



Exploring Issues for Black Gay and Bisexual Males in University Settings

James L. Maiden Ed.D.

Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, University of the District of Columbia Washington, DC

Email: james.maiden@udc.edu

Article History

Received: January 24, 2021

Revised: February 21, 2021

Accepted: February 26, 2021

Published: March 1, 2021

Copyright © 2021 ARPG &
Author

This work is licensed under
the Creative Commons
Attribution International



**CC BY: Creative
Commons Attribution License
4.0**

Abstract

The campus environment can be challenging for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer (LGBTQ) students still developing their sexual identity. Being a Black gay or bisexual male can add another layer of isolation in their university setting. The campus climate for Black gay and bisexual males lack social support and does address their experience and needs. Additionally, Black gay and bisexual males attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) feel unsupported by the lack of LGBTQ resources on campus. The conceptual article aims to explore issues impacting Black gay and bisexual males in university settings. This article provides an overview of student identity development, the impact of the African American community, discrimination and hate crimes, the campus climate, the HBCU setting, mentoring impact, and counselor educators' support with this student population.

Keywords: Black male; Gay; Bisexual; Student identity development; Counselor educators; LGBTQ; HBCU.

1. Introduction

Universities and colleges are often the settings where students disclose their sexuality to others (Evans and D'Augelli, 1996). In 2016, the American College Health Association found an increase in students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer (LGBTQ) (Best Colleges, 2020). Unfortunately, there are negative consequences of "coming out" for many students, and they are targets of discrimination and oppression. Lance (2002), postulated that colleges and universities' climate communicate rejection and intolerance to LGBTQ students. As a result, Black gay and bisexual males hide their sexual identity and are forced to negotiate their identity development within unwelcoming climates (Lance, 2002).

Young adults who self-identify as LGBTQ experience significant stresses in managing their sexual orientation on college campuses. Black males grappling with the intersection of their race/ethnicity and their gay or bisexual identity are at risk for serious mental health problems, including suicide and depression. These problems result from the difficulties involved in developing a gay or bisexual personal identity and are exacerbated by widespread negative attitudes. Black males face a "chilly" climate, including experiences of discrimination and feelings of fear (Evans and D'Augelli, 1996). They also face higher rates of harassment, assault, and intimidation than their White counterparts (Bieschke *et al.*, 2000). Given these obstacles for sexual minorities, a review of Black gay and bisexual males' challenges on college campuses is warranted. The conceptual article aims to explore issues impacting Black gay and bisexual males in university settings. This article provides an overview of student identity development, the impact of the African American community, discrimination and hate crimes, the campus climate, the HBCU setting, mentoring impact, and counselor educators' support with this student population.

2. Student Identity Development

The campus climate for LGBTQ students affects LGBTQ identity development (Evans and Broido, 1999). Renn (2017), stated that universities offer academic opportunities to learn about LGBTQ history, culture, and people. Meeting peers, faculty, and staff openly LGBTQ offers the opportunity to explore identity, and student organizations, and resource centers that create spaces for LGBTQ students to interact with others. This is vital because connecting the environment to identity is particularly relevant to the LGBTQ student population. Additionally, this is important because the college environment is often the context for the "coming out" process (Evans and Broido, 1999).

Student development theory suggests that sexual identity formation is a developmental task of the college years (D'Augelli, 1994). LGBTQ students in various phases of sexual identity development likely have different campus affiliations because coming out depends upon the campus setting (Evans and Broido, 1999). Chickering and Reisser (1993), documented that college students undergo a significant change in factual knowledge, cognitive abilities, values, attitudes, and psychosocial development. In addition to these changes, LGBTQ students often undergo a new

and unique sexual identity process. A series of discrete steps in the process of identity formation is discernible. D'Augelli (1994), framework informs much of the present work in the field. The framework includes developing an individual's self-concept, relationships with family, and connections to peer groups and community. This framework suggests that sexual orientation may be very fluid at certain times in the life span and more fixed at others. Human growth is intimately connected to and shaped by environmental and biological factors. The (D'Augelli, 1994) model describes six "identity processes" that include:

- Exiting a Heterosexual Identity— Realization of an identity other than what society has deemed “normal.”
- Developing a Personal LGB Identity Status—The process of coming out to one's self and identifying to one's self as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- Developing a LGB Social Identity—The process of sharing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity (or coming out) to friends.
- Claiming an Identity as an LGB Offspring—The process of coming out to parents or guardians.
- Developing an LGB Intimacy Status—The process of forming intimate relationships with people of the same sex.
- Entering an LGB Community—Coming out in multiple areas of one's life and being active within the community, including going to events, bars, clubs, organizations, etc.

Depending on the university setting and context and timing, the individual may be at different development points in each process, such as when an openly LGBTQ individual enters a setting and chooses not to express his or her true identity (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005).

Table-1. D'Augelli (1994) Homosexual Lifespan Development Model: This model is not a stage model, meaning an individual may experience these different processes at different times and they can occur multiple times



3. African American Community

There has been documentation of African American males contending with the intersection of their race/ethnicity and their LGBTQ identity, especially while attending HBCUs (Patton, 2011). Marginalized communities with long-running histories of discrimination have established support systems and tools to protect against discriminatory practices. Although some Black males have access to resources that allow them to be resilient against heterosexist stigma, the potential to experience discrimination from their ethnic/racial communities still exists. Discrimination towards Black males arises from cultural factors, including the importance of family, traditional gender roles, conservative religious values, and widespread heterosexism (Moradi et al., 2010).

African American culture has a significant impact on gay and bisexual males. This impact often leads to the systemic pressure within society and communities that intentionally or unintentionally continues the oppression and subjugation of LGBTQ individuals. African American culture emphasizes religious and familial relationships, commitment to the community, and social norms (Akerlund and Cheung, 2000). Black gay and bisexual males face rejection and homophobia from friends, family, religious figures, and the community (Meyer, 2010). Additionally,

the Black church, directly and indirectly, fosters and perpetuates a homophobic ideology that makes its way into African American households (Lewis G. B., 2003).

The acceptance of homosexuality varies in African American communities. African Americans are less likely than whites to see homosexuality as wrong and favor gay rights laws (Lewis G. B., 2003). Homosexuality becomes tolerable when it is something private that does not permeate into everyday conversation. This leads to African American males concealing their sexual identity. Choi *et al.* (2011), reported that gay and bisexual African American males conceal their homosexuality to minimize stigmatization. They also conceal their sexual orientation for self-preservation within their own community to minimize the homophobic reactions they fear from the African American community members (Choi *et al.*, 2011).

4. Discrimination and Hate Crimes

One area of concern to both researchers and the higher education community is anti-gay violence and harassment. LGBTQ students often remain closeted because of the hostile climate they experience on college campuses (Rankin, 2003). Research has documented gay and bisexual males' experiences in threatening and unsafe campus environments. In a study of gay and bisexual students at Yale University, 26% reported threats of physical violence, 50% reported two or more incidents of verbal assault, and 48% felt that future harassment was somewhat or very likely to occur (D'Augelli, 1994).

Anti-gay sentiment toward LGBTQ students by their fellow students is a subject well represented in the educational literature on four-year institutions (Reinhardt, 1997). Findings from a study that examined anti-gay violence and harassment on college campuses (Franklin, 1998) indicate that the problem is more widespread than previously thought. Franklin (1998), anonymous survey, conducted at six San Francisco Bay-area colleges, indicated that of the 484 respondents, 24 percent had engaged in verbal harassment of individuals perceived to be gay or lesbian. Another 10 percent admitted to committing physical violence or threats of violence against presumed gay men or lesbians. More than 1 in 3 college students had engaged in hate speech or hate crimes on the six campuses studied.

Recent research indicated that harassment and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ students was still prevalent on college campuses. Rankin (2003), reported that 74% of LGBTQ undergraduate and graduate students rated their campus as homophobic, and 60% of LGBTQ students reported concealing their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid discrimination. Similarly, 40% of the study participants indicated that they would likely hide their sexual orientation to avoid discrimination, and 36% experienced harassment within the year before taking the survey (Rankin, 2003).

5. The Campus Climate

The campus climate plays a central role in a student's ability to feel a sense of belonging. There are many LGBTQ issues common to college campuses and universities. One is the "commuter campus syndrome." This syndrome, where Black gay and bisexual males attend classes but do not become involved in campus life, contributes to students' inability to establish relationships with LGBTQ peers or create a sense of LGBTQ community on campus (Sanlo, 1998). LGBTQ students living off-campus with parents are significantly affected, as are those working full- or part-time while attending college. Both situations adversely affect students' ability to become involved in campus-based LGBTQ activities.

For Black gay and bisexual males to feel like they can thrive on campus, they need to be confident that the school they enroll in is committed to creating an inclusive environment and meeting the needs of the community. Colleges need to offer tailored resources to these students, from events to LGBTQ academic programs and campus centers. These resources may include religious groups, fraternities, and activist organizations explicitly designed for Black gay and bisexual males on campus.

6. HBCU Experiences

The experiences of Black gay and bisexual males at HBCUs have included discrimination and hate crimes. These universities have been slow to adopt policies and approve campus organizations that cater to LGBTQ students. Harper and Gasman (2008), stated that HBCUs are known for having unsupportive climates for LGBTQ students. Students attending HBCUs face discrimination for their sexual identity, which has attributed to low academic performance. Additionally, LGBTQ students have reported harassment, bullying, and physical violence that has led to dropping out, and even suicidal episodes (Lewis M. W. and Ericksen, 2016). The main reason for HBCUs not reacting positively to LGBTQ students is a lack of understanding of their community.

Tyre (2009), also posited that LGBTQ students experienced a hostile and unwelcoming environment at HBCUs. After conducting interviews with 76 African American men from 12 HBCUs, Harper and Gasman (2008) found that participants reported institutional resistance to their sexual identity by faculty and staff. Lisotta (2004) also revealed injustices in the LGBTQ student community. The author purported an incident reported at Morehouse College where a student had been assaulted by another student who had assumed that the victim was gay. These findings places emphasis for the struggle that HBCUs have in addressing LGBTQ students and reinforce the need for further, exploration of the challenges faced by LGBT students at HBCUs.

7. Mental Health Considerations

Although poor health outcomes affect all individuals across race and gender, when compared to other ethnic groups, African Americans have historically shown to have significant health disparities class (Flegal *et al.*, 2013). This is compounded when sexual identity is factored in for Black gay or bisexual males. The intersection of identities for Black gay or bisexual males' students may make them particularly susceptible to mental health concerns and facing inadequate access to culturally appropriate care. Despite having similar mental health disparities, Black gay and bisexual males are significantly less likely to receive professional care. While 47% of LGBTQ students reported receiving psychological or emotional counseling from a mental health professional, only 39% of Black gay and bisexual males reported having done so. Among those who seriously considered suicide, only half of Black gay and bisexual males received psychological or emotional counseling compared to 3 out of 5 LGBTQ students overall.

8. Mentorship for Black Gay and Bisexual Males

Mentorship is an essential aspect of college students' success and retention on campus. Maiden *et al.* (2020) stated that that mentoring is one of the most effective methods for supporting men of color. through mentorship Specifically, for LGBTQ students, it plays an integral role in their personal and collegiate success by connecting them with a mentor who understands the stresses they face in college and the challenges they might face in life. Mentoring is needed to foster a positive college experience for LGBTQ students. A small number of colleges and universities offer institutionally supported formal mentoring programs for LGBTQ college students. Characteristics of these programs include matching a student who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning with a faculty member, staff member, or peer who can assist them (Alford-Keating, 2002). These mentoring programs provide a tremendous opportunity to give much-needed support to LGBTQ college students. In a recent national study of gay men participating in university-sponsored mentoring programs, students identified several ways their mentors had supported them. Additionally, mentors provided these students with the necessary support in overcoming many issues, including the coming out process, meeting other gay individuals, dating and relationship issues, and religious conflict (Ross, 2002).

Mentoring is especially important for students at HBCUs. Mentorship provides supportive individuals who can understand LGBTQ students' challenges on a Black campus. Wall and Washington (1991), suggested that Black male students may not have the opportunity to engage in a mentoring relationship. When sexual orientation is added into the equation, the prospects become even slimmer and, these students may never have a role model in college who can genuinely understand the complexity of their experience. Linley *et al.* (2016), suggest that formal and informal mentoring is crucial for Black gay and bisexual male success. Through formal and informal interactions, Black males feel a sense of connectedness to the campus environment. Dentato *et al.* (2016), argued that formal mentoring contributes significantly to the level of LGBTQ student comfort and may directly impact homophobia and transphobic experiences within college settings and across campuses. Additionally, informal faculty mentoring, such as visibility on campus and participation in on-campus events, play a vital role in furthering the connection with the broader campus community (Linley *et al.*, 2016).

9. How Can Counselor Educators Help?

The first step for counselors who want to work with Black gay and bisexual males is to advocate and combat subtle or unconscious biases that may influence the counseling process (Bieschke and Matthews, 1996). Research has documented how some mental health professionals poorly treat sexual minorities (Barret and Logan, 2001). Bias toward this oppressed minority will impede on Black gay and bisexual males from seeking mental health services. Counselors must encourage other mental health professionals to attend workshops, read current literature, and participate in the LGBTQ culture to effectively acquire knowledge about the LGBTQ community.

Counselors in university settings must encourage administrators to provide leadership opportunities designed explicitly at the intersection of race/ethnicity and sexual identity (Goode-Cross and Tager, 2011). These leadership opportunities may include LGBTQ student organizations specifically designed for racial/ethnic identity groups, student leader positions designated for LGBTQ students of color, and leadership or internship opportunities on campus, clearly identifying LGBTQ people of color. Additionally, there must be an emphasis on campus climate initiatives to include people of color as a focus of LGBTQ support on campus.

Finally, counselors in university settings must promote mentorship for Black gay and bisexual males. Counselors must urge college administrators to systematically consider racial and ethnic identities related to students' mentorship opportunities. This includes encouraging heterosexual/cisgender students, faculty, staff, and alumni of color, working in solidarity with LGBTQ communities, and raising their campus visibility. This visibility assures Black gay and bisexual males to see allies from their racial/ethnic communities (Goode-Cross and Tager, 2011).

10. Conclusion

It is no secret that college is stressful, and all students face challenges. However, Black gay and bisexual males have unique concerns and issues that other student populations may not necessarily face. It is recommended that universities and colleges create an inclusive climate providing educational awareness for LGBTQ students. Similarly, university administrators must empower students of color to create their own spaces within leadership positions on campuses and have specific support for those opportunities.

References

- Akerlund, M. and Cheung, M. (2000). Teaching beyond the deficit model. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36(2): 279-92. Available: <https://10.1080/10437797.2000.10779008>
- Alford-Keating, P. (2002). *Mentoring programs. Our place on campus: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender services and programs in higher education*. S. Rankin R. Sanlo, & R. Schoenberg (Eds.). Greenwood Press: Westport, CT. 101-06.
- Barret, B. and Logan, C. (2001). *Counseling gay men and lesbians: A practice primer*. Brooks/Cole: Belmont, CA.
- Best Colleges (2020). College guide for LGBTQ students. Available: <https://www.bestcolleges.com/resources/lgbtq-student-guide/>
- Bieschke, K. J. and Matthews, C. (1996). Career counselor attitudes and behaviors toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 48(2): 243-55.
- Bieschke, K. J., Eberz, A. B. and Wilson, D. (2000). *Empirical investigations of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual college student. Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus*. V.A. Wall and N.J. Evans (Eds.). University Press of America: Oxford. 31-58.
- Bilodeau, B. and Renn, K. (2005). *Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice*. New Directions for Student Services. 25-39.
- Chickering, A. W. and Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity*. 2nd edn: Jossey Bass. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series: San Francisco.
- Choi, K., Han, C., Paul, J. and Ayala, G. (2011). Strategies for managing racism and homophobia among US ethnic and racial minority men who have sex with men. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 23(2): 145-58.
- D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Preventing mental health problems among lesbian and gay students. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 13(4): 245-61.
- Dentato, M. P., Craig, S. L., Lloyd, M. R., Kelly, B. L., Wright, C. and Austin, A. (2016). *Homophobia within schools of social work: the critical need for affirming classroom settings and effective preparation for service with the LGBTQ community*. Social Work Education. <https://1080/02615479.2016.1150452>
- Evans, N. J. and D'Augelli, A. R. (1996). *Lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people in college. The lives of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals: Children to adults*. R. C. Savin-Williams and K. M. Cohen (Eds.). Harcourt Brace College: Fort Worth, TX. 201-26.
- Evans, N. J. and Broido, E. M. (1999). Coming out in college residence halls: Negotiation, meaning making, challenges, supports. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(6): 658-68.
- Flegal, K. M., Kit, B. K., Orpana, H. and Graubard, B. I. (2013). Association of all-cause mortality with overweight and obesity using standard body mass index categories: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 309(1): 71-82.
- Franklin, K., 1998. "Psychosocial motivations of hate crimes perpetrators: Implications for educational intervention." In *Paper presented at the 106th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at San Francisco, CA*.
- Goode-Cross, D. T. and Tager, D. (2011). Negotiating multiple identities: How African-American gay and bisexual men persist at a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(9): 1235-54.
- Harper, S. R. and Gasman, M. (2008). Consequences of conservatism: Black male undergraduates and the politics of historically black colleges and universities. *Journal of Negro Education*, 77(4): 336-51.
- Lance, L. M. (2002). Heterosexism and homophobia among college students. *College Student Journal*, 36(3): 411-15.
- Lewis, G. B. (2003). Black-white differences in attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67: 59-78. Available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3521666>
- Lewis, M. W. and Ericksen, K. S. (2016). Improving the climate for LGBTQ students at an historically black university. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 13(3): 249-69. Available: <https://10.1080/19361653.2016.1185761>
- Linley, J. L., Nguyen, D., Brazelton, B. B., Renn, K. and Woodford, M. (2016). Faculty as sources of support for LGBTQ college students. *College Teaching*, 64(2): 55-63. Available: <https://10.1080/87567555.2015.1078275>
- Lisotta, C. (2004). *Homophobia of all hues*. The Nation. 15-17.
- Maiden, J. L., Mizelle, N., Nichols, B. J. and Stewart, D. O. (2020). The impact of microaggressions on men of color in graduate counseling programs. *International Journal of Social Policy and Education*, 2(5): 57-66.
- Meyer, I. H. (2010). Identity, stress, and resilience in lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals of color. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38: 442-54. Available: <https://10.1177/0011000009351601>
- Moradi, B., DeBlaere, C. and Huang, Y.-P. (2010). Centralizing the experiences of LGB people of color in counseling psychology. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38(3): 22-330.
- Patton, L. D. (2011). Perspectives on identity, disclosure, and the campus environment among African American gay and bisexual men at one historically Black college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(1): 77-100.
- Rankin, S. (2003). *Campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people: A national perspective*. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: Washington, D.C.
- Reinhardt, B., 1997. "Examining correlates of homophobia in heterosexual college students." In *Paper presented at the 105th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association at Chicago, IL*.
- Renn, K. (2017). *LGBTQ students on campus: Issues and opportunities for higher education Leaders*. Higher Education Today.

- Ross, F. E., 2002. "Beyond campus boundaries: The off-campus experiences of students." In *Paper presented at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators region IV-East conference, Skokie, IL.*
- Sanlo, R. L. (1998). *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: A handbook for faculty and administrators.* (Eds.) Westport, CT. Greenwood Press.
- Tyre, Y. S. (2009). *Understanding African American lesbian and gay identity development within a historically Black college environment (Doctoral dissertation).* Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. (Order No. 3365570).
- Wall, V. A. and Washington, J., 1991. "Understanding gay and lesbian students of color. Beyond tolerance: Gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus." In *American Association for Counseling and Development, Alexandria, VA.*