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Dimensions of Racism and their Impact on Partner Selection among Men who have Sex with Men of Colour: Understanding Pathways to Sexual Risk

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Abstract

While many studies have established the relationship between experiences of racism and sexual risk among men who have sex with men of colour, the pathways by which this occurs are underdeveloped. To address this gap, we must better investigate the lived realities of racism in the gay community. In this study, we had the unique opportunity to examine experiences of racism among African American, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander men who have sex with men living in Los Angeles through focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. We found three themes of racism: exclusion from West Hollywood and the mainstream gay community, sexual rejection based on race/ethnicity, and sexual stereotypes. There were differences across the three racial groups in the experiences of each theme, however. We then considered how racism impacted partner selection and found that race played a salient role in determining power differentials within mixed-race partnerships. Finally, we discussed several future areas for research that can better establish pathways between racism and sexual risk.

Keywords

discrimination; health; race; sexual risk; men who have sex with men

Introduction

A growing body of literature has detailed the racism experienced by men who have sex with men of colour (Meyer 2003, Díaz *et al.* 2004, Chae and Ayala 2009). These studies have demonstrated that racism is a common experience among African American, Latino and Asian Pacific Islander men that shapes their personal identity, as well as their interactions with the mainstream gay community.

The high prevalence of racism among men who have sex with men men of colour is particularly troubling when we consider its negative health impacts. Social discrimination on the basis of race, class, or sexual orientation has been consistently associated with worse physical and mental health outcomes among African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino populations (Díaz *et al.* 2001, Finch *et al.* 2001, Meyer 2003, Gee *et al.* 2007). In this

way, racism is a key driver of the social and health-related interactions for men who have sex with men of colour and has important implications for their overall well-being.

More specifically, racism appears to be a correlate of sexual risk for HIV among men who have sex with men of colour. Among Latinos, racism is associated with higher participation in sexual situations in which it is difficult to practise safer sex (Díaz *et al.* 2004). Among Asian/Pacific Islanders, racism is associated with higher instances of unprotected anal sex among certain groups with varying levels of ethnic identity or family support (Yoshikawa *et al.* 2004, Chae and Yoshikawa 2008). African Americans who report racism also have higher risk for unprotected anal sex (Ayala *et al.* 2012). There is some conflicting evidence, however (Nakamura and Zea 2010). Considering the disproportionate concentration of new HIV infection rates among men of colour (Prejean *et al.* 2011), a better understanding of racism and sexual risk seems especially crucial.

Sexual risk behaviours are affected by social and contextual influences (Díaz and Ayala 1999), but the pathways connecting them to specifically to racism remain underdeveloped. Some limited work has focused on psychosocial responses as mediators. For example, discrimination-related distress may raise the likelihood of participating in unsafe sexual situations (Díaz *et al.* 2004). Conversely, those who prefer racially-concordant partners as a response to discrimination may be less likely to engage in HIV-risk behavior (Chae and Yoshikawa 2008). These explanations are still likely only one aspect of racism and sexual risk, however. A more comprehensive exploration must first investigate a fuller understanding of the lived realities of racism. In what situations do men experience racism? Who are the perpetrators? What specific actions accompany racist events? How do the men interpret such experiences? The empirical literature clearly suggests that racism increases vulnerability among men of colour, but we have yet to uncover what kind of racism increases what kind of vulnerability.

This paper takes a first step in better understanding the nature of racism among men who have sex with men of colour. We examined the experiences of racism in the mainstream gay community among African American, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander men who have sex with men living in Los Angeles through focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. There are two important ways by which this paper contributed to the literature. First, we studied racism across a diverse set of racial groups¹. By comparing and contrasting the experiences across these groups, we gained a deeper understanding into the specific and unique nature of racism among men who have sex with men of colour. We should expect differences across racial groups, but only a few studies have considered racism across different groups of men who have sex with men simultaneously (Chae and Ayala 2009, Wilson *et al.* 2009, Ayala *et al.* 2012). This gap overlooks the important nuances across racial groups that reflect the increasingly fragmented nature of the nation's racial hierarchy. Much current research on racism relies on the traditional Black/White paradigm, that tends to lump together into a supposedly homogeneous whole all non-White groups (Kim 1998, Kim 1999). There is historical precedent for this model, but its wide application may inadvertently conceal unique experiences of racial discrimination across different racial groups. Different racial groups have unique social constructs that govern their location and treatment within the racial hierarchy (Smedley and Smedley 2005, Brondolo *et al.* 2011). As such, we expected such differences to be reflected in their experiences of racial

¹ We acknowledge Latinos are currently viewed as an ethnic group by the U.S. Census, irrespective of how they may define or describe themselves. We further acknowledge that race and racial constructs are dynamic and often contested. In this paper, we use the term 'racial groups' when referencing African Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Latinos, and White people to correspond to the larger concept of racial discrimination and to maintain parsimony throughout our paper.

discrimination – the nature of the stereotypes, the manner in which discriminatory events are performed and the environments in which they are perpetrated.

Secondly, we focused primarily on experiences of racism within the mainstream gay community and we additionally consider how racism impacts on partner selection. As previously discussed, racism in the general community can pose a threat to one's overall well-being. However, a fuller accounting of racism within the gay community may provide more specificity in understanding the mechanisms to sexual risk, especially those involving sexual partner selection. In doing so, we can gain better insight into the dynamics and motivations behind sexual partnerships and how discriminatory events intersect with them.

In summary, this paper explored the different experiences of racial discrimination within the gay community among African American, Asian/Pacific Islander and Latino men who have sex with men. We focused on racism within the mainstream gay community and compared and contrasted across these groups in order to identify unique lived experiences of racism within this particular social environment. We then considered how racism factored into sexual partner selection among the men in our sample. This paper has important implications on future research on pathways to sexual risk and measurement, which are more fully addressed in the discussion section.

Methods

Our data came from focus groups and individual in-depth interviews conducted as part of the Ethnic Minority Men's Health Study, designed to examine the impact of experiences of social discrimination, social networks, and sexual partnerships on sexual risk for HIV among African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino men who have sex with men in Los Angeles, CA. The men were recruited by a professional marketing firm, which publicised the study online and in community-based social and service venues catering to gay men of colour. The institutional review boards of both partnering organisations – AIDS Project Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA and the University of California, San Francisco, California – approved the study protocol.

Focus Groups

In July and August of 2005, six focus groups were convened with respondents who met the following criteria: men who (a) were between 18 and 50 years old, (b) reported having sex with other men within the past 6 months, (c) reported having had a new male sexual partner in the past 12 months, (d) were African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Latino, and (e) resided in Los Angeles County. A stratified purposive sampling method was used to ensure age and racial balance among focus group respondents (Kuzel 1999). Focus groups were stratified by age (18–29 years, 30–50 years) and race/ethnicity (one ethnic group per age group).

We used a semi-structured interview guide that covered several topics, including experiences of social discrimination and coping with racial and sexual minority status. We obtained written informed consent from participants and provided US\$75 compensation. Our focus group sample ranged in age from 21 to 49 years, and consisted of 17 African Americans, 16 Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 17 Latinos. The mean age of men was 31 years.

Individual In-depth Interviews

Individual in-depth interviews used a semi-structured open-ended interview guide which followed and expanded upon the topics identified in the focus groups. Participants discussed meeting sexual and dating partners, general partner selection preferences, the influence of

one's social network, experiences of and the impact of social discrimination and racism, personal coping strategies, and sexual risk practices.

Between December 2005 and August 2006, we conducted 35 individual in-depth interviews with men who reported sex with other men in the prior 6 months, lived in Los Angeles County, and were either African American (n=12), Asian/Pacific Islander (n=12), or Latino (n=11). Inclusion criteria were based upon purposive sampling, with cells stratified by age and race/ethnicity. Sixteen men were 18 to 29 years old; 19 men were 30 years or older (range 20–60 years, 33 years mean). There was no upper limit on age in these individual interviews. Interviewees provided written informed consent and received \$60 to compensate them for their time and transportation costs.

Analysis of Qualitative Transcripts

All focus group and individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. We used coding techniques borrowed from Strauss and Corbin's (1998) work on grounded theory. In the first phase, a multi-disciplinary team of investigators engaged in 'open coding'. They also confirmed a number of a priori codes by reading a selected number of transcripts in order to generate thematic categories, thereby reducing large passages of text to principal concepts. In the second phase, the team engaged in 'axial coding' in which members of the research team focused on relating concepts to subcategories and to each other, forming more concrete codes for analysis. All transcripts were double-coded and any disagreements in coding were discussed in meetings of coders until consensus was achieved. The coded transcripts were entered into ATLAS.ti 5.2 (Muhr and Friese 2004).

Results

Three Dimensions of Racism in the Gay Community

There were three dimensions of racism: exclusion from the mainstream (largely White) gay community (e.g., West Hollywood), sexual rejection due to race or ethnicity, and sexual stereotyping based upon race or ethnicity. While each theme commonly emerged for each racial group, there were differences across the groups in the particulars of each.

Exclusion from the Mainstream Gay Community and West Hollywood

The first dimension of racism addressed feelings of exclusion from the White gay community. West Hollywood serves as the social and political centre of the gay community in Los Angeles, housing several gay bars and clubs as well as gay social organisations and community services (Faderman and Timmons 2006). The majority of respondents reported experiences of racism in West Hollywood and agreed that they felt unwelcome or uncomfortable there. The men in our study did not identify with the neighbourhood and saw it as a marker of distance between themselves and the mainstream gay community. They associated West Hollywood with a certain type of gay identity, one to which they did not necessarily personally ascribe to, nor which represented their own understandings of their sexual identity.

'There's some discrimination in like West Hollywood, where it's like you know, only White gay guys, you know, could have been these old models --like blonde hair, blue eyes, you know...'

[Alex, 22-year-old Latino focus group respondent]

'The fact that there's no black people in there, the music they play and [pause] I don't know, I'm not saying people got to be all nice and come speak to you and ask you to dance but, I don't know, I just get this vibe. Like I don't know, I don't

know, it's just -- When I think of West Hollywood I don't --I don't think of black at all, I don't think of African-American or black at all. Like, but that's like the place to go if you're gay 'cause there's really no other places in L.A. Like West Hollywood, you know, they have all the bars and clubs. That's like the only place to go. But just my opinion they don't cater to black people.'

[Charles, 23-year-old African American interview respondent]

Other researchers have attributed the exclusion of racial gay men from the broader gay community to the symbolic construction of the gay community as White and well-to-do (Han 2007, Teunis 2007). The active maintenance of this image not only alienates men of colour from that gay community, it also disaffirms the identities of being both gay and a man of colour (Han 2007). Despite the common sense of exclusion from the mainstream gay community, the nature of this exclusion (i.e., how it was experienced and interpreted) varied by race and replicated racial interactions in larger society.

The African American respondents described underlying discomfort or uneasiness on the part of White gay men in their interactions and they more readily connected exclusion in West Hollywood to generalised racism in the mainstream gay community.

'It's hugely discriminatory. The White bigots in West Hollywood, who should be the most understanding, are the most bigoted. So the smallest microcosm of our society that has been discriminated against is one of the biggest discriminators and disrespectful. And so like I haven't gone to West Hollywood -- well I went to a meeting the other day. But before that I hadn't eaten in West Hollywood in three, four, five years.'

[Eric, 45-year-old African American interview respondent]

One of the African American focus group members detailed an overtly racist encounter in West Hollywood that he attributed to an underlying racism within the community.

'I've actually had someone in a club in West Hollywood actually call me the N word... When that happened, that really kind of like crystalised that there really is a very pervasive level of racism that exists within West Hollywood, and a lot of people don't want to talk about it. They don't want to acknowledge it.'

[Marcus, 32-year-old African American focus group respondent]

The overt experiences of discrimination and the respondents' clear connection to larger societal racism may reflect African Americans' stigmatised place in the racial hierarchy and how it is replicated in the gay community. Relative to other racial groups, Whites' maintain the strongest negative opinions towards African Americans, as evidenced by housing preferences and group beliefs (Link and Oldendick 1996, Emerson *et al.* 2001). Further, African Americans have a long racialised history in the U.S.A., whereas Latinos' and Asians' discriminatory experiences are likely influenced by migration and integration (Brondolo *et al.* 2011).

Asian/Pacific Islander respondents also acknowledged feeling unwelcome in West Hollywood, but did not attribute their discomfort to the underlying racism in the broader gay community. Their discussion focused on their sense of invisibility and lack of power in that community and highlighted 'subtle slights' perpetrated in West Hollywood and mainstream gay society.

'...your existence is accepted but you're completely ignored and undesirable.'

[Will, 31-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander interview respondent]

Asian Americans commonly encounter invisibility and social undesirability in larger society as well (Lin *et al.* 2005, Sue *et al.* 2007). They arise from the larger stereotype that Asian Americans are competent but unsociable (Lin *et al.* 2005) and are often expressed in subtle ways that not consciously intended by the perpetrator, but nonetheless represent a negative experience for the recipient (Sue *et al.* 2007).

Like African American and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents, many Latino respondents also spoke of being uncomfortable about West Hollywood. One unique topic for the Latino respondents, however, was how the spatial exclusion of West Hollywood was exacerbated by the geographic segmentation of the Los Angeles area as a whole. The combination of poor public transportation over the city's large physical area has further constricted already limited interaction between far-flung racial neighbourhoods. As a result, participants who had ties to ethnic neighbourhoods viewed West Hollywood as a foreign community far removed from the needs of their everyday lives, both geographically and symbolically.

One Latino respondent described his feelings about West Hollywood when discussing the Gay and Lesbian Center, the oldest and largest gay community services organisation in Los Angeles, located in West Hollywood.

'Another example is the Gay and Lesbian Center. They're really huge. It's the biggest gay and lesbian center in the nation, you know. But have they opened up any agencies in East L.A. [heavily populated Latino neighbourhood]? To my knowledge, no. I know they offered to make new buildings. They made some new buildings, they've got some new places down on Wilshire Blvd., but that's in the mid-Wilshire District, I believe. But I haven't seen them going out there. They may say "Oh, well we have this project going out there." Well throw a fucking building out there. Let me know how much of a project you have going out there and build me a building or let's get together with the community and hire people from the community and build a building. Where I can get access to healthcare and social services and other things so I don't have to get on a subway and a train and come up here to Hollywood to be seen and then get referred out over here to Altamed in wherever the hell it is now.'

[Richard, 41-year-old Latino interview respondent]

His quote illustrates how the mainstream gay community of Los Angeles is bordered, both in the geographic and symbolic senses, by West Hollywood. While the exclusion was commonly felt, African American, Asian Pacific Islander and Latino men described unique experiences within the gay community.

Sexual Rejection because of Race/Ethnicity

The second dimension of perceived racial discrimination within the mainstream gay community was discriminatory preferences in sexual partner selection, in which White men would reject men of colour as potential partners.

Asian/Pacific Islander men spoke frequently about being rejected by potential sexual partners because of their race, more so than the African American or Latino respondents. These interactions occurred in multiple venues, but were reported to be especially prevalent online.

'So a lot of people [chatting online] say "What are you?" And a lot of people, I'll tell them Asian, mixed, and they'll just stop talking, the instant messages, just stop talking. [...] But then it became obvious, you know, Asian was the key word that made a lot of people, probably at least half the people online, just stop talking altogether. I think it's really, I don't know, it's really saddening that in a

metropolitan city in our current times that that still happens, but I think it happens just as much as ever. I think there's just so much racism, maybe not as overt but I think it just shows that racism changes, manifests in different ways.'

[David, 23-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander interview respondent]

While this respondent viewed such rejection as stemming from racism, others were unsure as to whether this kind of rejection was motivated by racism or simply reflected personal preferences.

'Oh, everybody's different. They're receptive to different things. Maybe, like let's say the type of food, I might be more restrictive than they are, or in one aspect or another everybody's different. We have different tolerances for what we like in our life.'

[Thomas, 27-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander interview respondent]

Han (2008) suggests that such ambiguity over the motivation behind sexual rejection is a form of subtle racism, which can lead to negative effects on self-esteem. We also saw respondents questioning their own desirability in light of sexual rejection.

Respondent: '[Sexual rejection on race] really brought out a lot of, you know, childhood insecurities and stuff, that I sort of - I think, you know, I've become immune to it, I mean, not totally, when I see that.'

Interviewer: 'What sorts of insecurities?'

Respondent: 'That I'm not White and that somehow being Asian is, you know, it's like a second class, because the beauty and attraction is always, I felt, based on, you know, a particular ethnicity.'

[Jeff, 43-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander interview respondent]

Rejection based on race was also present among African American and Latinos, but was not discussed as frequently as it was for Asian/Pacific Islander men. Nonetheless, some African American and Latino respondents acknowledged such experiences of race-based rejection in their interactions within the gay community. Some also expressed some doubt about their own desirability as a result, suggesting that the negative impacts of sexual rejection can also impact their self-esteem.

'I feel like a lot of my failure on the Internet has partly been due to the fact that I'm like Mexican American, you know, and one who looks more indigenous than Europeans. [...] You know, so I have to always, I have to constantly question that, too, you know. Is this about me being racially discriminated against? Or is it just me being, you know, undesirable, so?'

[Adrian, 23-year-old Latino interview respondent]

Others, however, attributed rejection to personal preference and did not necessarily internalise the experience.

'Yeah, again it's a process. But I've seen situations where Black men will post and get very angry about [online requests for White partners only], you know, that it's just such a racist environment. And I might have thought that or felt that way at some point. I think it's a waste of time to post it and say it's such a racist environment, you know. Look at - well it's like the sales. You sort through your leads and get to a warm lead, and that's someone who's open to race.'

[Isaiah, 30-year-old African American interview respondent]

Sexual rejection and race-based partner preferences were common across groups, but the reactions to the experience varied individually, not necessarily across race. It seemed that some accepted that personal preferences were hard to control, regardless of whether they were motivated by racism or something more innocuous. For others, however, this ambiguity could have contributed to larger doubts about their personal desirability, while reinforcing their distance from the sexually-idealised White male.

Sexual Stereotyping

The final dimension of racial discrimination experiences was in sexual stereotyping within the mainstream gay community, which pertained to being an object of sexual desire solely because of one's race or ethnicity. We found common discussions about these sexual stereotypes across our respondents. All respondents found racial fetishes immediately offensive because of their reliance on stereotypes and blatant sexual categorisation. One African American respondent made the distinction between racial preferences and sexual stereotyping in the following way.

'It's, it's, um [pause]--- it's, it's, it's sad, it's saddening, it's really saddening, because I look at it and I'm like "Wow," you know, all White people they're not racist or whatever, there are a lot of Black people, there are a lot of White people who are attracted to Black people, but at the same time they're attracted to Black people for sexual reasons the same way some heterosexual men or men are attracted to men for only sexual reasons, when someone only wants to put you in a category for sex, you know.'

[Kevin, 28 -year-old African American interview respondent]

While all men reported being subjected to some racial fetishes, we saw clear differences in the types of stereotypes that these men encountered across race. What is more, these sexual stereotypes intersect with and are informed by additional racially-based stereotypes that are manifested in larger U.S. society. For Asian/Pacific Islander men, they reported being desired for being feminine and submissive.

'If someone comes up and -- you know, if they buy you a drink because they want to get your attention, you know, that's fine, but if they, the intention was "Oh, you must love being taken care of," or "That's what you're expected because I know you love being helped because you're helpless or submissive," or like, "You're to be treated like a child," and almost like, like I said, a pedophile kind of sensation where um there's certain people who think that -- It's almost like uh, a mix between wanting to take care of a child versus being intimate with someone.'

[Thomas, 27-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander interview respondent]

This stereotype closely parallels the sexualised images of Asians in larger society, in which Asian women are believed to be permissive and subservient to the desires of White men while Asian men are passive and asexual (Cho 1997). For Asian/Pacific Islander gay men, this places them in a feminised role within a sexual relationship and they are expected to acquiesce to the demands of their White sexual partners (Wilson *et al.* 2009).

African American men reported being subjected to the Mandingo fantasy, in which a physically powerful Black man sexually dominates his White partner.

'...as a Black male...you're made into this Mandingo fantasy. So you're supposed to be this creature with this huge dick that's supposed to dominate some poor little White 'ho, ...'

[Donnie, 25-year-old Black focus group respondent]

This fantasy ties in closely with another racial stereotype that African American men identified, which was being feared for physical intimidation.

‘...because people are very frightened of just Black people, you know. Not everybody but some people are just frightened. They have expectations, you know, remnants of the, you know, Rodney King, and, you know, expect a Black person to walk in the room and start tearing up stuff and, you know, breaking through windows.’

[Isaiah, 30-year-old Black interview respondent]

Thus the same stereotype of primitive or raw physicality may make African American men who have sex with men simultaneously dreaded and desired. Teunis (2007) suggests that this keeps the power of the partnership firmly with the White partner. While this objectification may appear to give African American men sexual power, the definition of roles is ultimately one where their White partners are sexually serviced. What is more, African American men described racism from White men during sexual encounters that stem from perceptions of their physical threat:

‘I think too there’s sometimes, you know, when it’s the Mandingo factor I think some men get, initially they’re frightened of what they’re attracted to and, you know, it can come out as, that fear can come out as, you know, in racist ways. You know, Black people are going to steal my wallet, you know, whatever - it might not be spoken that way but there’s, you know, you can kind of observe behavior. And then it might turn around to, you know, actually I want it or if you don’t give it to them then, then the racist stuff can come out afterwards, you know.’

[Isaiah, 30-year-old African American interview respondent]

Latino participants discussed being completely sexualised and stripped of character-based traits. Previous explorations of this topic have identified stereotypes of gay Latino men that relate to the larger racial stereotype of being passionate or ‘fiery’ (Wilson *et al.* 2009). While this stereotype was acknowledged, there was another significant stereotype closely related to the view of Latinos as low-skilled, undocumented laborers.

‘So I think that the way some of the White men look at some of these Latino immigrants is like, maybe like slave labor or like a slave lover, lover.’

[Richard, 41-year-old Latino interview respondent]

This view of Latinos also aligns with other stereotypes in which Latino men described being thought of as purely physical entities, lacking in education and culture.

‘And I always kind of feel that when I speak to them, I always kind of get the sense too that they -- ‘they’ meaning non-Latinos; that could include Asians and White, yeah, and including Asians and White men -- that I’m dumb, that I don’t know who, you know, Cocteau was, you know, that I don’t know Matisse and I don’t know these things. Oh, and assume, because of my lovely tattoos, that I was in prison and I was in a gang and where’s my accent, you know?’

[Richard, 41-year-old Latino interview respondent]

These stereotypes are perpetuated by the overall image of Latinos in Los Angeles. While Los Angeles has a large Latino population, the Latino community carries the stereotype of the undocumented underclass, which is either criminalised or victimised (Gomberg- Muñoz 2010). Some participants described this view of the Latino community was seemingly incompatible with being gay.

‘Yeah, yeah, and especially in a city like LA, where the most of the working class is Mexican American. It’s like you walk into a gay room, you could either be a, you know--- a gay person or you’re a janitor, one of the two. So those are the kind of, I mean, it’s, I think it’s unique in Los Angeles.’

[Adrian, 23-year-old Latino interview respondent]

The perception of mutual exclusivity between being Latino – specifically, working class Latino - and gay reinforces the idea that gay Latino men are uneducated or uncultured. These in turn can shape a certain kind of sexual stereotype in which Latino men are considered ‘slave lovers’ without regard for personal characteristics or accomplishments.

Encountering sexual stereotypes was a common and shared experience reported by study participants. Nonetheless, the particular nature of these sexual stereotypes was informed by broader racial stereotypes that arise from separate social constructions for each racial group.

Implications of Racism on Partner Selection

Experiences with racism can shape opportunities an individual has to meet sexual partners, as well as meanings attached to those relationships (Ayala and Díaz 2001). Some researchers have suggested that discrimination can either increase race-concordant partner preferences to mitigate discrimination or increase preferences for White partners because of internalised racism (Chae and Yoshikawa 2008). There was not clear support for either scenario, however, and racism was not explicitly mentioned in partner selection. Instead, partner preferences and selection were shaped by ideas that reinforced the fundamental racial hierarchy that underscores discriminatory events.

When asked, the majority of the respondents said they focused more on age, personal connections and physical attributes in selecting their partners over race. Nonetheless, some African American and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents explicitly stated that they were not attracted to men of their own race. This seemed to be influenced by broader negative racial stereotypes of men of colour over any internalised biases arising from racist encounters. For example, one Asian/Pacific Islander man who only recently started dating Asian/Pacific Islander men attributed the change to being more accepting of his own racial identity. Such a shift is presumably in light of discriminatory experiences and stereotypes that have questioned the desirability of Asian/Pacific Islander men.

‘So it’s like, I’m more open to [dating other Asian/Pacific Islander men]. And I think it’s just about you know, probably just growing older, and having a different perspective, you know. Or being a little more open to, or accepting myself more, maybe.’

[Robert, 44-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander interview respondent]

Likewise, respondents who stated a preference for White men did not express overt biases against their own race, but rather pointed to the larger social benefits that accompany having a White partner. One Latino respondent reported that he was primarily interested in White men because of the conferred social status within the gay community.

‘It was about the power and the status that’s associated with [dating a White man], status in the gay culture that’s associated with it. So it was something that I wanted very much to attain for myself, you know, and I can live with the way that I look as long as I had access to what I felt I deserved and, you know, I felt entitled.’

[Adrian, 23-year-old Latino interview respondent]

While respondents did not make overt connections between racism and partner selection, their preferences were clearly bounded by racial ideals that reinforce the social standing of White men. This had implications on the power dynamics within cross-racial partnerships. In particular, our respondents acknowledged a power differential that favored the White partner and left men of colour to find their own contributions to the relationship. One African American respondent with a history of dating White men described the power differential in a past relationship.

‘It’s an unrealistic expectation that he’s going to think that -- like he’s going to sort of willingly be sort of willing to share all this stuff that he’s worked his entire life to sort of get with someone who hasn’t, who has none of that. And it may appear like he’s offering it but he’s not offering that and there’s no way you’re going to sort of like, like use his yacht. Like why would he do that? It makes no sense and so that’s a sign, like you cannot possibly be equal in this relationship, you should not -- in retrospect. And so I sort of, I see that now. I can in no way be equal there. There’s no way I could sort of continue, you know, his sort of just taking care of everything, like if everything is sort of taken care of, you know, there’s no place for me to do anything.’

[Kevin, 28-year-old African American interview respondent]

In this instance, the respondent could not locate his own value in the relationship, as his White partner was both economically and racially privileged. He felt that he could not necessarily contribute anything outside of his looks, which he saw as ephemeral and replaceable.

In contrast, the previously quoted Latino respondent recognised that his higher socioeconomic background provided him with some authority within a partnership. He also perceived Whiteness as a unique dimension of privilege within the gay community, however, and differentiated it from dimensions of social status related to class. He expressed a desire to date a White man of a lower class in order to combine different aspects of social status within a relationship.

‘Lately it’s been I’d like to date a White trash guy, you know, somebody who feels bad about themselves. It would put me in a position of power and I’d be able to boost their self-esteem and then they’d be indebted to me for that. So that’s what I would like, you know. And ideally somebody who’s White trash, somebody who looks like they have like the status that, but don’t actually have it. So it’s like we fill in the gaps. They have the look, I have the status, we can like [pause] be an interesting unit, so.’

[Adrian, 23-year-old Latino interview respondent]

Ultimately, the intersection among discrimination, power differentials and partner preference is governed by racial dynamics that both arise from and reinforce the racial hierarchy. Each of these factors connect and reinforce one another, revealing the complex social landscape in which men of colour must operate in partner selection.

Discussion

We began the paper by calling attention to the knowledge gap in how experiences of racism impact sexual risk among men who have sex with men of colour. We suggested that a better understanding of racism among different groups in the gay community specifically was an important first step in this regard. To this end, we identified three dimensions of racial discrimination that men of colour experience within the gay community: exclusion from the larger gay community and West Hollywood, sexual rejection because of race, and sexual

stereotypes. We also compared and contrasted experiences across African American, Asian/Pacific Islander and Latino men. African American more readily connected racism within the gay community to larger racist ideas in society. For Asian/Pacific Islanders, their experiences with racism primarily consisted of subtle slights that reinforced lines of differences from the mainstream gay community. For Latino men, the geographic segmentation of Los Angeles and negative perception of Latinos underscored their separation from the gay community, both geographically and symbolically.

Our findings provide several potentially fruitful areas for research on racial discrimination. First, our paper has implications on the measurement of racism among men who have sex with men of colour. Our paper revealed several unique dimensions, suggesting that a summative scale may not fully capture the range of racist experiences. What is more, it appears that some dimensions are more salient for some racial group than others; for example, Asian/Pacific Islanders commonly mentioned rejection and invisibility. Future research should consider whether racism measures are adequately capturing the range of experiences of their group of interest. Having more specific measures is a crucial first step in establishing more concrete mediators of the health impact of racism.

Other implications of our paper raise theoretical questions about potential pathways to sexual risk. First, how do the different dimensions of racism undermine sexual health in general and lead to unique outcomes of sexual risk in particular? For example, we found one major theme to be exclusion from West Hollywood and the mainstream gay community as a whole. As a result, some respondents reported that they avoided the neighbourhood, highlighting the intersection between racism and geographical space and place. In this way, men who have sex with men of colour could also be physically and symbolically excluded from health-related resources that are often concentrated in commonly-known gay neighbourhoods. Alternatively, the avoidance of the mainstream gay community could impact the kinds of sexual contacts men who have sex with men of colour have, which can then affect risk profiles.

These potential pathways are unique from others that may arise from sexual rejection on the basis of race, which was another dimension of racism identified by our respondents. Some respondents reported negative affect and lowered self-esteem as a result of sexual rejection, which parallels psychosocial models of discrimination, stress, and coping. According to this model, discrimination is a stressor that initiates an appraisal and coping process that mitigates emotional and physiological distress (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Extending this idea, it is possible that coping strategies can mediate the relationship between experiences of racism and sexual risk. For example, discrimination has been associated with substance abuse (Martin *et al.* 2003, Chae *et al.* 2008) which may then constrain one's ability to negotiate a safe sexual environment.

Also, how do separate experiences of racism across African American, Asian/Pacific Islander and Latino men differentially impact their sexual risk? For example, we found that while all races reported sexual stereotypes, the nature of the stereotypes differed across race. A potential next step could be to consider how the sexual stereotypes of Asian/Pacific Islander men as submissive, African American men as physically and sexually dominant or Latinos as working class, sexual objects are played out in actual sexual encounters. For example, Wilson *et al.* (2009) found sexual stereotypes to guide roles within unprotected anal sex encounters between White men and men of colour. This study represents a promising new area of research that connects racial stereotypes with partner interactions and should be explored more fully.

Our data also suggest that the effect of racism on partner selection is an important area for future study. While participants did not explicitly identify racial discrimination as a motivating factor in choosing potential partners, their descriptions of partner selection implicated larger discussions of race and related power dynamics. For respondents in our study who dated White men, they described a power differential within the partnership that elevated the White man because of his privilege and access to mainstream gay culture. This relationship dynamic has serious implications on sexual risk if men who have sex with men of colour are not able to negotiate safe sexual encounters.

We also found, however, that racism is not an automatic causal mechanism of sexual risk; there were many men who acknowledged racist experiences, but resolved to move on. In this regard, men who have sex with men of colour have agency in a broader sexual ecology governed, at least in part, by racialised power dynamics. Uncovering positive responses to racism, as well as social or environment factors that bolster them, could provide valuable information for future interventions and education.

Finally, most of the proposed pathways in the discussion have considered how our findings on racist experiences might affect sexual risk behaviours, such as unprotected anal intercourse. It seems, however, that factors such as power differentials, micro-aggressions, or sexual self-esteem are also threats to overall sexual health, that is, they may be inhibiting the development of a positive sexual identity, access to civil rights, and the ability to achieve intimacy, pleasure, and nurturing relationships (Goldhammer and Mayer 2011). In this way, future explorations of the relationship between racism and ‘sexual risk’ do not necessarily need to be limited to narrow behavioural definitions, such as unprotected anal intercourse. Instead, they should consider how racism poses risks to the overall sexual health among all men who have sex with men, especially men of colour. We can also broaden our intervention and promotion activities to consider a full scope of sexual health and well-being among these men.

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