

**A Dual Identity Crisis**  
**Social Location and Stratification among African American Homosexual Men**

**Introduction**

In 1986, a little-known professor of social work published an article in the equally unknown (and now defunct) *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality* entitled “Black Gay Men and Conflicting Social Identities: Sexual Orientation Versus Racial Identity.” The author, Dr. Larry Icard, noticed a distinct lack of research in either African American studies or gay and lesbian studies on the social-psychological effects of being a member of two stigmatized groups in American society: African Americans and homosexuals. Icard, attempting to synthesize what data there was regarding each individual group respectively, developed the basic framework for a theory he called the “Dual Minority;” or the stigma and social isolation faced by black homosexuals living in both a racist and homophobic society. Icard’s theory identified a new and relevant field of study for social psychologists and mental health experts who had yet to consider the unique problems faced by this group of people. However, as important as this field of research may be, it has remained largely unexplored by the research community twenty years after its publication.

In this paper I will attempt to coalesce the majority of the academic work conducted regarding African American homosexual men; straddling the research traditions of sociology, social work, psychology, anthropology, sexology, and psychiatry in order to draw from the widest possible pool of scholarship on this relatively unexamined facet of society. I will focus this manuscript on how multiple dimensions of stratification and inequality manifest themselves in the lives of black homosexual men’s identities, interpersonal relationships, and social networks. In this endeavor, I will attempt to orient what little existing research there is on black homosexual men from a

sociological perspective and hope to elucidate prevailing trends in theory, data, and research regarding African American male homosexuality.

First, I will review dominant theories regarding racial and sexual identity development, and why they are inadequate to address identity formation in African American homosexual men. Then I will discuss in detail the perceptions of homosexuality within the black community, as well as contemporary conceptions of African American masculinity and its influence on homosexuality in the black community. The largest section of the paper will be dedicated to the phenomenon known in contemporary society as the “down low,” focusing on theories regarding its emergence, prevalence, perceptions, and effects on the black community. I will then discuss literature regarding the “coming out” process and the trials faced by African Americans who publicly disclose their sexuality. Finally, this paper will discuss the implications of the existing research and suggest future directions in which it can be taken.

However, I should present the caveat that the majority of the academic work regarding African American homosexual men has been either theoretical in nature or a reinterpretation of data not originally designed to address African American homosexual men directly. What little empirical research that has been conducted specifically on this community has been either ethnographic or relatively small-sampled quantitative analysis, simply because of the difficulty related to achieving a sizeable sample of this population, reasons for which are discussed later in this manuscript. This limitation has stifled detailed research on African American homosexuality.

### **The Dual Minority**

Whether they are referred to as suffering from “Dual-Discrimination” (Jones and Hill 1996) or “Double Marginalization” (Manalansan 1996), having a “Dual Identity” (Dube, Savin-Williams, and Diamond 2001), bearing a “Double Burden,” (Harris 2003), each description is referent to Larry Icard’s “Dual Minority”(1986). When Icard coined the term, though, he had in mind individuals whom had accepted and self-identified as both homosexuals and as African Americans. While Icard took for granted the fact that the majority of Americans of African descent identified as African American in his treatise, he was careful to point out that his theory applied to self-identified homosexuals, citing interaction theorist Vivienne Cass’s (1979) linear stage model of homosexual self-identification as the method through which a homosexual person undergoes a series of stages progressing toward homosexual self-identification.

Cass’s model, one of the most commonly used and widely-accepted theories regarding homosexual identity formation to date, is set up in a series of stages in which one comes to identify as homosexual, and though there are other models, most of them are simple variants on Cass’s theme, including sociologist Richard Troiden’s adaptation of the model from a symbolic interactionist perspective (see, for example Troiden 1979, 1984, 1988, and 1989). In Cass’s model, the individual progresses through a series of stages beginning at a point where s/he recognizes that there is something different about him/herself. Then the individual begins to recognize that s/he may be homosexual and internal conflict arises because of the stigmatization of homosexuality by society at large. At stage three, the individual has come to self-identify more as a homosexual than a heterosexual, though s/he may not outwardly admit it. At stage four, the individual accepts his/her homosexual identity, but, recognizing the stigma placed upon homosexuals by heterosexual society, begins to develop an “us versus them” mentality,

fearing the suffering that the newly accepted identity will cause him/her in larger society. In stage five, the individual begins to take pride in his/her identity as a homosexual and no longer fears the reprisal of larger society, but maintains a degree of opposition to mainstream sexuality. Finally, in stage six, the individual begins to integrate his/her sexual identity, which has become his/her primary identity, back into the other identities. The individual usually weakens in or withdraws from his/her combative stance toward heterosexual society.

Cass's theory posits that fixation at any stage can cause serious problems for the individual and his/her development of a healthy identity, and that all stages must be traversed by the individual for s/he to successfully integrate his/her sexual identity into him/herself. Ease with which the stages are successfully navigated is relative to the amount of experience with other homosexuals and immersion in homosexual culture; as experience and immersion increase, the speed with which one progresses through the stages increases.

There are several linear stage models such as those of sociologists Richard Troiden (1979, 1984, 1988, 1989) and Ritch C. Savin-Williams (2006). However, such a framework is somewhat flawed from a sociological standpoint, primarily in that Symbolic Interaction and Social Construction theorists would criticize the idea of stages of development, saying that one's social identity is amorphous and continues to change and grow with the accumulation of life experiences. Savin-Williams and others, aware of this criticism, are more likely to speak of the likelihoods of progressing down a continuous path given a set of variables based on life circumstances, experiences, or events. This is called a life-course trajectory. However, despite these criticisms from the

sociological community, these model types have stood the test of time and location in the psychological literature and are highly regarded in the psychological community.

In using this model as a demonstration of how African American homosexual men self-identify, however, Icard failed to recognize a fatal flaw in Cass's framework: ethnocentrism. Cass's model works very well on Western Caucasians and other minorities well-integrated into white culture, but, as I will demonstrate, it is inadequate to address homosexual identity formation in most African Americans.

### **The Incompatibility of Black and Gay Identities**

The primary reason Cass's model does not work for African Americans is because it assumes that sexual identity is and will always be the identity with the highest salience. However, this simply is not true for most minority homosexuals, most especially African Americans. The primary identity of African Americans is almost always that of their racial/cultural identity, and there are many reasons why this occurs (Loiacano 1989, Herek and Capitano 1995, Manlansan 1996, Greene 1997, Green 1998, Howard 2000).

The most obvious reason that black identity is paramount for African Americans could simply be that the identity is encountered long before sexual identity. As the experience of being African American in a racist society is usually encountered several years before sexual identity even begins to emerge, the process of identification as African American is well underway long before the process of sexual identification has even begun (Howard 2000).

Psychologist William Cross's (1995) revised Nigresence model, another linear stage model, identifies the stages African Americans undergo in the shaping of their identities as black Americans. It delineates five stages African Americans must go through in order to develop healthy cultural identities. The first stage is Pre-Encounter;

that is the stage at which an identity is formed, but no experience with differential treatment based upon race has occurred. Next is the Encounter stage, where the individual begins to experience differential treatment based upon race. The Immersion-Emersion stage occurs when these experiences culminate to eventually destroy the previous identity and new, afrocentric identity begins to form. At first this stage can be very confrontational, in which the individual judges others' levels of "blackness." The person enters the Emersion phase of this stage when s/he transcends this confrontation mindset. The next stage is the internalization stage, in which the individual begins to feel a sense of belonging in the black community and it is construed as the individual's primary reference group. Finally, the commitment stage is the stage in which the individual becomes committed to the furthering and improvement of the black community.

Cass's and Cross's models, when compared, are very similar. Both have early stages of differential experiences from majority groups; both have a stage of self-identification and conflictive "us versus them" mentalities; and both have stages of internalization and acceptance of identities. However, the primary conflict between these two models is the assumption that each will be separately integrated as the primary identity.

In the latter stages of Cross's model it becomes apparent that the idea of "community" – that is, having a close sense of kinship with African Americans – is central to a healthy African American identity. This sense is reiterated throughout the literature, (see, for example: Icard 1986, Loiacano 1989, Jones and Hill 1996, Manalansan 1996, Greene 1998, Lewis and Kertzner 2003). Likewise, exposure to and positive experience within the homosexual culture is necessary to the development of a

healthy homosexual identity as well. The necessity to be well-integrated into both the African American community and the homosexual community for African American homosexuals to develop a healthy social identity is usually the first point at which conflict arises.

### **Perceptions of Homosexuality within the Black Community**

Generally speaking, the African American community is more homophobic and openly hostile toward homosexuality than is American society at large. Most African Americans are quick to admit that their ethnic community is more homophobic than mainstream society (Adams and Kimmel 1997, Green 1997, Green 1998) In a study of 607 self-identified heterosexual African Americans, over two-thirds of the respondents reported that gay sex is wrong, over half expressed disgust at homosexuals, and less than a quarter said homosexuality was a naturally-occurring phenomenon, indicating that most blacks believe homosexuality to be a choice. Men were more likely to condemn homosexuality than women, as were those who were married and those who did not have college degrees. And yet, even these numbers may be inflated because of the number of black people who may self-identify as heterosexual and condemn homosexuality for social desirability purposes, but still engage in homosexual activities (Herek and Capitano 1995).

There are many theories as to why the African American community is so hostile toward homosexuality. One theory is related to group survival: that in a hostile, racist society, group solidarity is key, and homosexuality weakens the group by bringing shame and disgrace to the race (Icard 1986, Manlansan 1996, Harris 2003). Patricia Hill Collins, in her seminal work *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) says that the black community holds these beliefs about AAMSMs because they “pose a threat to a beleaguered Black male

heterosexuality that strives to claim its place at a table dominated by representations of White-controlled masculinity.” (174) Some extend these examples to extremes, saying that because homosexuals are less likely to reproduce, they cannot contribute to the perpetuation of the race, making them inferior (Icard 1986, Green 1998).

Another major theory closely related to group survival stems from the influence of Black Nationalism and its effects on black cultural identity. Some elements of Black Nationalist movements argue that because of the extreme level of racism in society, the African American community is defined by its weakest members, not its strongest (Green 1998). Homosexuality within the black community is often perceived as a “white problem,” and thus represents a part of the oppressive white society (Icard 1986, Jones and Hill 1996, Green 1998). Black Nationalists [argue that homosexuality brings](#) “disgrace” to their community, viewing black homosexuals as traitors to their race (Manlansan 1996, Adams and Kimmel 1997, Harris 2003). Some even go so far as to portray homosexuality as a problem placed upon African Americans by the racist white community to undermine black solidarity (Harris 2003). Like group survival theorists, Black Nationalists are also likely to support the idea that black homosexuals are inferior because of their inability to perpetuate the race, and that by not reproducing they are contributing to racial genocide (Icard 1986).

One of the major factors contributing to the stigmatization of homosexuality in the black community is the prevalence of AIDS in the black community and the rising rates of HIV infections among African Americans in the United States. As of 2004, African Americans accounted for nearly 50% of all new HIV infections (Centers for Disease Control 2004), despite accounting for only 12% of the US population. Where the black AIDS statistics become culturally and communally relevant are located in the

transmission methods: from 2001-2004, 49% of African American men who were diagnosed with HIV reported getting the disease from sex with other men, though this number may be an underestimate if any of those individuals included in the statistics did not want to reveal that they had engaged in sexual activities with other men. Meanwhile 78% of diagnoses for African American women in the same period came from sex with men (Centers for Disease Control 2005). These data have been, probably erroneously (see Ford et al. 2007); interpreted by casual readers, academicians, and cultural leaders alike to blame African American homosexuals for the spread of HIV within the community.

One of the most important contributors to the pervasive homophobia permeating the African American community is the “Black Church” – that is, members of the religious community within the African American community (Jones and Hill 1996). Black religiosity is a major influence on the homophobic attitudes of African Americans (Green 1997), and is often characterized as openly hostile to homosexuality (Icard 1986), wherein black religious leaders and congregants alike use the bible to condemn homosexuality (Green 1998).

According to sociologist Elijah Ward (2005) the black church “is widely recognized as the central, oldest, and most influential institution in the black community...[being] the spiritual ark that also preserved and empowered black people socially, psychologically, and physically during and after slavery.” (495) Ward’s study, “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity, and the US Black Church,” engaged in a massive historical and comparative literature review, compared results of major national data sets, and conducted interviews with and observations of several black clergy members; endeavoring to identify the influence of the black church on homophobic attitudes in the African American community.

Among Ward's most important finding was that church attendance in the black community transcends socio-economic status. All African Americans, regardless of income, are highly and equally likely to have at least some interaction with the church. Ward also found that, at best, black churches were silent on the issue of homosexuality; however they were much more likely to be condemning of the lifestyle, and rarely did congregants question this condemnation (2005).

### **Black Masculinity and Identity**

Another contributor to the high homophobia levels within the black community, to which the other theories thus far presented have alluded, is the theoretical notions of black identity itself, especially those regarding black masculinity. As it directly relates to homosexuality, the culture of black masculinity defines homosexuality as effeminate and weak, undermining the desired communal image of the strong black male (Harris 2003), and not conforming to such gender norms can cause one to be labeled within the community as weak (Jones and Hill 1996). Likewise, African American males often measure other males' masculinity by the number of women he has slept with and his sexual assertiveness (Lewis and Kertzner 2003).

Many sociologists have suggested that this strong black male image can be referred to as one of "hypermasculine;" meaning an over-exaggeration of masculine characteristics, such as sexual assertiveness. Ward (2005) says that hypermasculinity "seizes upon opportunities for projecting male dominance, possibly functioning as a means to vent the extra frustrations that black men experience in a racist society, while also shoring up a sense of identity in an uncertain social world." (498-9) Ward also states that in order to be perceived as hypermasculine, which he and many other sociologists have characterized as a generally desirable trait among black males, one must perform

overt acts of homophobia, and that such acts are beneficial to the black heterosexual male's identity development because they function as a way of "precluding questioning about one's [own] sexual orientation, through a generous and decisive clarification of any ambiguity about the matter." (499)

African Americans, especially men, with homosexual tendencies are clearly faced with severe identity development issues and pressures to conform to social norms within their primary reference group, and identity crisis could easily be prevalent as a result. Rational Choice Theory (i.e. that people make choices based upon a rational, cost/benefit analysis) would suggest that African Americans and other minorities have more trouble coming to terms with their gay identity than whites because it would cause them to be outcast from their primary reference groups (Lewis and Kertzner 2003).

Theoretically, then, the dissonance caused by being torn between obligations to one's community and one's own homosexual feelings could cause extreme cases of identity crisis among many (if not most) African Americans with feelings of homosexual attraction. Rational choice theory suggests that that for these reasons, a worrisome and problematic form of identity management, commonly referred to in popular society as "The Down Low," has arisen.

### **"The Down Low" and the Black Community**

A person who is "On the Down Low," or DL as it is sometimes called, refers to an African American male who presents himself as a masculine heterosexual in the African American community and often engages in heterosexual relationships with women while secretly engaging in homosexual relationships with other men (Harris 2003, Phillips 2005). Many black homosexuals claim heterosexuality and remain "on the DL" to avoid stigmatization from both the black community and heterosexist society at

large (Herek 1995, Jones and Hill 1996, Brown II 2005). As most black homosexuals fear rejection for the black community, their primary reference group, while being acutely aware of the extremely high levels of homophobia in the community, most are reluctant to make their sexualities known publicly (Manlansan 1996, Green 1997, Green 1998). Hence, the creation of the DL: a communally constructed social identity that is ultimately destructive both to the individual and the black community as a whole.

The identification of the DL in the black community as a uniquely black male phenomenon serves several purposes of both a homophobic black community and a larger, inherently racist society. The most important aspect of the DL phenomenon is that being “on the DL” is not encouraged by the black community. As portrayed by Black Nationalists and the Black Church, homosexuality is perceived as a choice, so that black people who engage in homosexual activity willfully undermine the race and/or live in sin. The logic is, seemingly, that black homosexuals should “choose” to be straight so they do not hurt the community. Black homosexuals who hide their sexuality appear to be both secretive and harboring devious intent toward the community (Jones and Hill 1996). Generally, the black community reviles DL men because they are seen as unchristian, placing their own desires above the needs of their female partners as well as cowardly because they refuse to come out (Phillips 2005).

The “devious” aspect of African Americans “on the DL” is constantly reinforced by popular media. These men are often portrayed as leading double-lives (Brown II 2005). In the best-selling, though non-scientific, 2005 book *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Men who have Sex with Men*, author J.L. King recounts his experience and the experiences of other men living “on the DL,” each telling how he, too, felt as if he had been forced to lead a double life. And while similar accounts of black

men with homosexual tendencies feeling as if they are leading a “double life” and being forced to “choose” an identity of either being black or being gay are revealed in academic literature (e.g. Tinney 1986, Loiacano 1989, Hawkeswood 1990, Herek 1995, Crawford et al 2002, Pitt 2006), King’s portrayal of the DL phenomenon has done much more damage to the black homosexual community than good. It is sympathetic to black men “on the DL,” but has further enraged the black heterosexual community, entrenching this sense of duplicity on the part of black DL men (Phillips 2005, Boykin 2006, Pitt 2006). A series of popular media books have since been published demonizing the DL phenomenon. Even typically progressive-minded popular media icon Oprah Winfrey has confronted men “on the DL,” casting them as surreptitious and cowardly (Pitt 2006).

Most prominently, DL discourse has unfairly set up black homosexuals living in secrecy as scapegoats for problems within the community, especially the rising rates of HIV/AIDS among black women (Phillips 2005, Boykin 2006). This aspect in particular may have done the most damage to the black community. The scapegoating argument ignores the fact that secretive homosexual acts alone cannot cause one to catch HIV. Rather, it is any form of unprotected sex, straight or gay, that transmits the virus. Furthermore, women who have unprotected sex with men are significantly more likely to catch the virus from their male partners than are men who have sex with female partners who have the virus. Thus, heterosexuals are just as responsible for the spread of the virus as homosexuals (Phillips 2005). Finally, recent research on AIDS transmission literature has shown absolutely no link between secretive homosexual activity and the spread of HIV/AIDS in the black community (Ford 2007). This stereotype not only causes divisions within the black community, but preys upon older stereotype of AIDS being a “gay disease,” which in turn further demonizes homosexuality within the community.

Portraying the DL phenomenon as a problem only within the black community also furthers the racist and heterosexist messages of a hostile larger society. Of foremost importance here is the idea that only black men engage in secret homosexual acts while presenting themselves as heterosexual in society. However, a wealth of data exists to the contrary; the most famous example being Laud Humphrey's controversial *The Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1970), wherein the author documents the phenomenon of heterosexually presenting men who sought anonymous homosexual relations in public restrooms, called "tearooms." The vast majority of the people whom the author encountered patronizing "tearooms" were white, and a large number were married as well.

Framing the DL as a "black problem" also feeds racist stereotypes about black men's sexuality, reinforcing notions that black men cannot control their sexual urges and will seek sexual pleasure however they can get it (Phillips 2005). Most interesting is the role the media has played in this function. White men who could otherwise be considered "on the DL," are often portrayed as victims of a heterosexist society unable to express their true identities (e.g. *Brokeback Mountain*). Black men, on the other hand, are portrayed as devious villains by contrast. Likewise, when soliciting interviews regarding black men "on the DL," reporters and others usually seek out opinions from AIDS researchers and black community leaders (often religious leaders) who are hostile toward the DL phenomenon. However when information regarding white men "on the DL" is needed, interviewers often seek opinions from sociologists and anthropologists who are sympathetic to the plight of these men. While these same academicians would report similar sympathy for black men "on the DL," and the same researchers and community leaders would report equal condemnation for white DL status men, these opinions are not

sought from these people regarding their opinions on men from the other race. This presentation deficit in popular media is rooted in the racist stereotyping of black male sexuality (Pitt 2006).

### **Life “On The Down Low” – Identity and Crisis in Black Homosexual Men**

Using Cass’s and Cross’s models as our theoretical frameworks for identity formation of the gay and black identities, respectively, the data presented in the previous two sections provide no clear, safe route to identity realization for black homosexual men. It comes as no surprise, then, that these men are rarely able to integrate either identity completely. As Cass (1979) and Cross (1995) both state, the inability to fully integrate these identities causes severe internal conflict and dissonance, and fixation at any stage can be extremely harmful to the individual both internally and to his social interactions. Research has shown that many gay blacks internalize negative stereotypes about homosexuality, causing self-hatred (Jones and Hill 1996). Not surprisingly, African American homosexual men also report higher rates of depression, anxiety, and an increased sense of fatalism than both white gay men and straight black men (Richardson et al. 1997; Diaz 1997).

As previously stated, racial identity is almost always more important to black homosexuals than sexual identity. This means that these men will do more to maintain their status in the black community than they will to establish a place in the gay community. This is likely the primary cause for the DL phenomenon. Black gay men want to remain a part of the black community, and so they hide their sexuality so that they are not outcast from it (Tinney 1986, Loiacano 1989, Hawkeswood 1990, Jones and Hill 1996, Manlansan 1996, Green 1998). However, because of the internal knowledge that one is homosexual, it becomes exceedingly difficult for that person to develop a fully

mature and healthy black identity because the black community has established that overt rejection of homosexuality is a key part of the black identity, especially the black male identity. Because of this pressure, many black homosexual men revert to the hypermasculine identity to both prevent their association by others as homosexuals (Ward 2005), but also to fit into established stereotypes of black male sexuality and black masculinity – strong, aggressive, and hypersexual – to cognitively manage their identity crises (Icard 1986).

Cass (1979) tells us, one of the most pivotal steps in developing a healthy gay identity is public acknowledgement of being homosexual. Public disclosure of one's own homosexual identity is indicative of developmental maturity and is requisite for a healthy homosexual identity (Parks, Hughes, and Matthews 2004). However, because the black community is so hostile to homosexual black males – and even more so toward black men keeping their homosexuality a secret – the rational choice model presented earlier (Lewis and Kertzner 2003) seems, at least on the surface, to be playing out in reality. That is, it is more worthwhile to the actors to remain “on the DL” and risk being discovered than it is to outwardly acknowledge their homosexuality.

As communal pressures drive black homosexuals underground, most do not have the opportunity to experience the necessary contact with other homosexuals required for a healthy homosexual identity development. Furthermore, those who do attempt to interact in the predominantly white homosexual culture are generally faced with the high degree of racism they also experience in larger society, such as: exclusion, marginalization, stereotyping, sexual objectification, and others (see, for example, Icard 1986, Loiacano 1989, Peacock et al. 2001, and Harris 2003); preventing them from having the positive experiences with other homosexuals necessary for progression through the various stages

of homosexual identity formation identified by Cass as pivotal for healthy homosexual identity formation.

Furthermore, black homosexuals often find it difficult to interact in the larger homosexual community because of differential socialization patterns between the majority whites who maintain the contemporary gay community and the minority blacks within it. White culture is highly individualistic, which is reflected in the gay community at large, whereas black culture is highly communal (Howard 2000). White homosexuals find strength and comfort in their ability to succeed on their own, while the black community takes pride in the accomplishments of others of their race and derive strength and comfort from the support of their friends and family (Manlansan 1996). This differential socialization is a major contributor to blacks' inability to find acceptance and comfort in the larger gay society.

### **Living “On The Real” - The “Coming Out” Process and Living Openly as a Black Homosexual**

Despite the immense pressure faced by African American homosexuals to accept and disclose their sexuality, many do so. A black gay man who discloses his sexuality is sometimes described as living “on the real,” (Harris 2003) meaning he is open and honest about his sexuality and has managed to successfully navigate his way into the latter stages of homosexual identity formation. Most black homosexuals do not reach this point until much later in life than white homosexuals, if they reach it at all. In fact, the pressure from the black community is often so great that black men who have sexual contact with other men but are not currently engaged in such acts still tend to identify as heterosexual (Brown II 2005), implying most black homosexual men “on the DL” tie homosexuality to

the sex act itself, and have not been able to internalize their sexuality as a part of their identity.

Men who are able to integrate their sexuality with their identity and begin living “on the real” face a unique set of challenges. One of the most common features of black homosexuality is that much less emphasis is placed on the idea of “coming out,” or publicly disclosing one’s sexuality in the black community, especially to family than it is among whites (Loiacano 1989, Adams and Kimmel 1997), however research has shown that those who do come out directly rather than hiding their sexualities are much more likely to find acceptance from their families. Still, even after this direct disclosure is conducted, most African American families tend to avoid the issue altogether (Merighri and Grimes 2000). Research has also shown, though, that African Americans are far less likely to “come out” to their parents directly than members of other races and are also the least likely of all minority groups to disclose their sexuality at all (Groves et al. 2006). When disclosure actually does take place, the majority of the time indirect disclosure methods are chosen in which the individual does not directly disclose his/her sexuality, but does not attempt to hide it as much anymore, resulting in the family members eventually learning of and accepting the person’s sexuality in their own time (Adams and Kimmel 1997).

Still, being “out” in the Black community has severe problems for black homosexuals. Many black homosexuals lose their connection with the church (Adams and Kimmel 1997), which one can only imagine being a devastating blow to one’s black identity, considering how important it has been both historically and contemporarily to the black community (Ward 2005). In addition, black homosexuals are often pressured to declare their “allegiance” to either the gay community or the black community (Jones and

Hill 1996). The black and gay communities are not integrative and, historically, have been openly hostile to one another (Icard 1986). The black community, sometimes seeing homosexuality as a “white problem” fears that black homosexuals will not be dedicated to black causes, while the gay community fears that because of the hostile nature of blacks toward homosexuality, black homosexuals will not support their political and social agenda (Jones and Hill 1996).

Meanwhile, the gay community’s lack of ready acceptance of black homosexuals often causes blacks to decide not to interact with that community. In smaller, less populous areas, this usually means most blacks withdraw from the gay community altogether, while in larger areas with higher gay populations, such as San Francisco, Atlanta, and New York, they typically form their own sub-community of black homosexuals, separate from both the gay *and* black communities (Adams and Kimmel 1997, Peacock et al 2001). This sub-community may interact with one or both of the larger communities, but they tend to find their own niche the most comfortable (Adams and Kimmel 1997).

### **Discussion, Conclusions, and Future Research**

The theme that cannot be restated enough is that black homosexuality is considerably understudied, especially considering its timely relevance and social significance in the world. Black homosexuality’s overly negative portrayal in the media, the so-called “hypermasculinity crisis” in African American male culture, the faulty association of black homosexuals with the AIDS epidemic in the black community, and the emergence and stigmatization of the DL phenomenon are but a few reasons more research needs to be conducted in this area.

Further, what study has been done has been primarily conducted by treatment specialists, such as social workers, psychiatrists, and counselors; and very little is sociological in nature. The majority of the existing research is focused on remedying problems for the individual and not the entrenched roots of the problems within the black community and gay communities and a racist, heterosexist society. Furthermore, the few sociological perspectives in this literature are primarily conflict-oriented, and the only substantive theory about the emergence of the “down low” comes from a rational choice perspective (Lewis and Kertzner 1997). The lack of identity-focused research gives little chance to examine or scrutinize such claims.

Simply stated, there is not enough data to make any overly gratuitous claims about the entirety of the gay black male population, and I would question the validity of applying a rational choice perspective to this identity process. First, we need new research to get “behind” the data that currently exists. Qualitative interviews with African American homosexual men regarding identity formation would be an excellent start. First we need to know whether or not there actually *is* an identity crisis. This seems like a logical conclusion considering the data presented thus far, but as most of this data is treatment oriented, we are only getting pictures from people who *are* having identity issues. Perhaps the majority of these men have no such problems, or have found alternative paths to identity realization through the performance of gender and emotion work, neither of which has been studied in this context.

If we do find that there is an identity crisis, as suggested by the literature, we need to know the level of reflexivity these individuals have about this crisis (i.e. how much does this “crisis” affect their lives, if at all), and what methods do they employ to negotiate the conflicting characteristics of being black, gay, and male. Again, qualitative

studies of African American homosexual men could help us to understand these processes.

In specific regards to the “down low” phenomenon, there are many questions that need to be answered. How prevalent is the down low phenomenon? What activities might cause one to be labeled by others as “down low?” What are the characteristics of people who self-identify as “down low?” Questions like these could be addressed by surveys of both black homosexuals and heterosexuals, but achieving a sizeable, representative sample of the latter may prove difficult considering the impetus to hide one’s homosexuality.

This understudied area potentially has important application to play in the study of other “doubly-stigmatized” groups, such as minority women, but it places a unique twist that other double stigma populations do not face as the representation of homosexuality across genders, races, cultures, age groups, etc varies a great deal. While many see it to be an inborn trait as natural as race or gender, another large proportion of the population sees it as a choice, and this divisiveness on its definition affects how it is perceived among groups. The negative perception of homosexuality with African American culture has fostered an exceedingly hostile environment for these men that could be very different from double stigmas wholly ascribed by nature or wholly ascribed by choice.

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