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Reflections on the Spirituality of Three Black Gay Men

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Abstract: Spirituality is important in the lives of African Americans. Not surprising then, it is significant for Black gay men, as members of the African American community. In this paper we discuss five themes that emerged from an analysis of three autoethnographies.

Introduction

For many African Americans, religion and spirituality have been an integral part of their lives. They serve as the foundation for African Americans' "long history of a strong faith tradition" (Gillum, 2009, p. 3). African Americans have relied on their religious affiliations and beliefs to acquire job and life skills (Isaac, 2008), develop health promotion behaviors (Gillum & Griffith, 2010) counter racism and oppression (Taylor, Krause & Chatters, 2005), and cope with physical and mental stress (Gillum, 2009). And, while religious institutions play a significant role, "most religious environments in the U.S. do not affirm homosexuality" or sexual expression beyond marriage (Barnes & Meyers, 2012, p. 505). Despite anti-gay messages often espoused in the Black church, Black gay men still engage in religious activities and believe in a higher power (spirituality) who accepts them for who and what they are. For some, this realization may occur in adulthood, after much soul searching and experiences. In this paper we explore the role of spirituality and development in the lives of Black gay men.

Spirituality and Religion

Religion has often been used interchangeably with spirituality. In reality, the terms have two distinct meanings. Religion has been defined as a "formalized set of ideological commitments associated with a group" (Fincham & Ajayi, 2011, p. 260). In other words, individuals who are religious follow certain practices and rituals and maintain certain beliefs associated with an organized group (i.e., denomination or religious sect). Spirituality can be difficult to define as it has different meanings for different people (Tisdell, 2008). It may include belief in a "sacred and transcendent dimension to life" (Mattis et al., 2001, p. 223). Spirituality is also defined as a yearning to connect with community or a higher power (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 64). In associating spirituality with the African Diaspora (Jagers & Smith, 1996), spirituality is seen as a worldview whose cultural expressions are central to the African Diaspora (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). Relative to adult education, even though "spirituality is generally seen as an individual's experiences of what is perceived as sacred, how one frames or understands those experiences can strongly influence one's beliefs and behaviors" (Tisdell, 2008, p. 29).

Historically, among other things, spirituality has served and has shaped individual and communal relationships and promoted altruism (Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002). In a concept analysis of African American spirituality, Newlin, Knalf and Melkus indicate that culturally prominent aspects of spirituality include peace, coping, and guidance. In the African American community, spirituality is also an important part of one's overall development. There are numerous theories that attempt to explain spiritual development in adulthood (Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Reker, 1991). One theory that seems to encompass most of the theories advanced in the research literature is Kegan's (1982) Synthesizing Model. Kegan basically posits that we move between the need to be part of the group and the need to be individuals. He explains that while we have a strong desire for connection, we equally desire independence or to be differentiated from others. No accommodation between the two will result in balance. Where a need is unmet, individuals are left with no choice but to change the system – to change their understanding. This includes Black straight and gay men. For purposes of this paper, we delve further into Black men's spirituality.

Black Men and Spirituality

Despite the wealth of literature relative to African American spirituality and religion, there is limited research on African American male spirituality (Mattis et al., 2001). There are two divergent views of religiosity and African American men. One perception is that of African American men whose religious involvement is associated with political engagement. The other is of African American males who are antisocial and nihilistic (Smith, Fabricatore & Peyrot, 1999). Smith, Fabricatore and Peyrot question both images as the former appears to challenge the prevalence of religious involvement of African American men and its positive effects, while the latter calls into question the "diminishing concern for others" (Smith et al., 1999, p. 579). Regardless of the perceptions of African American males, there is enough evidence to suggest that spirituality plays an important role in their lives.

Although the literature relative to African American men and spirituality may be scant, we have learned a few things regarding this nexus. For example, African American men have scored lower on dimensions of organizational involvement (attending a church), non-organizational religious involvement (i.e., reading religious material), and subjective religiosity than women (Mattis et al., 2001). Older African American men tend to be more spiritual than younger African American men (Mattis et al.). Ellis and Flannelly (2009), in a national study, found African American men who reported high levels of daily religious guidance reduced their chances of developing a major depressive disorder. Although when compared to other groups, some African American men's spiritual and religious involvement may not be as great, it appears to make a difference in the lives of those who have embraced it. In applying this model to Black gay men who seek to make meaning of their spiritual lives, it becomes evident that change in their belief system is a necessity in order to move forward.

Black Gay Men, Religion and Spirituality

Many Black churches vehemently argue that homosexuality is unnatural and that gays should not practice or engage in homosexual behavior, even though some ministers admit that homosexuality may be beyond one's control and that some are born this way (Giordiano, 1999). In the past, institutions such as the Black church have participated in helping the Black community by lending support, providing care, and being actively involved in the health and

social welfare of its members (Baker, 1999; Jeffries, Dodge, and Sandfort, 2008). However, many believe that the Black church may be the primary instigator of homophobia in the Black community (Constantine-Sims, 2001). Participants in this study overwhelmingly support this contention. One participant in this study said, “I studied the Bible closely and listened frequently to sermons from my mom’s pastor that condemned homosexuality as sinful. No one dared to counter this Biblical conclusion. This justified the dislike of “funny” people - God did not like them. Yet, somehow, I never really accepted this Biblical conclusion.”

Many Black religious, political, and social leaders believe it is their responsibility to deliver Black gay men from homosexuality through prayer and conversion therapies (Grace, 2001); however, the American Psychological Association has denounced therapies aimed at attempting to change one’s sexual orientation (Helminiak, 1995). hooks (2001) makes a sweeping proclamation about affirming Blackness. She posits “Loving Blackness means that we love all of who we are, and that includes gay Black People; Black people are here to stay and are not looking to heterosexuals to validate their existence” (p.196-197). Black gay men face a multiplicity of oppressions as they are Black, male, and gay. Sadly, many are rejected by their own (African American) community; furthermore, they are barely tolerated by White gays (Bryant, 2008; Malebranche et al., 2009). This translates to the literature as little is known of the lived experiences of Black gay men as it relates to the role of spirituality as they navigate the lifespan.

Although some Black congregations appreciate and value their gay and lesbian members, religion is often cited as a major culprit in perpetuating homophobic attitudes toward these individuals (Boykin, 2005; Constantine-Simms, 2001). This is surprising as Bryant (2008) and Bryant and Bowman (2010) indicate that Black gay men are highly influenced by their religion. And, in their study of Black Gay men, Malebranche, Fields, Bryant and Harper (2009) found over 75% reported that they believed that homosexuality is a sin. This internalized belief may have a negative impact on Black gay men’s masculine identity and self-concept; according to McNeal (1988) “when pathological belief systems and feelings become rooted deep in the unconscious of gay people the result can be resistance to healthy self-acceptance” (p. 16). For some Black gay men these negative religious influences have resulted in oppression, alienation and both internalized and externalized homophobia (Bryant, 2008). In contrast, non-heterosexuals cope with this quagmire by esteeming personal faith in spirituality higher than themselves, the bible or the churches they attend (Jeffries et al. 2008). Jeffries et al. further note that, unlike religiosity, spirituality is experiential and personal in the lives of Black gay men.

Methodology

The following question guided this research: a) What is the role of spirituality in the development of Black gay men? An autoethnographical methodological approach was used. Autoethnography involves an insider’s perspective on a cultural event or group. Autoethnography connects the personal to the cultural using various methodological strategies (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Furthermore, this type of research helps glean a deeper understanding of the researcher’s personal experience, by using techniques such as introspection, focusing on feelings, thoughts, and culture (Esterberg, 2002). The strategy used in this study is a biographical method where “turning-point moments of individual’s lives” can be presented and examined (Denzin, 1989, p. 13).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed for similarities and differences concerning the role of spirituality in the lives of the three participants. Content analysis to identify, code, and categorize themes and patterns in the data were used (Patton, 1990). This method provides a way of analyzing the structure of the data, allowing salient themes, patterns, and observations to emerge. For example, narratives aimed at extricating text related to spirituality allowed for sub-codes such as associated stressors, identity issues, and coping strategies to be identified. The authors then met for several data analysis sessions in which they compared and discussed themes and arrived at an agreement as to which themes were most prevalent in all of the stories until a point of saturation was reached.

Findings

The three participants for this study all lived in the Southeastern part of the United States. All three were educated, with two having doctoral degrees. One participant, Frank, was in his mid 40s, another, Stephen, in his mid 50s and the third participant, Louis, was in his early 60s. Two of the participants, Louis and Frank were actively engaged in their church. While the other participant attended church, he was not a member of one. Analysis of the autoethnographies revealed five themes related to spirituality in the lives of the authors common to each of the autoethnographies—Active Concealment, Early Black Church Indoctrination, Reconciliation and Reinterpretation, Embraced Spirituality, and Evolved Altruism.

Active concealment. This theme served a dual purpose. The participants hid their true feelings for members of the same sex. They also concealed their lack of interest in young male-oriented activities. To hide their feelings, they often found themselves being alone. On the other hand, they did engage in “male” activities, despite their disdain for them, because it allowed them to conform to cultural masculine expectations. Each of the men played sports, but it was more to meet societal expectations of boys their age.

Early Black church indoctrination. The importance of God and attending church was taught to the participants at a young age. Hence, they all attended church on a regular basis as young children. Unfortunately, they often heard that homosexuality was a sin and it violated God’s natural laws.

Reconciliation and reinterpretation. With the mixed and often negative messages they received in their youth, the participants had to take time to critically analyze and reinterpret the Bible for themselves. Stephen was able to develop a healthy self-identity by seeking other faith communities and nurturing his spirituality. Louis rejected the teachings of the church and sought a church that was inclusive and understood God as he had come to understand him based on his life experiences. He came to understand God as a loving and caring entity that embraced his sexual orientation as part of his humanness.

Embraced spirituality. Despite the homophobic teachings of their childhood, spirituality remains an integral part of the lives of the study participants. Each considered their sexual orientation not to be a choice, but a part of their God given identity. A loving and caring God did not and could not give them a “sinful” identity. Thus, spirituality became intertwined with their self-identity.

Evolved altruism. Based on their embraced spirituality, all three participants felt a need to give back to others, particularly members of the Black community. Louis felt as if his life had come full circle and that now he can use all of his experiences to give back to a world that he once took so much from. He stated, “I want to make a difference in the lives of Black gay men.” Frank indicated a desire to become a mentor and advise “young Black brothers and sisters to reach their full potential.” Stephen has a need to help other Black gay men and lesbian women by “speaking up.” Each felt compelled to reach out and help others especially in reconciling their belief in God with their sexual identity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Not only does spirituality play a role in the lives of African Americans, it appears its role is important regardless of their sexual orientation. The findings from this study support the notion that spirituality is personal and experiential for Black gay men (Jeffries et al., 2008). Despite the oppressive intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation, these men have relied on a higher power as a defense mechanism. In addition, they still engage in religious activities that support their spiritual beliefs.

While the spiritual development literature has grown significantly over the past few years, very little has addressed spiritual development in LGBT individuals and none of it has addressed spiritual development in Black gay persons. Findings from this study can be useful to both practitioners and researchers in working with this population of learners. Practitioners working with diverse populations can use spirituality as a means to assist them in their development. More research needs to be conducted to further understand the role of spirituality in the lives of Black men as they transition through adulthood. For example, would the findings be similar with heterosexual men? As adult men, do they change their interpretations of spirituality? We are just beginning to enhance our knowledge of Black gay men and spirituality. Undoubtedly, more research should be conducted to include other Black gay men to determine how aspects of spirituality affect their lives and to determine if the experiences of the participants in this study are common among others of this population.

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