. So I don't care to deal with them, really, you know, unless I feel that they are really, really sincere in what they are saying and that it doesn't make a differ-

ence the color that I'm Black and she's White. Otherwise, I just deal with my own people.

When Elaine was with a White woman, they had problems in that there were limited places they went to comfortably:

At times I was 'Negressed', and they still had the philosophy that Black people should sit at the back of the bus. It wasn't overt, but it was subtle racism, and you were discriminated against in terms of housing, employment—depending on the area of the city you happened to be in. If you were in a mixed couple, be it heterosexual or homosexual, there were feelings within the community, both heterosexual and homosexual, that were discriminatory feelings and attitudes.

Sadie had lived with an Anglo woman for four or five years and had a "fairly decent relationship with her"; they remained close friends. Nevertheless:

There were cultural differences that I did not want to be involved in. I think I specifically said to myself, the next relationship that I was in, I would like to be with a Black woman. I know it was a conscious decision. I feel that it was a real good decision for me. I think it was the best decision I could possibly have made . . . I think to deny racism or sexism is kind of indicative of closing your eyes and putting your head in the sand and saying, "I know it exists; I don't want to have to deal with it." . . . I thought of a time when she and I were together, and I said to her, I made a comment to her, "Stop acting White." She, then, of course, told me, "Sadie, I'm not acting; I am." In this [next] relationship I very much wanted to have a relationship with a Black woman; it was important to me.

Linda, interestingly, talked about the impact that racism had on her current relationship with an African-American woman. Namely, they tended to argue about skin color and beauty. She was quite aware that such differences of opinion were an internalized form of racism that affected even her relationship with someone of her own ethnic group.

Effects of racism on friendships. Women were also asked whether racism affected their friendships with Whites in any way. Brenda said she had "White associates—not friends, just associates." Mary Jo said she did not have many White friends:

If I do have them, I let them know exactly how I feel, and most of them can't deal with that, so I don't have that many White friends . . .

[Racism] has affected [friendships] in a very negative way insofar as I just cut myself off. I don't want to be bothered with that.

Three others also seemed cautious. Although they all avoided any persons they met socially who were racist, none deliberately and automatically limited personal friendships because of anticipated racism.

Sadie expressed relief at being able to move more in an African-American social world after her relationship with an Anglo woman ended. She did not feel "integrated":

I had my work world; I had my social world; I had my other world. And [they] didn't cross over. [Now] because I pretty much made my world a Black world, I feel better, more comfortable. I just didn't feel that I was living my life to the fullest.

Participation in lesbian events. Half the women did not stop themselves from participating in gay-oriented organizations or social activities even though the community affairs were attended predominantly by Anglos. Two were not active in lesbian community events, but not because of racism: Hattie was not a joiner, and Elaine was "in the closet," not involved in the gay community, because of once having lost a job when her lesbianism was discovered.

The contrasts were Mary Jo and Brenda. Mary Jo did not care to socialize with lesbian groups unless they were African-American or ethnic minority. She found that Anglo lesbians stick to themselves. "It seems like they're not really interested in getting to know me, so I'm not interested either." Brenda was vehement that racism had affected her participation in lesbian events. She kept all White people at a distance.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

While the size of our sample precludes any definitive conclusions about the occurrence of racism, sexism, or homophobia in the lives of African-American lesbians and its impact on their behavior, we have attempted here to voice some of their concerns. Their experiences highlight the complexity of the issues that some segments of this community struggle with in the area of intimate relationships and discrimination.

Very little is known about these women's lives. Black lesbians suffer from invisibility both within the African-American community and the primarily Anglo gay and lesbian community (Bell & Weinberg, 1978;

Mays & Cochran, 1988). African-American lesbians, like Black gay men, report having a difficult time finding romantic/sexual partners (Bell & Weinberg, 1978), perhaps due to diverse communities, each laden with the possibility of discrimination, in which they must participate in order to create sufficient sexual, emotional, and tangible support systems for themselves (Cochran & Mays, 1988b). Their experiences may or may not be similar to Anglo lesbians who face far less complexity in their lives. For example, there is some evidence that African-American lesbians are more likely to have had extensive heterosexual experience (Bass-Hass, 1968; Cochran & Mays, 1988a; Mays & Cochran, 1988) and to have had prior heterosexual marriages and children (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Mays & Cochran, 1988) than Anglo lesbians.

The women interviewed minimized anticipated race and sex discrimination by avoiding persons and situations. They managed possible homophobic reactions by not revealing their sexual orientations—the one characteristic of the three studied that for many could be hidden. The other consistent finding was a definite impact on their psychological well-being when they experienced discrimination (Cromwell, 1983). Their feelings ranged from anger to condescension. We need to know more about how these reactions affect well-being and how these tensions influence the quality and maintenance of love and friendship relationships. Are internalized feelings of racism a source of tension within a relationship? Does the commonality of the experience of discrimination forge a bond influencing the development or maintenance of a close relationship? If we are interested in accurately understanding the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of close relationships, we need to explore the influence of socio-cultural forces that act upon these relationships, particularly for individuals where ethnic and cultural issues are salient in their everyday life.

While research on heterosexual intimate relationships can offer some insight into homosexual relationships, it does not present an exact parallel (Eldridge & Gilbert, 1990; Morin, 1977). The same is true of research on close relationships of heterosexual Black Americans. This exploratory study of the perceptions of a small group of African-American women points toward several issues deserving further study. These include the multiple influences of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sociocultural forces on close relationships, the impact of perceived discrimination, and the structure of social support systems for African-American lesbians. Further exploration of these issues would not only contribute to our knowledge of how African-American lesbian relationships function but also to a better conceptualization of relationship models in general. Theories of mate selection and close relationships (e.g., Winch, 1958; Walster,

Walster, & Berscheid, 1978; Hatfield & Traupmann, 1980) have been limited by their heterosexual and ethnic biases. Testing how well current models can explain each of these factors can only serve to increase the scientific base of our knowledge of the universal elements of close relationships.

NOTE

1. Throughout the text we use the two terms, African-American and Black, interchangeably. However, we wish to emphasize that this analysis focuses on the interface of African-based cultural backgrounds and discrimination against descendants of a formerly enslaved segment of the American population on the issues of interest. In doing so, we are choosing not to focus on the many, diverse segments of the Black population in this country, including those of recent immigrant background from the Caribbean.

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