

# The Role of Spirituality in the Lives of Black Same Gender Loving Men at Midlife

Larry Bryant  
*Georgia State University*

Lorenzo Bowman  
*DeVry University/Keller Graduate School of Management*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

## Recommended Citation

Bryant, Larry and Bowman, Lorenzo (2011). "The Role of Spirituality in the Lives of Black Same Gender Loving Men at Midlife," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/11>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

# The Role of Spirituality in the Lives of Black Same Gender Loving Men at Midlife

Larry Bryant  
Georgia State University

Lorenzo Bowman  
Devry University/Keller Graduate School of Management

Keywords: Black gay men, sexuality, sexual orientation, spirituality, same gender loving.

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the role of spirituality in the lives of Black Same Gender Loving (SGL) men. Findings from the analysis of three autoethnographies indicate Black SGL men experience same sex attraction at an early age, reevaluate the religious and spiritual teachings of their youth, attend church at an early age, consider spirituality an integral part of their daily lives, and utilize spirituality in reaching reach out to others.

## Introduction

In comparison to other areas of adult learning, spirituality among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) persons has been given little attention in mainstream adult education literature (Tisdell, 2001; Hill, 2007). According to some scholars, spirituality has a rightful place in dissipating the silence that threatens to obliterate our hopes and dreams, as well as a rightful foothold in the annals of adult education (Tisdell, 2000).

Johnson-Bailey (2006) embraces this notion as she introduces the role of spirituality in the learning circles of Black women; here spirituality is viewed as an interconnectedness of life events and outcomes, specifically, the women in these circles say they learn from all life forms and accept unquestionably the presence of a higher power. Other adult education scholars note spirituality as liberatory space. Hill (2007) in his groundbreaking article "*Adult Education: Breaking Open Our Times*" comments that liberatory space is about mobilizing people to take control of their lives. Most importantly, Hill notes that this liberatory space must include places for Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Why is spirituality important in adult education? In a recent symposium, Hill (2002) answers this question quite eloquently, he states "*A primary goal of adult education should be to craft a just world in which we live, as educators we are often called to assist adult learners in meaning-making under conditions that are oppositional to dominant ideologies.*" This statement certainly rings true for Black SGL men as they attempt to navigate a racist and homophobic society, especially when it pertains to religion.

However, missing from the adult education literature is the role of spirituality in the lives of Black SGL men as they navigate midlife. While some scholars have begun to take note of the lived experiences of lesbian and gay men and women, most of this limited attention has been directed at the lives of White lesbian and gay women and men (Bryant, 2008; Hill, 1995). As a result, little is known of the lived nonformal experiences of Black SGL men as it relates to the role of spirituality. How is it that SGL men learn to navigate the realities of double oppression? This research explores the role of spirituality in the lives of these men as they navigate midlife within a racist and homophobic society (Bryant, 2008).

Many Black religious, political, and social leaders believe it is their responsibility to deliver Black SGL 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). In contrast, the feminist writer hooks (2001) makes a sweeping proclamation about affirming Blackness in her article *Salvation*. She posits the following: "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).

### **Defining Spirituality**

Some adult educators realize a strong correlation between spirituality and the learning environment. Dirkx (1997) asserts that "*Attention to soul in adult education is important, particularly in attending to group process*" (p. 310). He suggests that it is not our responsibility as adult educators to focus on spirituality but to attend to nurturing the soul. In other words, we should recognize what is already inherently inside individuals and respect that as a sacred and valid part of their relationships and experiences.

The term spirituality is difficult to define. Its attributes, meanings and relationship to religion has evolved over time. One explanation of spirituality by Fenwick and Lang (1998) captures the themes espoused by participants in their research study. "*Spirituality is a yearning to connect with community, a higher power, or a transcendent energy, and to liberate this energy within one's self*" (p. 64). According to participants in this study, spirituality is defined based on their personal relationship with a higher power, but contains some elements of their religious upbringing as well.

Additionally, a research study by Tisdell (1998) looked at spirituality, women and adult education for social change. One of the themes she found in the sample was what she called "moving away", that is, participants in early adulthood began questioning their childhood religious teachings and understandings. This initial moving away was in response to their perceptions of hypocrisy, sexism, heterosexism and lack of personal or cultural support. These experiences are consistent with findings in this research study, where participants change their perspective over time on various aspects of their childhood religious beliefs; particularly around sexual orientation. According to Tisdell (2001), three important general themes emanate from the literature in defining spirituality; that is, the further development of self awareness, a sense of interconnectedness, and a relationship with a higher power.

Although present and very active in the Black church (choir, music ministries and other committees), Black SGL men make up a marginalized population that receives infrequent public discussion or acknowledgment (Woodard, 2000). This qualitative research project explores the autoethnographies of three Black SGL men as they navigate mid-life.

### **Methodology**

This paper utilizes an autoethnographical methodological approach. Autoethnography involves an insider's perspective on a cultural event or group. The insider has intimate knowledge of the event or group (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Each author has lived their adult life as men who prefer sexual and emotional relationships with the same sex.

Autoethnography connects the personal to the cultural using various methodological strategies (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). 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, 13). When the presentations are done in the first person, they are autobiographies (Denzin, 1989). The two authors combined their own personal narratives along with one invited submission. These three narratives were analyzed for similarities and differences concerning the role of spirituality in the lives of the three participants.

This study used content analysis to identify, code, and categorize themes and patterns in the data (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

As described under the data analysis section, relevant themes, patterns, and observations related to the three ethnographies emerged as the data was rigorously examined, and compared. Analysis of the autoethnographies revealed six themes related to spirituality in the lives of the authors common to each of the autoethnographies. Each of these themes is discussed below:

**1. Black SGL men are attracted to the same sex at an early age:** The internal spiritual struggle began at an early age for each participant after becoming cognizant of their same sex attraction. This conflict manifested itself in many ways, but for all three participants hiding their true feelings was evident in their attempts to seem normal by playing sports. Mitchell, Lorenzo and Larry asserted that they were aware of being attracted to the same sex at an early age, Lorenzo did not recall the exact age that he realized he had a same sex attraction, but he did recall knowing that he was “different” at about age five. He further noted that he did not have the same interest as his brothers, sisters and cousins his age. Each autoethnography revealed that although everyone played sports, each did so in order to meet societal expectations. Mitchell mentioned how he played Baseball and would strike out each time he came to bat – he didn’t like playing. After one game, his father yelled at him (for not doing his best); he noted that he never played the game following that experience. For Lorenzo and Larry, playing sports provided an opportunity for male intimacy that each found enjoyable, even though neither enjoyed playing the sport for its inherent enjoyment.

**2. Black SGL men attend church at an early age:** Each of the autoethnographies revealed that Larry, Mitchell, and Lorenzo all were required to attend church on a regular basis at a very early age. This speaks to the centrality of the Black Church in their lives. As such, each sought to make spiritual meaning of their sexual orientation early on. Mitchell stated that in growing up in a very religious home, he was very involved in church. He was an active participant in the youth church and youth choir. He further stated that he always enjoyed singing in the church choir, so much that he wanted to become the choir director. He recalled putting on his mother’s choir robe and standing in front of the mirror pretending that he was the director and shouting like the ladies in the church. Larry also discusses attending church at an early age and being very

involved in the choir and other related ministries. Most important, the involvement in church at an early age meant that each of the participants were taught that homosexuality was sinful, aberrant and a violation of the “natural” laws of God.

**3. Black SGL men learn to reinterpret theological teachings consistent with affirming their sexual orientation:** It’s interesting to note that no one considered rejection of the church and its teachings as an option until adulthood. During his freshmen College year, Lorenzo noted how he rejected the teachings of his Mom’s church regarding homosexuality and its view of sacred scripture. He sought other faith communities that nurtured his spirituality and fostered a healthy self identity. Mitchell similarly rejected the teachings of the Church regarding his sexual orientation. He researched the interpretation of sacred Christian writings and the Bible for himself and came to understand the “Bible” from a different more affirming perspective. He concluded that most of what he had been taught from the Bible was interpreted from a literal perspective, as opposed to the cultural, historical view. Larry also rejected the teachings of the church that had been given to him as a child. Since these teachings condemned homosexuality, he searched for a church that was inclusive and that 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.

**5. Spirituality is an integral part of the lives of Black SGL men at mid-life:** Larry, Lorenzo and Mitchell noted that spirituality, not religion was a central and important part of their lives today in spite of the homophobic teachings they had experienced from church and family. For example Mitchell says the following: *“As far as I can remember, I have always had a close relationship with the most-high God.”* Similarly, Larry recalls the role spirituality played in helping him overcome many challenges in his life, including drug addiction to helping him achieve a Ph.D. He states: *“As I began to grow spiritually, I began to feel more and more that God saved my life for a reason.”* Lorenzo states that he came to believe that “God in his creative plan has indeed created some individuals to be gay.” Each considered their sexual orientation not to be a choice; rather, it was a part of their God given identity. A loving and caring God did not and could not give them a “sinful” identity.

**6. Black SGL men have an altruistic desire to help others as a part of their spiritual journey:** Larry noted that he feels as if his life has 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 states “I want to make a difference in the lives of SGL men . . .” Mark noted that he’d like to mentor and advise young Black brothers and sisters to fulfill their full potential. Lorenzo felt a need to help other Black gay men and lesbian women by “speaking up.” He noted that he now understands that “silence can be dangerous where oppression is present.” He further notes that speaking up challenges the status quo and heteronormative assumptions. Each felt compelled to reach out and help others to especially in reconciling their belief in God with their sexual identity

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings in these autoethnographies have significant implications for those in adult education who support and encourage learning from a social justice and inclusionary perspective. Hill (2007) affirms the oversight of SGL men in adult education literature. He notes that this is an ongoing problem for adult educators in keeping with our profession’s purpose of promoting

social justice. While there has been some positive action in the field in recent years through the inclusion of scholarship that has served to reveal the lived realities of lesbian and gay men and women in our society, this scholarship has not typically addressed the unique realities of Black SGL men and the role of spirituality in their lives. Results of this study support some of the current literature around spirituality in the Black community, in that Black SGL men consider religion and/or spirituality an important part of their lives and identity (Malebranche et al. 2007; Woodard, 2000); however, many participants in this study evolved to a point of acceptance of their sexual orientation based on their own spiritual meanings. Traditional theological interpretation supports the belief that all non-heterosexual behaviors are immoral. For many Black SGL men this belief has resulted in bondage, legalism, ostracism, depression, alienation, psychiatric institutional admission, violence, despondency, and suicide (Helminiak, 1995). As participants in this study navigate midlife, they searched and found their own meanings and understanding of spirituality and scriptural interpretation that affirms their sexual orientation as good.

While the spiritual development literature has grown significantly over the past few years, very little of it, if any, has addressed spiritual development in LGBT individuals and none of it has addressed spiritual development in Black SGL persons. This research will provide adult educators with some insight into the spiritual development of these men and as such provide them with useful knowledge of how this population creates spiritual meaning for themselves in a world that oftentimes uses religion and other spiritual avenues as tools of oppression, alienation, and separation.

## References

- Bryant, L. (2008). *How Black men who have sex with men learn to cope with homophobia and racism*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens.
- Denzin, N.K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dirkx, J. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult learning. In P. Cranton (Ed.). *Transformative learning in action* (pp. 79-88). *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education*, No. 85. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. P. (2003). Autobiography, Personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 199 - 258). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fenwick, T., & Lange, E. (1998). *Spirituality in the workplace: The new frontier of HRD*. *Canadian Journal for the study of adult education*, 12(1), 63-87.
- Grace, A. (2001). Being, becoming, and belonging as a queer citizen educator: The places of queer autobiography, queer culture as community, and fugitive knowledge. *CASAE-ACEÉÉA National Conference 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary proceedings*. Retrieved May 9, 2008, from <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2001/grace.pdf>
- Grace, A. P. & Hill, R. J. (2001). Using Queer knowledge to build inclusion pedagogy in adult education. *Proceedings of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Annual Adult Education Research Conference*, Michigan State University, Lansing MI, 145-150
- Helminiak, A. D. (1995). *What the Bible really says about homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press.
- hooks, b. (2001). *Salvation: Black people and love*. NY: Harper Hill-Collins.
- Hill, R. J. (1995). Gay discourse in adult education: A critical review. *Adult Education*

- Quarterly*, 45(3), 142-158
- Hill, R. J. (2007). Breaking open our times (and other liberatory acts). In K. B. Armstrong & L. W. Nabb (Eds.), *American Adult Educators: Quintessential Autobiographies by Educators of the 21st Century* (pp. 153-158). Chicago: Discovery Association Publishing House.
- Johnson-Bailey, J. (2006). Transformative learning: A community empowerment conduit for African American women. In S.B. Merriam, B. Courtenay & R.M. Cervero (Eds.). *Global issues in adult education: Perspectives from Latin America, Southern Africa, and the United States* (pp. 307-318). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Malebranche, D., Fields, L., Bryant, L., Harper, S. (2007). Cool pose revisited: The social context of masculinity and sexual risk among Black men who have sex with men. *Men and Masculinity*, Article 10.1177. Retrieved May 30, 2008, from <http://jmm.sagepub.com/cgi/rapidpdf/1097184X07309504v1>
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tisdell, E., Tolliver, D., Charaniya, N., Walsh, J., Hill, R. (2002). *Dealing with religious, cultural, and spiritual pluralism in adult and higher education practice in the age of terrorism: Challenges and controversies*. Paper presented at the 43 Adult Education Research Conference, Raleigh NC
- Tisdell, E. (1998). Poststructural feminist pedagogies: The possibilities and limitations of a feminist emancipatory adult learning theory and practice. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), 139-156.
- Tisdell, E.J. (2000). Spirituality and emancipatory adult education in women adult educators for social change. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(4), 308-335.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2001). Spirituality in adult and higher education. ERIC Reproduction Document #ED45970. Retrieved September 18, 2010 from <http://ericic.syr.edu/Eric/>
- Woodyard, J., Peterson, L., Stokes, J., Joseph, P. (2000). Let us go into the house of the Lord: Participation in African American churches among young African American men who have sex with men. *Journal of Pastoral Care* 54(4), 451-460.