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Initiating a Culturally-Responsive Discourse of Same-Sex Attraction Among African American Males

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that culturally-responsive and organic frameworks are necessary to fruitfully understand social and psychological phenomenon such as same-sex attraction among African American males. To initiate a culturally-responsive discourse, the authors delineate between so-called down low behavior and an emerging brand of same-sex attraction popularly termed homo-thug. Hip-hop culture is discussed as necessary cultural context to this phenomenon as well as an alternative theoretical lens. The paper then delineates between sexual attraction, orientation, and identity to create intellectual space for alternatives to mainstream, White gay explanatory frameworks.

This interdisciplinary discussion generates from the position that organic and culturally-responsive frameworks are necessary to understand social and psychological phenomena in helpful ways. More pointedly, such frameworks are compulsory when attempting to understand phenomena among groups such as African Americans whose representations and accounts in canonical western, American narratives and culture are not consonant with their indigenous narratives.

Until recently, the frameworks and related lexicon through which most scholars and the general public have understood same-sex attraction, behaviors, or orientation among African American males have generated from a White, gay

experience. Fukuyama and Ferguson (2000) concisely articulate this position and its potential implications:

> Gay identity and the gay liberation movement have been associated with the White middle class…. [Thus] people of color may resist joining the gay liberation movement because it is perceived to be joining with the White oppressor and denying one's family ties. In some ways, a gay identity may be a function of acculturation into American society. (p. 99)

Though Fukuyama and Ferguson make the connection to the gay liberation movement in the United States, the suggested point remains: the mechanisms through which groups have attempted to understand non-White, same-sex attraction and behaviors have been culturally-irresponsive vis-à-vis White gay explanatory frameworks.

The need for a culturally-responsive discussion and an indigenous lexicon have become more apparent recently since *down low* (DL) behavior has been thrust into the popular public conscious by narratives such as J.L. King's (2005) *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, Oprah Winfrey shows devoted to the topic, songs/videos such as R. Kelly's five-part "In the Closet" series, and more generally the LOGO channel series *Noah's Arc*. According to the accounts in pubic venues such as these, down low refers to men who maintain heterosexual relationships yet also covertly maintain sexual (committed or uncommitted) relationships with men. In literature, television shows, and other spaces of public discourse, down low is constructed almost entirely as an African American phenomenon. Often improperly conflated with the down low phenomenon is the emerging brand of same-sex behaviors we refer to as *homo-thug*. (However, we must admit that since we identify this behavior within the postmodern hip-hop movement, inclusive race identification with this behavior may not be sustained over time, as hip-hop behaviors are not racially inclusive.) What necessitates a separation of these two terms is that, presently, it appears that homo-thug behavior entails specific kinetic restrictions to the same-sex encounters: no kissing, a dominant sexual position, no long-term relationships, and no submissive behaviors. These restrictions confound many of the existing frameworks for understanding sexual behavior (Denizet-Lewis, 2003).

In an attempt to initiate culturally-responsive ways of understanding this phenomenon, we do the following: First, we delineate between down low and homo-thug behaviors and pay particular attention to the latter, as it is the phenomenon that necessitates a more culturally-responsive discourse.

Second, we illustrate how contemporary hip-hop culture is an essential cultural context and a relevant theoretical lens to view this phenomenon. Third, from a psychological perspective, we reiterate a three-tiered distinction between sexual attraction, orientation, and identity that creates intellectual space for alternatives to mainstream White gay explanatory frameworks. Additionally, we discuss sexual identity development and identity formation. Finally, we call for more research to be done on this emerging brand of same-sex attraction among Black men so that researchers can delve more deeply into the social, cultural, and racial implications for such behaviors, specifically, in Black communities.

DELINEATING BETWEEN DOWN LOW AND HOMO-THUG

Two improperly conflated constructs in the public opinion add further complication to healthy and organic ideas about Black male sexual identity. These two conflated constructs are the so-called DL phenomenon and the hyper-masculine brand of Black male sexual identity popularly termed as homo-thug. Men on the DL are described to maintain heterosexual relationships with women (e.g., marriage) yet also secretly engage in sexual acts with other men. These engagements known as DL can be from idiosyncratic sexual encounters void of emotional attachment to romantic, long-term relationships. The deepest scholarly explorations of Black men on the down low (i.e., Smith, 2006; Valera, 2006) reveal that in most cases these men consider themselves either bisexual or homosexual yet keep their attractions to and relationships with other men hidden through a variety of strategic methods. Additionally, these studies suggest that men keep such activities hidden because of the belief that there is no "authentically Black" gay identity. Thus, in many instances, Black men who identify as bisexual or homosexual must choose between being Black or non-heterosexual. As one would imagine, these studies suggest that maintaining such conflicting identities can cause psychological turmoil in these men. Boykin (2005) makes the important point that DL behaviors are not a new phenomenon and that they are not limited to Black men. However, Smith (2006) illustrates that Black men are more likely to keep bisexuality or homosexuality hidden. This can be attributed in part to the tendency for the gay liberation movements to be associated with whiteness (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000) and the apparent contradiction between an "authentically Black" identity and a non-heterosexual identification.

That down low is thought of as a relatively new phenomenon and one that is endemic to African Americans also connects to racist ideas about Black sexuality. Gines (2004) highlights that the ubiquitous myth that African American men have animalistic sexual appetites is the basis for down low behavior being thought of

as a Black phenomenon. Along these same lines, she illustrates the racist idea that this same sexual appetite now causes Black men to engage in same-sex behaviors without considering themselves homosexuals or bisexuals. The thinking goes that Black men cannot help but have numerous sexual liaisons, which has its stereotypical antecedents in chattel slavery (Robinson, 2001).

What is often improperly conflated with DL behavior is a set of same-sex behaviors that do not fit neatly into the narrow parameters of Black male sexual identity that currently exist. Denizet-Lewis' (2003) journalistic exploration of the lives of Black men on the DL in Atlanta held many clues to this homo-thug brand that we see as distinct from DL. Denizet-Lewis points out that two of his informants, Chi and Jigga, both have strong attractions to and long-term relationships with women but also possess equally strong urges to have sex with physically strong, masculine men. Their activities are kinetic and, unlike most DL or bisexual behaviors, have specific restrictions: no kissing, a dominant sexual position, no long-term relationships, and no submissive behaviors. As one informant stated: "many guys are in a never-ending search for the roughest, most masculine, straightest looking men [and that] part of the attraction to thugs is that they're careless and free" (p. 30). More dangerously, he added: "stopping to put on a condom forces a guy to acknowledge, on some level, that they're having sex with men" (p. 31). Such kinetic restrictions and particular attractions suggest a set of behaviors that are different from DL. Stated another way, Chi and Jigga are not simply bisexual according to the popular, White definition of the term.

The comments of another informant, D, further illustrate homo-thug behavior as separate from a hidden gay or bisexual identity: "[D] prefers sex with women, but he sometimes has sex with men because he 'gets bored'" (Denizet-Lewis, 2003, p.32). D and others were adamant with Denizet-Lewis that they are not gay, especially in relationship to dominant White gay brands. Their stereotypes of White gay men were predictable: "'gays are faggots who dress, talk and act like girls. That's not me'" (p. 32). Similarly, they were also clear about what brands of masculinity they are not looking for: no "flaming queens," "sissies," "faggots" or White-identified Black men need apply.

Denizet-Lewis' (2003) exploration also illustrates that particular versions of homo-thug behavior can be elaborately constructed and performed to mask a more feminine (again: White) gay identity. At different times, his informants mentioned that a telephone conversation is a better means than the Internet to make connections with possible sexual hook-ups because it allows one to properly decipher if other men "naturally" sound masculine or if they are manufacturing it and "'obviously trying to hide the fact that they're big girls'" (p. 9). Other ways of manufacturing hyper-masculinity are through hip-hop attire that

reveals a muscular physique. Through assessing brands of masculinity in these ways, homo-thugs demonstrate awareness that some self-identified gay men intentionally fashion stereotypical and hyper-masculinity that is inauthentic in their assessment. This manufactured masculinity is not what homo-thugs desire. Instead, they look for the brand of Black masculinity that they perceive as real and naturally occurring, like their own. This type of "look" also predominates Internet advertising on homo-thug sexuality.

Denizet-Lewis' (2003) report suggests that homo-thug behavior as described by his informants is distinctly separate from down low. Though the journalistic venue of the report disables readers from a rigorous research critique, the report is useful insofar that it identifies a phenomenon that apparently is void of scholarly treatments and deserves more rigorous exploration.

CONTEMPORARY HIP-HOP AS NECESSARY CULTURAL CONTEXT

Archetypes of Black Sexuality and Masculinity

Any discussion and rigorous exploration of Black sexuality and masculinity in the 21st Century must take into account the surrounding context of hip-hop culture. This is necessary context because through commoditization and widespread distribution, the representations of Black males in hip-hop music and videos serve as the most available archetypal brands of masculinity for imitation or classification. Although local communities of hip-hop are often ethnically diverse (Harrison, 2003; Petchauer, 2007), portrayals of masculinity via hip-hop on mainstream media channels are still overwhelmingly Black and generally fit a few archetypes such as the hustler, conscious emcee, pimp/playa, and hyper-masculine thug. Due to the brand(s) of blackness that hip-hop constructs, it often times becomes the primary cultural site from which blackness must be (re)defined as non-monolithic.

The exact influence of these representations upon individual and group identity is difficult to pinpoint. In many ways, it is analogous to the tension between "top down" and "bottom up" approaches in local and global ecologies of talk (see Erickson, 2004). Both extremes of influence are oversimplifications: a) a top down determinism in which people adopt and internalize wholesale media representations or b) a naive, bottom up emphasis on individual agency according to which people are immune to media representations. An accurate level of influence is likely somewhere in between these extremes, wherein hip-hop (mis)representations of masculinity and sexuality are resources (i.e., texts) that are sampled, mobilized, and used in sometimes unpredictable ways for identity

construction (McCarthy, 1998). In their discussion of what brand of masculinity they prefer above, Chi and Jigga illustrate that the brands set up by hip-hop constitute the "real" and "authentic" ones that they desire. In this way, what is established as "authentic" in a heterosexual/ist site (i.e., hip-hop) carries over into their world and is held as normative.

Hip-Hop as Theoretical Lens

Aside from establishing the context that frames Black masculinity, hip-hop can also be seen as a theoretical lens through which to view what appear to be idiosyncratic sexual behaviors described by Denizet-Lewis' (2003) informants. From this perspective, hip-hop is much more than a musical genre. Rather, the artistic and cultural expressions that have generated from hip-hop (and been co-opted into hip-hop) are emblematic of deeper metaphysical and epistemological orientations. Hoch (2006) argues that the first four artistic elements of hip-hop (i.e., djing, rapping, breakdancing, and writing graffiti) established the foundational aesthetics or "ways of doing," and that this foundation is expanding to include hip-hop theater, journalism, literature, pedagogy, social activism, and self-knowledge. Chang's (2006) edited volume is an attempt to capture and lend coherency to some of the emerging aesthetics of hip-hop. In this way, hip-hop is a form that shapes how some people and groups approach, engage in, and do such activities.

The hip-hop related work of Shusterman (1997, 2000, 2005) and Potter (1995) serve as useful resources to understand some of the philosophical underpinnings of hip-hop, particularly those that can be situated within pragmatism and postmodernism. Shusterman (2000) creates four categories to elucidate these pragmatist aesthetic characteristics: *appropriative sampling, cutting and temporality, autonomy and distance*, and *technology and mass-media culture*. Particularly important to the topic at hand is the first three of these characteristics.

Appropriative sampling refers to the practice of lifting a contextualized sound bite (e.g., a Clyde Stubberfield snare, a fragment of a Malcolm X speech), manipulating it through a sampler, and recontextualizing it into a hip-hop musical composition (Schloss, 2006). Potter (1995) calls this hip-hop's core practice of "taking things out of one context and putting them in another" (p. 44). Though Shusterman refers to appropriative sampling mostly in regards to the musical element of hip-hop, it is not limited to music but is also conceptualized as a way of approaching other activities such as breakdancing, graffiti, formal education, and navigating social situations (Petchauer, 2007).

The autonomous characteristic means that hip-hop resists compartmentalized

or dichotomist framings such as positive/negative, good/evil, and serious/silly. It is more fluid than fixed, which is what has rendered it difficult to define according to rigid, modernist categories. Potter (1995) reinforces hip-hop's autonomy by discussing its signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988) practices that create slippage of meaning(s) in the spoken word, images, and actions. One of the most recent iterations of this characteristic has been illustrated by self-proclaimed "hip-hop intellectuals" (e.g., Todd Boyd, Michael Eric Dyson, Marc Lamont Hill) who resist classification into one category such as university professor but instead position themselves to shift among the roles of professor, activist, speaker, blogger, author, public intellectual, etc. The adjective "hip-hop" entails an ability not just to permeate through traditional roles and boundaries but also to redefine them.

Finally, the category of cutting and temporality refers to hip-hop's emphasis on open-ended innovation over any finality of the artistic product. Kline (2007) cites the example of remix within hip-hop music according to which it is regular practice for a song to undergo distinct and numerous iterations, each of which is considered and distributed as a finished product. According to this category, hip-hop remains more shifting than it does fixed, and its shifting characteristic is central to its understanding. Potter (1995) emphasizes this point by writing that hip-hop foregrounds the "jagged edges, cuts, and sutures" that "hold" hip-hop texts together rather than presenting a sampled, manipulated, and pasted composition as if it were an "original" or "new" creation (p. 74).

These three characteristics of appropriative sampling, autonomy, cutting and temporality help identify some of the theoretical underpinnings of hip-hop. They do not create a comprehensive framework for understanding the homo-thug phenomenon but instead provide a fruitful basis for initial understanding that has been missing in most contemporary social science discourses.

The aspect of the homo-thug phenomenon that has been most confounding to present understandings of sexuality is that individuals such as Chi, Jigga, and D clearly identify as heterosexuals yet engage in particular kinds of sexual encounters with other men that are typically categorized as non-heterosexual (e.g., oral and anal sex with other men). Engaging in such activities as these men do is a form of appropriative sampling, wherein the men sample from these existing categories of sexual identities for their own purposes regardless of any previous meanings attached to these behaviors. By way of appropriative sampling, anal or oral sex with another man does not contradict a fundamentally heterosexual identity. It is important to note that the informants do not seem to be transversing across these categories of sexual identity or orientation, identifying as heterosexual or homosexual at different points in time. They plainly situate themselves as heterosexuals, sample from these other sets of behaviors, and claim that the whole

framing of sexual orientation is irrelevant to their lives.

These acts of appropriative sampling cut against a coherent, dichotomous framing of sexual identity and produce the characteristic of autonomy described above. Like hip-hoppers who, due to an array of activities, cannot be classified simply as poet, rapper, teacher, lecturer, etc., the main informants in Denizet-Lewis' (2003) article, if taken at their word, cannot easily be classified as heterosexual/homosexual, transgendered, etc. Their sexual encounters and identification as heterosexuals create an autonomous space separate from these existing categories of sexuality.

Appropriative sampling and the autonomous space that it creates signal a brand of sexual identity that is open and shifting rather than fixed. This fluidity is the cutting and temporality presented above. Like hip-hop that foregrounds this open-ended and shifting nature, this brand of sexuality does not merely demonstrate fluidity but is fundamentally characterized by it.

The brand of homo-thug sexuality identified through a hip-hop framework is one that cuts against existing conceptions of sexuality. It does this through similar philosophical underpinnings by which hip-hop has resisted coherent framing as a musical genre or subculture. These underpinnings center on appropriative sampling, autonomy and distance, and cutting and temporality. These three tenets are not solely theoretical or identifiable in hip-hop musical products. They exist as "ways of doing" in the artistic processes of hip-hop (Kline, 2007) and have been applied by hip-hoppers as a way to understand and engage in other domains. These three tenets frame a very shifting and idiosyncratic brand of sexuality. In the following section, we expand this discussion into psychological research on sexual attraction, orientation, and identity in attempt to render coherence so that researchers may explore this phenomenon in culturally-responsive, rigorous ways.

ATTRACTION, ORIENTATION, AND IDENTITY

A Three-Tier Distinction

One starting point that may enable fruitful exploration of this phenomenon is a distinction between sexual *attraction, orientation*, and *identity* (Yarhouse, 2005). Sexual attraction refers to the actual sexual interest in and emotional draw toward a member of the same-, opposite- or both sexes. Discussing same-sex attraction is the most descriptive account a person can give of his or her sexual desires, and if these desires are consistently directed toward the same sex, that person might describe him or herself as homosexual in terms of sexual orientation. Orientation,

then, refers to a sustained sexual and emotional attraction toward the same-, opposite-, or both sexes. But both attraction and orientation are distinct from a gay identity. A gay identity is a modern sociocultural label used to communicate to oneself and to others one's sexual identity. As such, a sexual identity label, a self-defining attribution ("I am gay"), reflects a sociocultural construction unique to our culture and time in history.

This explanation is helpful insofar as it ties into another debate in the field of psychology: the essentialist/social constructivist debate about the definition of orientation. Essentialists argue that distinctions among types of sexual orientation (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) are real distinctions that exist across all cultures and throughout history. From this perspective, sexual orientation is a "real thing" that is at the core of the person. Social constructivists, in contrast, see sexual orientation as a linguistic construct used by members of a society to discuss sexual preferences (see Greenberg, 1988). Sexual orientation is then more like what it means to be a Republican or Democrat: these words do not hold the same meanings throughout history and across cultures as they do in our contemporary culture. Rather, they are given meaning within our cultural context today, and they are linguistic constructs that convey something of a person's political preferences. In any case, the discussions centering on the meaning of sexual orientation occurs within the gay community between essentialists and social constructivists (see Stein, 1999).

How do people come to form an identity around experiences of same-sex attraction? This is an important question considering that informants such as Chi, Jigga, and D in Denizet-Lewis' (2003) report voiced and acted upon attractions to other men but did not construct a homosexual or bisexual identity. To answer this question we look first to sexual identity development models for sexual minorities. Then we will consider specific mechanisms by which identity may be formed.

Sexual Identity Development

The literature on sexual identity development has evolved significantly in the past 40 years. Some of the earliest models advanced stage theories by which everyone who identified as gay was thought to advance through the same stages in a linear fashion (Yarhouse, 2001). For example, Cass (1979) introduced a model by which a gay or lesbian identity was achieved through the following stages: a) *identity confusion* (questioning what one's identity *is* in light of experiences of same-sex attraction), b) *identity comparison* (reaching the conclusion that one is different than one's peers based on experiences of same-sex attraction), c) *identity tolerance* (assuming that experiences of same-sex attraction mean that one is probably gay),

d) *identity acceptance* (identifying same-sex attraction as signaling that one is gay), e) *identity pride* (taking pride in one's gay identity at the expense of good that might be seen in heterosexuals), and f) *identity synthesis* (reaching the conclusion that one's self-identification as "gay" is one part of who one is) (Yarhouse, 2001).

These initial models led to further discussion of differences between gay males and lesbians, which led to more differentiated models of gay male (e.g., McDonald, 1982; Troiden, 1979) and lesbian sexual identity development (Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Sophie, 1986). Similarly, bisexuals within the gay community began to develop alternative models of bisexual identity development (e.g., Fox, 1995) by which they showed greater awareness of opposite-sex attraction, behavior, and relationships and same-sex attractions, behavior, and relationships related to initial identification as bisexual and its subsequent disclosure to others (Fox, 1995).

Additional developments more germane to the present discussion have been the literature on race and ethnicity and sexual identity development. Emphasis here has been placed on the apparent dual development of identification with racial and ethnic minority communities and sexual minority communities (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Perhaps one of the most frequently cited tensions among racial and sexual minorities has been the belief that there is a need to choose between a cultural community with proscriptions regarding their sexual identity and a gay or lesbian community with potential racial prejudices (Chan, 1989; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; cf., Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, & Brooks, 2007). As was mentioned earlier, Smith (2006) and Valera (2006) both found that one reason African American DL men kept same-sex encounters secretive was because of a belief in the contradiction between being Black and gay.

The earliest stage theories were based primarily upon White informants and ignored ethnic minorities such as African Americans. Although there has been recent interest in the relationship between racial identity and sexual identity development (e.g., Chan, 1989), there is considerable work to be done in this area.

Forming Identity

The work being done on sexual identity development is particularly germane as we consider how people come to view themselves as having an identity tied to their sexual attractions. While the existing models of sexual identity development are helpful, the most recent discussions have moved toward an understanding of milestone events in sexual identity development, with a greater appreciation for the wide range of experiences reported by sexual minorities. For example, Savin-

Williams and Diamond (2000) summarized the average age of milestone events from four studies in which differences were evident between sexes. Males tended to report first awareness of same-sex attraction between ages 9-11, while females reported first awareness between ages 10-12. First same-sex activity was reported on average as between ages 13-15 for males and ages 14-16 for females. First labeling as gay, lesbian, or bisexual was reported as between ages 14-16 for both males and females. Finally, age of disclosure of identity to others was reported as occurring between ages 16-17 for both males and females.

Although not necessarily representative of sexual minority youth, this data suggests that awareness of same-sex attraction generally precedes behavior, which precedes labeling and disclosure. This appears to be consistent with other research, which has generally indicated that same-sex behavior precedes identity labeling as gay among males in particular. In any case, these studies raise the question of how adolescents and young adults make meaning out of their experiences of same-sex attraction and same-sex behavior. Is it merely the discovery of a "real" orientation that would exist throughout history and across cultures, or is it a constructed meaning associated with attributions and interpretation of attractions and behavior? In relation to Denizet-Lewis' (2003) informants, according to this progression, one could conclude that these men have experienced attraction and subsequent behavior but not labeling as bisexual and subsequent disclosure.

In their study of Christian sexual minority young adults, Yarhouse, Brooke, Pisano, and Tan (2005) discussed the experience of *attributional search* for sexual identity. They defined attributional search among young adults as "an important meaning-making process as they attempt to come to terms with the fact that they experience same-sex attraction" (p. 358) (see also Yarhouse & Tan, 2004).

This notion of attribution relates directly to one of the more recent attempts to understand identity from narrative theory. This theory has been discussed in relation to sexual identity by Yarhouse (in press), who recognized that sociocultural discourses have valued heterosexuality as normative while allowing for limited exceptions typically tied to culturally sanctioned rituals and sexual roles (Herdt, 1996). The emphasis in a narrative understanding of sexual identity is how people locate themselves within a larger narrative about sexuality and sexual identity. These "sense-making stories" (Barry, 1997, p. 32) are told and retold and over time become part of a person's identity.

Returning to attributions and interpretations, from a narrative understanding, sense-making stories reflect attributions a person makes about the meaning they associate with same-sex attractions. The interpretations a person makes about same-sex attraction will be located within dominant messages associated with sexual identity either within the broader culture or within one's subculture. This

narrative approach is yet another way to frame the attributions about same-sex attraction and behaviors made by Chi, Jigga, and D. While it is unclear to what they attribute the same-sex attractions, it is clear that they do not attribute them to any kind of identity that would challenge their standing as heterosexual men.

This emphasis on meaning-making and interpretation also exists in scholarship on political theory. For example, Smith (2003a) discusses a theory of people-building (also called "people-forming" or "people-making", p. 13) tied to political identity. Although there are differences between sexual identity and political identity, sexual identity as LGBT is a sociocultural consideration insofar as people are assenting to a label that communicates something to others about their attractions. Smith discusses how identity can be formed by coercive force or persuasive stories. This process is relevant to narrative theory and to the development of meaningful stories of gay identification. Smith refers to these as "ethically constitutive stories" (p. 64), by which he means "that present membership in a particular people [is] somehow intrinsic to whom its members really are, because of traits that are imbued with ethical significance" (p. 64).

In his analysis, Smith (2003b) also distinguishes between two major dimensions of the stories people live by and their political identity: *ethnic* and *civic* aspects of identity. Ethnic aspects of identity are those unchosen, fixed aspects of identity that cannot be changed, whereas civic aspects of identity reflect principles, rules, and social norms with which one voluntarily agrees. It is the combination of these two aspects of identity that contribute to people becoming members of a community and feeling that it is intrinsic to their self-definition (see also Templeman, 1999).

In the discussion of sexual identity, ethnic aspects of identity are that the person experiences attraction toward the same sex. The civic aspects of identity reflect what a person chooses to agree with concerning values and assumptions with respect to sexual identity. The gay identity reflected in mainstream, White gay culture is a readily available, normative sexual identity that reflects community membership that supports such an identity as intrinsic to the person. Although Smith (2003a) believes that ethically constitutive stories are often religious or quasi-religious, we are suggesting that such persuasive stories of gay identification that have emerged in the 20th Century as normative for White gay identification have created a hegemonic sexual identity that can be in conflict with African American sexuality.

The absence of narratives about gay identity among African American males limits informants like Chi, Jigga, and D in their ability to advance from the attraction tier to orientation and identity tiers. In a sense, it is possible that they "sample" these behaviors and do not attribute them to a non-heterosexual identity because there are no such corresponding narratives. This is also relevant to ethnic

and civic dimensions of identity as the absence of narratives also hinders these two areas of identity formation.

One could argue that the informants will move to the stages of minority sexual identity development as described previously, but these stage theories may be both outdated and over-privilege White-orientations. Because most scholars of sexual identity development—even ethnic minority sexual identity development—appear to adhere to the hegemonic, White gay explanatory framework, it is unlikely that such a narrative will emerge from within that system of thought. To the extent that the system does not (or cannot) properly delineate same-sex attraction among Black men, it will be an outlier to mainstream gay culture, which does not provide a satisfactory narrative for African American sexual minority identity development.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that organic and culturally-responsive ways of explaining social and psychological phenomenon like homo-thug behaviors are necessary to produce fruitful dialogue and understanding, especially within Black communities where this behavior can have disastrous results if such a dialogue and corresponding lexicon do not exist. Presently, the discourses surrounding same-sex attraction among Black men in the United States is polarized around anachronistic notions of Afrocentric and revisionist behaviors or the inability to find a way to communicate successfully between disparate perspectives for understanding human sexuality. The confusion surrounding the recent and improperly conflated phenomenon such as DL and homo-thug behaviors is also a result of this polarized discourse and the dominant White perspective. As such, we believe to fully understand and adequately research same sex attraction among Black men in the United States, researchers may benefit from looking to indigenous and culturally-relevant frame works.

The distinction between epistemologies, theories, approaches, and strategies (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) is a helpful way to briefly outline some possible characteristics for future research in this new direction. The culturally-responsive frameworks advocated in this article clearly generate from a constructivist epistemology according to which the meanings of attractions, orientations, identities, and behaviors may be radically different for groups or individuals. These differences exist due to variation of socialization, culture, and other factors. The theoretical orientations necessary for organic and culturally-responsive frameworks are largely emic. That is, they must generate from the phenomenon and those thought to embody, enact, or create it. The emerging theoretical

perspective within hip-hop (introduced but certainly not limited to what has been discussed in this article) is one such emic approach. Further elucidation of this idea and its postmodern characteristics may make this a useful theoretical tool for the topic at hand. In terms of approaches, phenomenological approaches such as grounded theory, portraiture, and life history are suitable for exploratory and generative studies such as the ones needed here. These follow from a constructivist and emic epistemology and theory, respectively. Finally, as in Denizet-Lewis' (2003) exploration, strategies for data collection should center on participant-observation in the spaces that informants occupy and extensive interviews.

In making a brief outline such as this, we encourage a variety of approaches and strategies, for "every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (Silverman, 2002, p. 348). However, we see essentialist or objectivist epistemologies and notions of sexuality and sexual identity from a White, gay explanatory framework as limited to produce the kinds of insights necessary to understand the homo-thug brand of sexuality and same-sex attraction among African American men more generally.

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