Unpacking Civic Engagement:

The Sociopolitical Involvement of Same-Gender Loving Black Women

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ABSTRACT

Employing a national sample of over 600 same-gender loving (SGL) Black women, we explore the relative impact of community-level support/comfort and the importance of sexual orientation and racial identity on two dependent variables – sociopolitical involvement within lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities as well as sociopolitical involvement within people of color (POC) communities. Findings indicate that feelings of connectedness to the LGBT community are the most important predictor of sociopolitical involvement within both LGBT and POC communities; while, counter-intuitively, being comfortable within the LGBT community had a negative impact. Further, the impact of the importance of identity was negligible.

KEYWORDS: Black same-gender loving women, Black lesbian, community engagement, civil engagement, sociopolitical involvement, belonging
INTRODUCTION

The sense of belonging is a fundamental aspect of the social experience (Putnam 2000). Yet, many individuals feel unaccepted and marginalized within their social and cultural groups. It is particularly problematic when this marginalization occurs within groups that experience multiple forms of oppression (Reynolds and Pope 1991). This article examines the sense of belonging that Black same-gender loving women (SGL) experience with both the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities and with communities of color.

As women who have historically faced race, gender, class, and sexuality-based oppression and marginalization, Black SGL women provide the perfect lens through which to examine belonging within marginalized communities. Through survey data collected from over 600 Black women who took part in the Social Justice Sexuality Project Survey – a survey that measures the experiences of LGBT people of color (POC) – this paper explores the impact of sociopolitical involvement, an aspect of civic engagement, on the sense of belonging that these women experience. This research hypothesizes that women’s level of sociopolitical involvement within these communities is directly correlated to the level of acceptance they feel within those communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic engagement consists of activities ranging from social activism to campaigning for political candidates and participating in social issues. The title of Robert Putnam’s (2000) work, Bowling Alone, is in reference to the decline in social activities that has occurred in recent decades, and its correlation to a decline in political engagement. Yet feelings of belonging within a community may hold important implications for sociopolitical involvement.
Civic engagement has been examined in relation to a number of variables, including race, gender, income, education, geographic location, and, most notably, age (Putnam 2000; Sander and Putnam 2006; Verba et al. 1995). In Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) analysis of civic engagement, they found that Black and White people in the U.S. tend to have the highest levels of civic engagement compared to other racial/ethnic groups. A 2011 study of first-time, full-time AmeriCorps volunteers found that Black people tend to volunteer more frequently than Latinos or Asian Americans (Finlay, Flanagan, & Wary-Lake, 2011). Black people are more likely to report campaign work and involvement in informal community activities and protest more than their White counterparts (Verba et al. 1995). More specifically, Blacks – as compared to their White counterparts – spend significantly more hours volunteering for political campaigns and are more likely to participate in issue-based activities, such as basic human needs, education, civil rights, and, in particular, criminal justice or drug issues (Verba et al. 1995). For example, a 1990 study of 1,466 respondents to a General Social Survey (GSS) illustrated that Black people in areas with high Black empowerment (defined as areas with a Black mayor) were more civically active than those in low Black empowerment areas or their White counterparts of comparable socio-economic status (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990).

Regarding gender, women are slightly more likely to be involved in civic activities than men (Campbell 2009; Verba et al. 1995). Levels of civic engagement greatly increased with both income and education (Verba et al. 1995). The greatest determinant for civic engagement, however, appears to be age cohort (Sander and Putnam 2006; Putnam 2000). Galston and Lopez (2006) argue that Americans born, “between the late 1920s and mid-1940s… tend to be more participatory and less individualistic in their outlook than are their younger fellow citizens” (2006: 5). Activities such as volunteering for organizations, voting, and even church attendance
are heavily determined by age cohort, with older Americans participating in more of these activities than younger ones (Galston and Lopez 2006; Sander and Putnam 2006).

The sense of belonging to a community is not only important for individual psychosocial well-being and positive identity formation, but also because it is often directly linked to an individual’s level of civic engagement (Flores et al. 2009; Heath and Mulligan 2008). Belonging consists of “an unfolding space of attachment, affiliation, and recognition” (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, and Gibson 2008: 172), or as Nira Yuval-Davis explains, belonging is as much about emotional connection as it is about “feeling ‘safe’” (2006: 198). This sense of belonging is especially important for those who have experienced multiple levels of identity-based oppression and marginalization. Intragroup marginalization, or “the downgrading and discrimination that more privileged group members have towards other, less privileged group members” (Harris 2009: 431), includes homophobia among women and within communities of color, as well as gender and racial/ethnic discrimination within LGBT communities. Rust (2000) noted three coping mechanisms for sexual minorities of color: concealing sexuality in order to maintain the support from racial/ethnic communities, leaving racial/ethnic community of origin for LGBT communities, or maintaining a close connection to racial/ethnic communities while being “out” and challenging homophobia within these communities.

Research on homophobia within communities of color has focused on homophobia within the Black community (Ward 2005; Crichlow 2004; Battle and Lemelle 2002; Constantine-Simms 2001; Griffin 2001; hooks 2001; Thomas 1996; Dalton 1989). Scholars argue that homophobia within the Black community is due, in large part, to conservative notions of sexuality and gender, which is often rooted in the history of sexuality-based oppression that Blacks have experienced (Harris 2010; Battle and Lemelle 2002; hooks 2001; West 2001; Hill
Collins 2000). Research examining racism within LGBT communities has found that perceptions of racial discrimination are highly distressing to LGBT people of color (Flores et al. 2009; Han 2007; Diaz et al. 2001; Loiacano 1989). The Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud: Black Pride Survey 2000 found that half of Black LGBT people strongly agreed that racism was a problem in the mainstream LGBT community. In fact, most of the respondents in the survey, regardless of gender and gender expression, indicated that racial/ethnic discrimination was the primary form of discrimination that they experienced (Battle et al. 2002).

There has been little research on the sense of belonging and sociopolitical involvement among people who experience multiple forms of oppression. A majority of the research on homophobia in communities of color focuses on the experience of gay men, overlooking the experiences of lesbians. Similarly, research on racism in the LGBT community focuses on gay men of color and pays little attention to the experiences of lesbians of color. In order to explore feelings of intragroup marginalization and its influence on feelings of belonging and sociopolitical involvement, this study examined sociopolitical involvement among Black SGL women. As a group that often experiences race, gender, sexuality, and class based oppression, Black SGL women provide the perfect paradigm through which to examine intragroup marginalization and its impact on feelings of belonging.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data used in this study come from a 2010 survey administered by the Social Justice Sexuality Project. The purpose of this project was to collect data on the experiences of LGBT people of color concerning the following five themes: identity (both racial and sexual), physical/mental health, family, religion/spirituality, and sociopolitical involvement. Data were
collected from over 5,000 respondents throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The current article focuses on the subset of 664 women who identified as Black.

The Black women within this sample were between 15 and 81 years of age, with a mean age of 37. A little over one-third of the respondents identify as single (36%) and almost half are parents (45%). Most respondents live in urban areas (74%) and 36% live in the southern part of the U.S. The average respondent identified as being politically liberal. The level of education among the respondents ranged from less than high school (3.3%) to graduate/professional school (8.1%). A majority of the respondents (25.8%) reported having at least some college education, with 19.2% reporting having a bachelor’s degree. The reported household income ranged from under $8,500 (9.2%) to over $100,000 a year (8.9%). (Please see Table I for demographic information.)

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We used the term “same-gender loving,” an Afrocentric term stemming from the early 1990s (Melancon 2008), which is used by many Blacks to describe not only their sexual orientation, but also their intimate relationships with people of the same gender. This term is used as a reaction to more Eurocentric terms such as “homosexual” and “bisexual” because it reduces the focus on sexual activity and instead highlights the loving relationships that Black individuals can have with those of the same gender. Thus,

[same-gender loving] challenges [homophobia, heterosexism, and racism in America] and, thereby, serves as a pragmatic and ideological site of resistance… [It] acknowledges the multiplicity and diverse ways of loving and sexuality, it allows for a more complex and inclusive self-definition of – [B]lack sexuality. Moreover, it also challenges the ethnic invisibility, as well as the inscribed ‘[W]hiteness,’ that gay and lesbian discourses and queer theory largely produce. (Melancon 2008: 645)
Importantly, SGL takes into account the multiple identities, both racial and sexual, of the respondents in the sample. A vast majority of the respondents identified as being attracted to women, and a small minority of the sample (3%) identified as heterosexual. Since heterosexual identified women attended these LGBT social and cultural events in which the surveys were distributed and took part in the study, we included them in the sample of women. By virtue of these heterosexual respondents being in a queer space and completing the survey, they are same-gender loving. As such, SGL is used to describe the women in this sample as this term encompasses all of the identities (lesbian, bisexual, queer, same-gender loving, heterosexual, etc.) described by the women in the sample.

Measures

This paper focuses on the correlates of sociopolitical involvement among a sample of Black SGL women in both LGBT and people of color (POC) organizations and events. There were eleven measures.

Demographic variables included age, sexual orientation, relationship status, having children, born in the U.S. or not, residing in an urban, suburban, or rural area, being a resident of the southern part of the U.S., political views, education, and income.

LGBT Sociopolitical Involvement (alpha = .770) consisted of the prompt “Thinking about LGBT groups, organizations, and activities in general, during the past 12 months, how have you: (Check one box per question)” followed by six items: participated in political events, participated in social or cultural events, read newspapers or magazines, used the internet, received goods and/or services, and donated money to an organization. Items were scored on 6-point Likert scales where 1=never and 6=more than once a week.
POC Sociopolitical Involvement (alpha = .837) consisted of the prompt “Thinking about groups, organizations, and activities for people of color, during the past 12 months, how often have you: (Check one box per question)” followed by the same six items as above.

Connection to LGBT Community (alpha = .763) consisted of three items (e.g., “I feel a bond with other LGBT people”) scored on 6-point Likert scales where 1=strongly disagree and 6=strongly agree.

Outness (alpha = .899) was a six-point scale about outness to various groups (e.g., family, religious community) and items were scored on 5-point Likert scales where 1=none to 5=all.

Family Support consisted of one item: “As a LGBT person, how much do you now feel supported by your family?” with the 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=not at all supported to 7=they don’t know I’m LGBT.

Comfort in LGBT Communities consisted of the item “How often have you felt uncomfortable in your LGBT community because of your race and ethnicity?” and Comfort in Racial Communities consisted of the item “How often have you felt uncomfortable in your racial or ethnic community because of your sexual orientation?” Both items had 6-point Likert scales from 1=always to 6=never.

Sexual Identity Importance consisted of the item “Do you feel that your sexual orientation is an important part of your identity?” and Racial Identity Importance consisted of the item “Do you feel that your racial or ethnic status is an important part of your identity?” Both items were scored with 6-point Likert scales where 1=not at all important to 6=extremely important.
Models

In order to explore the effects of identity and community on the LGBT and POC sociopolitical involvement of Black SGL women, four models were run. The first examined community connectedness (Connection to LGBT Community, Outness, Family Support, Comfort in LGBT Communities, and Comfort in Racial Communities) on level of LGBT sociopolitical involvement. The second model examined community connectedness and identity (Sexual Identity Importance, Racial Identity Importance, and Sexual Orientation) on level of LGBT sociopolitical involvement. The third model examined community connectedness on level of POC sociopolitical involvement. Finally, the fourth model examined community connectedness as well as identity on level of POC sociopolitical involvement.

RESULTS

For the first two models of the multivariate analyses, LGBT Sociopolitical Involvement was the dependent variable (see Table II). Women who felt more connected to the LGBT community and were out to more people had higher levels of LGBT sociopolitical involvement. However, quite surprising and somewhat counter-intuitively, the greater the comfort these women had with the LGBT community, the lower their LGBT sociopolitical involvement. Family support and comfort in racial communities had no impact on LGBT sociopolitical involvement. All of these relationships held when the importance of identity measures was introduced into the models (see Model II), as well as when several demographic variables were included (see footnote on Table II).

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Insert Table II about here
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When POC Sociopolitical Involvement was the dependent variable (Models III and IV), similar results emerged. This may not be too surprising given that the women in the sample represent participation in both LGBT communities as well as POC communities. Therefore, as with LGBT sociopolitical involvement, when examining POC sociopolitical involvement for the Black women in this study, connection to LGBT communities had a positive impact, comfort in LGBT communities had a negative impact, and family support had no impact (see Model III). However, differences also emerged. For example, being out to more people was not statistically significant. Additionally, the more comfortable the women felt in their racial communities, the higher their POC sociopolitical involvement. Nonetheless, as with LGBT sociopolitical involvement, all of these relationships held when the importance of identity measures was introduced into the models (see Model IV), as well as when several demographic variables were included (see footnote on Table II).

Finally, it is worth noting that while comfort in racial communities was not a significant predictor of LGBT sociopolitical involvement (see Model II), it was positively significant for POC sociopolitical involvement (see Model IV). Similarly, the importance of racial identity was a significant predictor of LGBT sociopolitical involvement.

**DISCUSSION**

The analyses presented in this paper provide a more nuanced account of the experiences of SGL Black women and their LGBT and POC sociopolitical involvement. The findings of this study support previous research which maintained that sociopolitical involvement is often determined by the sense of belongingness in a community (Flores et al. 2009; Heath and Mulligan 2008). However, the findings here contradict research arguing that demographic
variables such as age, income, and education significantly impact civic engagement (Sander and Putnam 2006; Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995). These contradictions could be due to the specific measures used in this study and also to our focus on SGL Black women.

The strengths of this study include the large sample size and the overall geographic representation of the sample. The primary limitation of this study includes the sample itself. As these women were recruited at both LGBT and POC events, it is likely that these women are not truly representative of the general Black SGL population. This sample population may be more likely to participate in sociocultural events and activities, or may see this participation as being more vital to their identity development than women who do not attend these events. In addition, these women are more educated and have higher income levels than the general population of Black women.

It was quite unexpected that the greater levels of comfort in LGBT communities would have a negative impact on both measures of sociopolitical involvement. It is possible that women are very active in these communities when they are first coming out, or move to a new location, or are trying to find a lover. Once they have friends and have moved in with a lover, they may have less desire to get involved in organized sociopolitical activities. This finding may also be reflective of research purporting that civic engagement is an important coping mechanism for those facing multiple levels of minority-based stress (Balsam et al. 2011; Poynter and Washington 2005). In short, when SGL Black women feel alienated from the LGBT community, their coping strategy may be to become all the more sociopolitically involved.

This study was focused on sociopolitical involvement and feelings of belonging to LGBT communities, so it did not inquire about respondents’ connectedness or feelings of belonging to POC communities; however, it did assess comfort in racial communities based on their sexual
orientation. Thus it is unlikely that the results of this study would be replicated if participants were recruited in people of color spaces. Future research could also examine the influence of community connectedness to both activist and non-activist volunteerism within both LGBT and POC communities. Importantly, future research should examine sociopolitical involvement among Black SGL men as well as examine the experiences of other SGL women and men of color. In addition, future qualitative research might investigate how these women understand their level of connection to their community, their racial and sexual identity, and its effect on their own levels of multiple types of sociopolitical involvement.

The implications of this study are particularly interesting because the most important variable for sociopolitical involvement is simply feeling accepted, particularly by the LGBT community. Black feminist theory argues that sociopolitical involvement is an important part of Black women’s experiences (Hill Collins 2008). Historically, Black women have played a key role in not only the push for civil rights, education, housing, and health care rights, but they have also been the backbone and primary contributor to the Black community’s most influential institution: the Black Church. Additionally, Black women were also active in the civil rights, Black power, lesbian and gay, as well as the women’s rights movements. If Black women report high levels of community acceptance within the LGBT community, they have the potential to serve as leaders and agents of change for the LGBT community.
REFERENCES


Table II
Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the
LGBT and POC Sociopolitical Involvement of Black Women
(betas in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LGBT Sociopolitical Involvement</th>
<th>POC Sociopolitical Involvement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model I</td>
<td>Model IIa</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected to LGBT Community</td>
<td>.284*** (.335)</td>
<td>.278*** (.328)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outness</td>
<td>.130*** (.037)</td>
<td>.123*** (.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>.006 (.009)</td>
<td>.009 (.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort in LGBT Communities</td>
<td>-.110*** (-.157)</td>
<td>-.112*** (-.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort in Racial Communities</td>
<td>.016 (.024)</td>
<td>.017 (.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Identity Importance</td>
<td>.030 (.041)</td>
<td>- .025 (-.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Identity Importance</td>
<td>- .021 (-.031)</td>
<td>.068* (.094)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>- .063 (-.011)</td>
<td>- .101 (-.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.285***</td>
<td>1.273***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>.158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† p≤.10  *p≤.05  **p≤.01  ***p≤.001

a The following demographic variables were included: single, has ever parented, age, foreign born, big city resident, south resident, political views, education, and income. However, none were significant and therefore did not impact the above results.