

African American Lesbians: A Selective Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Although research on African American women's mental health has increased over the past several years (Brown & Keith, 2003; Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004; Warren, 1997), a lack of scholarly literature in the area of African American lesbians' mental health continues, limiting the helping profession's ability to provide effective services to this group. This literature review will: (1) highlight psychosocial stressors that can potentially impact African American lesbians' mental health, (2) outline limitations of the current research, and (3) offer areas for future research.

Scholarly research of African American women's mental health has increased over the past several years (Brown & Keith, 2003; Ramos, Carlson, & McNutt, 2004; Warren, 1997). Yet despite the increased interest, a dearth of research on the mental health of African American lesbians continues. Although the Institute on

Medicine (IOM) (1999) calls for this type of research, it appears sexual orientation is not an area of much interest to mental health researchers, perhaps in part because the Surgeon General's report (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001) excludes sexual orientation as a variable of interest. Given the importance of this ground-breaking report, the failure to acknowledge sexual orientation further minimizes its importance in the field of mental health.

The scholarship on African American women's mental health has resulted in a body of important knowledge, yet the neglect of any comprehensive focus on lesbians' mental health is disconcerting and continues to be a fundamental problem in the mental health literature. Lack of literature limits the helping profession's ability to provide effective mental health services to African American lesbians. The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to highlight psychosocial stressors that can potentially impact African American lesbians' mental health; (2) to outline limitations of the current research; and (3) to offer areas for future research.

Intra-cultural Homophobia

African American women often encounter stresses from three "isms"—racism, sexism and classism. African American women who self-identify as lesbians may experience additional psychosocial stresses associated with their sexual orientation (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Greene, 1994; Mays, Cochran, & Rhue, 1993). For example, research suggests greater homophobia, defined as "a type of prejudice that involves a fear or anger, disgust, or discomfort with homosexuals and homosexuality" (Rogers, 2006, p. 250), exists in the African American community than in the European American community (Clark, 1983; Greene, 2000; Gomez, 1999; Savage & Harley, 2005; Mays et al., 1993). Lesbians are often subject to ridicule and gay-bashing in the African American community. Their lifestyles are viewed as a "phase" they are going through. African American lesbians are often labeled as unattractive, lacking the ability to find a male to marry and with whom to bear children (Greene, 1994). The marginalization of African American lesbians

is considered irrelevant to the concerns of the community, since homosexuality is perceived as a European American phenomenon (Boykin, 1996). Thus the experiences of African American lesbians often cause them to perceive their own community to be "extremely homophobic" (Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996, p. 51).

Lack of Social Support

Traditionally, the African American community has been a safe haven for African American women from various forms of oppression (i.e., racism and classism). African American lesbians, however, lack support from traditional social networks in the community due to their sexual orientation. For example, some African American clergy openly condemn homosexuality and use the Black church as a vehicle to promote an anti-homosexuality agenda (Boykin, 1996). According to Nero (1991), "there are few arenas where the dread and condemnation of homosexuality is more noticeable than in black church settings." For some African American clergy, lesbianism goes against traditional family values and is "unnatural." Therefore, African American gays and lesbians are not only faced with ostracism and pain due to their homosexuality, they often face it first from their families and church members (Griffin, 2000). Thus, a traditional source of support is not readily available to African American lesbians. Johnson (2001) asserts:

The censorship of black homosexuality, along with false separation of the secular and the sacred body and soul, has made the church less a site of comfort and affirmation and more a place where 'opening the door to the church' means opening the doors of the closet (p. 107).

The religious condemnation of lesbianism may lead to a personal spiritual crisis for lesbians. How African American lesbians reconcile their sexual orientation with their religious beliefs has yet to be addressed in the literature and is certainly another area warranting research.

Although African American lesbians' families may be aware of their sexual orientation, it is generally not a topic open for discussion, which promotes the denial of homosexuality through the pretense of heterosexuality or "passing" (Savage & Harley, 2005). Rather than dealing with the issue of lesbian relationships and lifestyles, the family often pretends the relationship does not exist and accepts the lover in the culturally accepted role of "girlfriend" or "sister" (Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996, p. 97). As Greene and Boyd-Franklin (1996) note, "the same familial and social networks that assist them [lesbians] as black people often do not assist them as homosexuals"(p. 99). This denial of their personal identity can leave African American lesbians conflicted between fighting for acceptance and maintaining peace through pretense.

Disclosure and African American Lesbians

The gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (GLBT) community stresses the value of coming out to family, friends, and the broader community (Salvage & Harley, 2005). This multistage process begins with overcoming internalized homophobia or socialized heterosexism and gaining self-acceptance as a person with a GLBT identity. Being openly homosexual within one's community of peers is viewed as a healthy psychosocial development (Cass, 1984). Due to the condemnation of homosexuality in the African American community, however, lesbians are often apprehensive of disclosing their sexual orientation to their family and peers and are less likely than European American lesbians to do so. Consequently as Greene (2000) asserts:

Because family and community are important buffers against racism and sources of tangible support, the homophobia in these communities often leaves lesbians and gay men of color feeling vulnerable and less likely to be out in the same ways as their [white] counterparts (p. 28).

Disclosure to family members is often fraught with costs such as estrangement (Mays, Chatters, Cochran, & Mackness, 1998) and exile because lesbianism is taboo in the African American culture. Given the risks involved with disclosure, African American lesbians often choose to conceal their sexual orientation to maintain the support of their family and community.

African American Lesbians and Racism

African American lesbians also fail to find a safe haven in the European American gay community because it is plagued with racism (Boykin, 1996; Greene, 1994). African American lesbians are at the bottom of the race hierarchy (Greene, 1994). As Boykin (1996) notes, "The social exclusion of [gay] blacks is the most obvious and common form of gay racism practiced in the white [gay] community" (p. 215). For instance, political activism and social events are commonly tailored to the European American GLBT agenda which excludes African American lesbians' concerns. African American lesbians who are open with their sexual orientation are often denied the opportunity to serve as leaders or sit on boards of directors for national gay and lesbian organizations because they are both African American and women (Jones & Hill, 1996). In addition to not having to deal with issues of racism, many European American lesbian activists, in contrast to African American lesbians, are well-educated, middle-to-high income, and reside in upper class metropolitan areas (Boykin, 1996). Issues pertinent to the European American GLBT community's economic, social, and psychological well-being are primary concerns when it comes to advocating for gay rights, ignoring issues specific to African American lesbians. Some African American lesbians residing in major metropolitan cities (e.g., Washington, DC, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles) have access to resources such as social clubs, organized support groups, and conferences specific to African American lesbians' issues (i.e., National Black Lesbian Conference); however, lesbians residing in rural areas or smaller cities often remain isolated and without support systems (Greene, 2000).

African American Lesbians, Psychological Distress and Depression

African American lesbians may be vulnerable to psychological distress due to their stigmatized status in multiple communities. Prior research has found evidence suggesting higher rates of stress and depression in African American women who self-identify as lesbians (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Cochran & Mays, 1994; Hughes, Matthews, Razzana, & Adanda, 2003; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001; Mays & Cochran, 1998; Matthews & Hughes, 2001, Prado et al., 2002). The National Lesbian Health Care Survey, conducted in 1994, one of the few empirical studies to include an adequate sampling of African American lesbians and the largest survey on lesbians and mental health to date, found that over half of African American lesbians reported higher rates of stress-related depression compared to their White counterparts (Bradford et al., 1994). Additionally, self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse, overeating/purging, and suicide attempts were found to be particularly high in this group of women. The findings from this study are limited, however, by the lack of in-depth exploration of factors related to the high self-reports of stress-related depression and/or self-destructive behaviors.

More recent studies also provide evidence that African American lesbians experience high rates of psychological distress. Hughes and colleagues (2003) examined similarities in correlates of psychological distress and coping mechanisms in African American lesbians and heterosexual African American women. Similar risk factors were common in both lesbian and heterosexual women; however, African American lesbians self-reported higher levels of psychological distress. Further, African American lesbians were more likely to engage in self-destructive coping strategies such as alcohol and drug use to cope with their stress. Similarly, in a national survey of 603 African American women who self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, Mays, Cochran, and Roeder (2003) found that homosexual women experienced levels of psychological

distress that surpassed national trends for African American women overall.

Conclusion

Although the aforementioned studies provide a strong body of evidence that African American lesbians' mental health status may be worse than that of their heterosexual counterparts, major gaps in the scholarship on African American lesbians' mental health remain. Currently, the literature on the mental health of African American lesbians consists only of cross-sectional studies or comparative analysis studies examining prevalence rates, correlates, and coping strategies for depression and/or psychological distress (Bradford et al., 1994; Cochran & Mays, 1994; Hughes et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2001; Matthews & Hughes, 2001; Prado et al., 2002).

African American lesbians are a vibrant part of the population and their mental health should be an important public concern. The literature reviewed here highlights the merit of future qualitative research on African American lesbians' mental health status to provide a foundation for interventions to help understand the risks of depression and psychological distress and means of avoiding them, as well as sources of support for those currently experiencing depressive symptoms. Depression has been identified as an emerging public health concern among lesbians (IOM, 1999). Information gleaned from research on African American lesbians' mental health will furnish the helping profession with the tools necessary to develop training modules on early identification, outreach, treatment, and prevention strategies specific to this subset of the lesbian population.

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