

Black Queer Space and Safety

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Introduction

The four significant themes that emerge from this case study are safety, space, voice, and the authentic public Black same gender-loving self (APBSGLS). Safety was pervasive within all cases. *Safety* was defined as the sense of being free from danger when presenting all aspects of one's personality. *Space* was defined as the place to freely be their complete self without fear. *Voice* was defined as the individual's ability to speak for and identify self, and to describe how to be seen and heard. The *APBSGLS* was defined as the extent to which individuals create and exist in safe spaces without feeling the need to hide.

Microaggressions

Three broad categories of microaggressions—subtle verbal and nonverbal assaults—include microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidation. The subsequent themes include: invitation of ethnic minorities to feel alien in their own land; racial minorities made to feel unintelligent; and the pathologizing of the cultural norms of racial minorities because their norms did not match those of the dominant cultures (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions specifically include feelings of omission, invisibility and powerlessness in Blacks (Proctor, Kyle, Lau, Fefer, & Fischetti, 2016). There is no reprieve for Blacks working in institutions of higher education. (Proctor et al., 2016). The lack of racial diversity (Walcott, Charret, McNamara, & Hyson, 2016), and minimal supervisory training in working with racial minorities seem to be the rationale for this microaggression (Proctor et al., 2016). According to Proctor and others, Black individuals experience higher levels of microaggression (2016).

Microaggressions and coping strategies

In the face of overt racism and discrimination, Black individuals create coping strategies to assist in day-to-day life (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). These strategies are historically formed networks, circles of individuals, in the workplace, to which they turn when faced with racism, discrimination, and microaggressions for support through adverse situations (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). Through these safe spaces—coping networks—Black women gain and foster self-empowerment, legitimacy, and acceptance (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). They face microaggressions

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by being underrepresented in corporate leadership, through stereotypes of being superwomen or having “bad attitudes,” and through invisibility (Holder et al., 2015). They use coping mechanisms such as self-care, or therapy; shifting, or changing appearance or speech to combat stereotypes; support networks; religion and spirituality; and developing a sense of validation and internal excellence, as well as having pride in self, culture, and in their families (Holder et al., 2015).

In search of space

In the discussion of the Black queer individual's search for space, the discourse on the visibility and invisibility of Black LGBTQ individuals on HBCU campuses was continued through a focus on acceptance confusion (Coleman, 2016). The research demonstrated that through contradictory messages of acceptance within the environs of HBCUs, Black queer individuals faced an ambiguity that pushed them not only in search of a space, but a safe space (Coleman, 2016). On HBCU campuses, Black queer individuals were shown to have been shunned by a culture steeped in religiosity (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013; Kirby, 2011), and to have been folded into sororities, fraternities, social networks, choirs, and fashion events (Coleman, 2016). The conservative depression of the emergence of the queer identity juxtaposed with the varying and specific social acceptance (Coleman, 2016)

was depicted as possibly leaving individuals feeling confused. Recognizing these discrepancies, some HBCUs--Howard, Spellman, Bowie State, and Morehouse--were all shown to be moving toward inclusion (Coleman, 2016).

What began to emerge in the literature was that Black LG-BTQ individuals were searching for space, a sense of belonging to a community where they could express themselves and be open and nourished and utilize the benefits of the resources of that community (Kitchen, Williams, & Chowhan, 2012). This established construct of establishing space and belonging was shown to provide individuals safety (Maslow, 1954), a lifelong buffer against adverse life events (Bowlby, 1969), and personal and social wellbeing (Sarason, 1974). While the literature on the intersecting identities, such as race and sexual orientation, was shown to be building from its early stages (Hudson, 2015), the evidence demonstrated that lesbians, gay men, and persons of color who identified with a space, or community, exhibited protection from discrimination (Lee, 2003) and depression as well as other negative health outcomes (McCallum & McLaren, 2011; McLaren & Challis, 2009). However, the literature was not inclusive of racial minority LGBTQ individuals, indicating a necessary area of study (Hudson, 2015). Further study, specifically on racial minority LGBTQ individuals, demonstrated belonging, space, and connectivity were directly related to increased material and spiritual resources, while lack of belonging led to stress, pain, and sadness (Hudson, 2015).

The construct of intersectionality, intersecting social identities that mutually naturalize and reinforce each other (Shields, 2008), was found to be a strong aspect of the emerging literature on LGBTQ individuals and their experiences with multiple minority statuses (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). The emerging literature demonstrated not only the inclusion of the struggle found by these individuals, but also the individuals' perspectives, narratives of how they experienced the struggle (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). Black women specifically reported experiencing discrimination by omission or by being ignored (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Mohr et al., 2015; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). What Black women reported, as well as what was hypothesized about the experienced discrimination of Black women and Black lesbians, was that the intersection of marginalized identities can cancel out the less privileged identity by differing to members of marginalized groups that are the most ideal and privileged (Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Remedios & Snyder, 2015). Black identity in the workplace is under fire (Greene & Stewart, 2016; Proctor et al., 2016) with increasingly more segregation (Hellerstein, Neumark & McInerney, 2008). This segregation compounds the stigma faced by marginalized populations (Hernandez et al., 2016). Out of 11.5% of Black individuals in the American workforce (Toossi, 2009), only 1.2% are found in leadership positions (Hernandez et al., 2016). Blacks are often given a niche in leadership which is racialized in content or jobs, usually with Black followers (Hernandez et al., 2016). Black persons are often stigmatized as less intelligent and not seen as leaders (Hernandez et al., 2016; Mohr

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& Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). Black individuals are stigmatized-by-association and receive lower evaluations (Hernandez et al., 2016).

Tokenization, race, and social support

Workplace segregation (Hellerstein et al., 2008) leads to compounding the stigmatization already felt by Blacks in the workplace (Hernandez et al., 2016). Many Blacks find themselves as one of few in a predominantly White workplace, resulting in further challenges (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006). Blacks feel they must do more work to be seen as equal (Valdez, 2015). This feeling of heightened scrutiny blossoms when Black individuals are one of a few, or the only one in a workplace (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014). Kanter (1977) theorized that as minorities, Blacks and women, become tokenized, their behaviors are generalized onto their minority group, and they experience heightened pressure to perform and over-perform. Positivity has been found to be associated with heightened visibility at work (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014). Blacks report that being one of few, or the only Black professional in their workplace, affords them recognizability and desirability in that they were sought out by Black persons in the community for their services because of pride held in them (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014).

Black women and coping strategies – shifting

Black identity in the workplace has shifted from Black individuals seen as biologically inferior (Steinberg, 2007; Valdez, 2015) to being seen as societally unimportant and invisible (Greene & Stewart, 2015; Holder, 2008; Holder et al., 2015; Proctor et al., 2016). Blacks demonstrate resistance to workplace racism, discrimination, and microaggressions through self-preservative techniques--shifting (Johnson, Gamst, Meyers, Arellano-Morales, & Shorter-Gooden, 2016). These techniques include presenting self (tone of voice, choice of hairstyle, non-sharing of personal life, mannerisms) in alternative, more socially acceptable ways (Johnson et al., 2016). Minimization naturalization, and avoidance, understood as ineffectual coping strategies (Thomas et al.,

2008), serve as useful tools to relieve discrimination-caused pain and to guard against the negative cumulative effects of discrimination for some Black women (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Hunt, 2013; Neal-Barnett, 2003; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Thomas et al., 2008).

Sexual identity management: In and out of the workplace

Sexual orientation, mental illness, and religious beliefs are examples of concealable stigma (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). The potential for the self to be divided (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013) is explained as internalization of rigid distinctions made between concealing a stigmatized identity as one's public self and disclosing the identity as one's private self (Brekhus, 2003; D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Decena, 2011; Eribon & Lucey, 2004; Goffman, 1959; Gross, 2002). Each person has a public and private self (DuBois, 1903; Goffman, 1959; Rogers, 1959; Snyder, 1974). It is important to integrate the public and private selves into an authentic self in public spaces following a period of adjustment (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). To decrease marginalization, stigmatized individuals actively conceal the private self, thus making no distinction between them (Jones & French, 1984; London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012; Merton, 1938; Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009; Sedlovskaya et al., 2013; Vescio, Gervais, Heiphetz, & Bloodhart, 2009). This public concealment requires the effort of constant cognitive monitoring (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). This constant cognitive suppression and monitoring of a stigmatized identity causes psychological distress (Beals et al., 2009; Cole, 2006; Cook, Arrow & Maller, 2011; Frable et al., 1998; Pachankis, 2007).

Sexual identity management in the workplace is more complicated than a dichotomous choice between concealment and disclosure (Jackson & Mohr, 2016). These two have been erroneously viewed as two sides of the same coin (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; Schrimshaw, Siegel, Downey, & Parsons, 2013) due to both constructs maintaining similar predictions of psychosocial variables (Beals et al., 2009; Pachankis, 2007). Studies on concealment and disclosure found that concealment behaviors, and not levels of disclosure (nondisclosure) (Jackson & Mohr, 2016), predicted unique relationships between psychological well-being, depression, and life-satisfaction (Meidlinger & Hope, 2016; Schrimshaw et al., 2013).

Workplace sexual identity management (WSIM) has been found to be a construct and an empirical model (Rummell & Tokar, 2016) that explains the manner in which LGBTQ individuals disclose their sexual identities to others in the workplace (Lidderdale, Croteau, Anderson, Tovar-Murray, & Davis, 2007; Miller & Brown, 2005). Lidderdale and colleagues (2007) use four segments to explain workplace management of sexual identities. The first segment is on learning sexual identity management strategies through interactions of distal contextual variables (exposure to sexual minorities), person inputs (race, gender), and sexual and nonsexual group identities (religion, culture (Lidderdale et

al., 2007). The second segment is on how the learned experiences informed the individual to the efficacy or ability to perform WSIM strategies (Lidderdale et al., 2007).

It has been found that, in masculinized workplaces such as law enforcement, gay men may be forced to disclose their sexual identities due to their concealment behaviors interfering with their normal duties or workplace policies and norms (Collins, 2016). Conversely, the potential for harassment in masculinized workplaces may impede the disclosure decision (Collins, 2016).

Study

The authentic public Black same-gender loving (SGL) self

The authentic public Black same-gender loving self (APBSGLS) theme is explained by this author as the authentic or real persona. It is a set of behaviors or appearances, exhibited by a Black SGL individual when presenting themselves to the public. Due to outward biases, Black SGL individuals may be perceived a certain way. Both the self-depiction of the APBSGLS and biases (erroneous or otherwise) projected on Black SGL individuals are described throughout this study.

One representative case, P6, presents the narrative of a Black, same-gender loving (SGL), woman. The narrative describes sexual identity management, disclosure or concealment, and to what degree, within a workplace. P6's workplace sexual identity disclosure is predicated on "how much risk you are assuming by disclosing your sexual identity."

P6 discussed feelings of safety and public settings in connection with the ability to authentically present both racial and sexual identities. She reported personal happiness associated with safety and identity disclosure, saying, "In my current life, I'm not as concerned about, or not really at all concerned about, identity disclosure in my workplace. But in my personal life, I'm still very conscious of the spaces I go into." P6 reported feeling safety in her present employment. She stated,

Prior to working here, I only interacted with White heterosexual people in a professional context. Now my whole day is very Black and very queer. I love that 99% of the people I interact with, in my entire life currently, are Black queer people. Prior to working [in my present job], I had to be very careful about job security.

P1, a Black SGL man, discusses the APBSGLS in his narrative, through his presentation of his sexual and racial identities to the public. P1 defined identity management as "the way in which we control or try to control how we are perceived by others and even ourselves." P1 discusses the use of sexual identity concealment in some workplaces, as a deviation from being fully authentic. P1 states he, "shied away from being a same-gender loving person at work." This realization becomes a catalyst for P1 to reconstruct his sexual identity presentation at work.

P2, a Black SGL woman, states,

Sexual identity management, to me, would mean the way that you navigate, where you choose to navigate, specifically in your workplace or in everyday life, to avoid the biggest risk to yourself.

I'm oftentimes not disclosing. I don't want to talk about my personal life at all. In a lot of circumstances, not confirming or denying, but just choosing not to talk about my personal life, in the workplace.

She also reports using self-descriptive language to manage her sexual identity outside of the workplace. This includes identifying as "femme" (feminine) and the inherent privilege associated with that. The participant says,

I did not speak so much about my personal life, because I'm a Black femme, I do have that Black femme privilege, where people do not automatically assume that I'm gay. There are supervisors who have asked me inappropriate questions about my sex life after I disclosed, so this made me not want to talk about my personal life at all.

Safety

Safety is an individual's ability, in any given space or situation, at any given time, to feel a sense of protection from dangers and to feel comfort being their authentic or true selves. In this study, the definition of safety encompasses the distinct needs of Black SGL individuals to feel protected from dangers (i.e., racism, sexism, homophobia, microaggressions) that may occur within organizations.

P6 discusses being "a Black femme-presenting person," and so feeling a lack of safety in environments dominated by White heterosexual men as well as in some "queer spaces." She states,

I am very conscious of the interactions I have with people. I generally do not feel safe in large groups of White men. People call that racism, and then I have to define racism for them. The bar and club scene [in my city] are dominated by White, heterosexual, cisgender, drunk men, and for that reason, the majority of my night life, social life happens in [nearby cities], with much different queer social landscapes. In the White homosexual, LGBTQ, world, I could absolutely name a handful of gay spaces to have a drink in. [However, in these spaces only] Black gay, homosexual men feel comfortable. I don't feel affirmed in any of these spaces.

She further reports feeling her talents viewed as "not good enough, when you show up to an interview and you're Black and a woman, and you're trying to put in your pocket the fact that you're also queer." She discusses the weight of having an added identity, the overachiever identity, placed on her by parents trying to prepare Black children for a "racist and sexist" world.

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identity, active policing of self or language, they may be outside the parameters of mental and emotional safety. P1 discusses the "emotional and mental labor" he experiences when managing his identity. P1 reports having to actively "police" his "language" and his "mannerisms" depending on which work, or other, environment he is in. These behaviors and language, while authentic and true to P1's identity, are helpful in "building culture and community" and often have to be suppressed for job safety, resulting in much mental and emotional labor.

P1 speaks to the dangers of being honest about his sexual identity. There is an understanding that in certain Black spaces, his sexuality cannot display for safety reasons. P1 lacks trust in remaining safe, if authentically SGL, in some spaces or neighborhoods. Even appearing SGL is dangerous in certain places due to assumptions others would make about this identity. P1 states that he does his "best to disclose" his sexual identity. However, "when driving through the hood," P1 stops "having" his "own concert while listening to Mariah Carey or Taylor Swift." He stops dancing and turns the music down when at a red light, "because [of] safety." He speaks of danger, he has seen, the "violence" enacted upon those who "do not conform to or display people's idea of masculinity; you will get killed."

P1 speaks of the dangers of nonconformity around "Black masculinity." He discusses using "subversion tactics" when younger. He would "make" his "voice deeper" and "not as gay" when around Black males in his family. When he is "around Black masculinity," he finds himself "suppressing parts of" his "gayness for safety."

Discussing racial identity management inside and outside of the workplace, P2, a Black SGL woman, discusses her emotional state, the emotional toll, of reconciling racial and sexual identities in and out of the workplace. She explains how femme-presenting privilege exempts her personally from homophobia but not from extrinsically experiencing it. She says,

At times I feel like it's a betrayal of my Black community, because I'm not just Black. I'm not just a lesbian. I'm both of these things. So, if there is someone talking about committing violence against Black trans women, but they completely breeze past the fact that you're a

lesbian, you still are a part of the subculture. They do not feel as though they should include you in the violence that they're speaking about. They don't even think that you would be offended. Talking about harming someone in the gay community, that's how someone can feel about me.

Space

Half of the data from the P3 narrative has been found to be associated with the construct of space, or the tangible and intangible, physical, psychological, emotional, and issues of race, as well as trust and safety. This participant identifies as an educated, young Black gay/SGL man with at least one Black person in his work environment to open up to about his sexual identity. However, he reports knowing [assuming] a co-worker's reaction to his sexual identity and feelings, as if the space was not there to disclose his sexuality. P3 states,

My direct supervisor [at a previous job] was a Black woman and we were the only two people of color in the office. It wasn't jarring, because I had been at this PWI [a phrase used by the participant, meaning Predominantly White Institution] for a while, and I was getting acclimated to the overall Whiteness of the space. [I felt the only person I could talk to] was my supervisor [but she] was an elderly, 40-year-old Black woman, churchgoing, listening to church music in the background. [I decided] there was no need to go down this avenue with her, I already knew what she was going to say that I was going to hell.

The participant states that the least beneficial sexual identity management strategy for him in the workplace is trusting a space, the safety of a space, before intense observation. The participant reported not trusting sharing his personal life at work, saying, "I am really guarded. I haven't put myself out there unless I have felt comfortable in the space." P3's narrative explores bisecting levels of space. The space of his current job, where he feels "comfortable" and "open", and able to explore his "Blackness." This space for racial identity exploration, is bisected by created space of "solidified Blackness." This created space intersects a space of a new sense of "community" and connectivity with other Black individuals. This new sense of "community" and connectivity was bisected by spaces of job productivity, because of connectivity, identity, and authenticity. This led to connectivity spaces outside of the workplace, but it also led to "hurt" and "separation from people" who were different from P3. P3 stated,

The intersectionality [reconciling] of the different aspects of my identity, causes a lot of people to play oppression politics, [or try to determine] which struggle is greater than the other. It is being Black versus being gay, versus being attractive. [With clients] it's, 'are you HIV positive or recovering from substance abuse? How bad is your

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mental illness?' In navigating these spaces, I realized my Blackness helped me solidify my Black identity, walk in certain spaces, and be accepted. [Being accepted] in certain spaces [helped me understand] where I am not accepted. Intersecting my Blackness with [other] aspects of my identity has helped and hurt. I have found others with [similar] intermingling identities, but I have been separated from [White individuals].

Moving forward

There is an evident need for community, for a sense of belonging, for safe space, for unconditional love. Where Black folks historically have turned to the church, these spaces of faith may not be thought open and safe by Black individuals with intersecting identities. Based on this article, improvement to this study can come from the inclusion of questions on faith and having a higher power for support and comfort, due to the strong role the church--Black church--plays in being support and comfort to Black individuals.

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