



“It’s like Slapping Somebody in the Face in the Middle of Sex”: An Intersectional Exploration of Emotional Abuse in Queer Relationships

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Abstract

Purpose This study identifies and analyzes missed opportunities to examine how race and racism intersect with intimate partner violence in queer relationships.

Method Guided by the concept of intersectionality, the article reviews the literature on emotional abuse in queer intimate relationships to understand when and how it engages race. The article features an in-depth examination of several studies that failed to consider the racial dimensions of emotional or psychological abuse, even when the sample was made up mainly of people of color. The article juxtaposes these “colorblind” studies with several excerpts from the LGBT Relationships Study. This study entailed interviewing 99 LGBT people in three major U.S. cities about their romantic relationships over the lifespan. Certain participants’ discussion of how racism surfaced in their intimate relationships suggest that sexual racism may constitute an overlooked form of emotional abuse.

Results Many studies failed to recruit racially diverse samples or recruited racially diverse samples but did not discuss the racial experiences of the participants. Although some of these studies attended to gender, age, power, and/or HIV status, they did not similarly examine how race intersects with emotional abuse.

Conclusion Scholars should be more intentional and curious about how racial discrimination may factor into emotional abuse. Interventions may include providing participants with specific examples of racial insults and asking whether they have encountered them. Scholars should also explore building bridges between the IPV literature and the literature on sexual racism because of convergence between these phenomena.

Keywords intimate partner violence · sexual racism · intersectionality · LGBTQ

Introduction

Over thirty years ago, Kimberlé Crenshaw identified “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Crenshaw suggested a cognitive and cultural bias that plays out in the domains of law, politics, and culture. The dominant culture tends to think of “race,” “gender,” and “class” as separate experiences. People typically organize their work around a “single categorical axis,” overlooking or disregarding the intersections among multiple categories of experience. The effects of this bias are first that it “erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and

remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140). Moreover, the single-axis framework blinkers our vision, limiting the ability to perceive and combat discrimination. Discrimination is more complex and layered than anti-discrimination lawyers and activists typically realize. Even though multiple systems of oppression often overlap to make people vulnerable, Crenshaw documents the pervasive tendency to “compartmentalize experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.167).

Crenshaw subsequently published *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, which applied intersectionality to intimate partner violence (IPV) involving heterosexuals. She wrote:

Focusing on two dimensions of male violence against women—battering and rape—I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product

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of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1243-44).

For example, Crenshaw argued that policy makers had failed to consider how women of color, although vulnerable to violence from their partners, were reluctant “to subject their private lives to the scrutiny and control of a police force that is frequently hostile” to their racial/ethnic community (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1257). Critical race scholars, including Crenshaw, have also argued that “words can wound,” and emotional abuse may be understood as one application of this claim (Matsuda et al., 1993).

This essay seeks to extend Crenshaw’s pathbreaking lens to the context of intimate partner violence in queer relationships. Crenshaw is a legal scholar, but her framework of intersectionality has been utilized by scholars from various social science disciplines, including psychology and public health (Bowleg, 2008; Mohr & Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Meyer, 2008). I aim to illustrate the missed opportunities of a single axis inquiry into intimate partner violence in queer relationships and to suggest how an intersectional framework could expand and deepen the literature. I will refer to the category of intimate partner violence in queer relationships (i.e., a relationship in which at least one of the partners does not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender) by the acronym of “QIPV.” Alternative terms such as “same sex intimate partner violence” risk excluding the experiences of bisexual and transgender people who may be in relationships with a partner of a different sex. Although most of the studies that I review were written decades after Crenshaw’s foundational articles on intersectionality, many seem to see race as something outside of queer relationships and of minimal relevance to the study of QIPV.

In truth, the relationship experiences of queer people of color are broader and more complex than the categories and filters that scholars often use to analyze intimate partner violence. Some QIPV analyses largely ignore queer people of color because of methodological choices that skew the samples towards relatively affluent, White participants. For example, one study identified subjects through Facebook advertisements directed at men who had “indicated an interest in men on their user profiles” (Finneran et al., 2012, p. 262). This requirement that a man publicly express his sexual orientation in his Facebook profile may have contributed to the predominance of White participants even in South Africa and Brazil, which are racially diverse countries (Finneran et al., 2012). Yet even when researchers

make efforts to identify and include a racially diverse sample, too often the analytical framework implies that race is outside the relevant analysis (Houston & McKirnan, 2007). In effect, queer people of color and queer people in interracial relationships are included in these studies, but they are treated as if they left their experiences with race and racism at the door. These limitations fragment and fracture the lived experiences of queer people of color who experience IPV. They also distort the field’s analysis and capacity to understand how race interacts with QIPV.

To be sure, some studies do consider how race impacts IPV among queer populations. Much of this research seeks to determine whether queer people of color experience a greater risk of violence than their White queer counterparts (Pittman et al., 2022, Whitfield, D.L. et al., 2021). There is also a larger body of scholarship that considers how race intersects with IPV and focuses predominantly on heterosexual, cisgender people (Al’Uqdah et al., 2016, Taft et al., 2009). In addition, a small body of studies focuses on IPV among queer people of a particular racial or ethnic minority group (Kanuha, 2013). The risk of IPV studies that are explicitly focused on a particular racial/ethnic group is that mainstream scholars may overlook them, regarding them as tangential because of their specific focus. Because of pervasive racial stereotypes, these studies may also be misunderstood to suggest that particular ethnic minority groups are inherently violent, although some scholars carefully note these risks (Al’Uqdah et al., 2016, Kelly et al., 2020). Despite such risks, studies focused on a particular ethnic minority group or people of color generally may reveal vectors of vulnerability that might remain hidden in a larger study with a predominantly White sample.

This study reviews the mainstream literature on QIPV to examine closely the extent to which it engages race. The first section identifies structural and cultural factors that push race to the margins of much QIPV literature. The next section highlights several QIPV articles to demonstrate different ways in which scholars failed fully to consider race and racism. Most of this literature is “colorblind” in the sense that, even when participants of color are included in the study, the study seems uninterested in their experiences with racism. In the final part of this essay, I draw on excerpts from interviews conducted for the LGBT Relationships Study, which was grounded in intersectionality, to illustrate how racial power may be distributed in interracial relationships. A growing body of literature on “sexual racism” documents how racial exclusion, stereotypes, and unhealthy power dynamics may mold intimate relationships (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2015; Smith, 2017; Robinson, 2023). I argue that scholars should explore the intersection of sexual racism and intimate partner violence. To illustrate, a White man who utters a racial epithet during sex with

his Black partner (and without his partner's prior consent to him using that word) may be understood as engaging in sexual racism *and* emotional abuse. My analysis encourages IPV scholars seriously to consider whether certain manifestations of sexual racism should be incorporated into IPV frameworks and IPV scholarship.

Reasons for the Absence of Racial Analysis in Many QIPV Studies

Why is race rarely engaged in much of the QIPV literature? To be clear, my argument is not that most scholars in this field are intentionally hostile to engaging race and racism. The problem appears to stem primarily from cultural and unconscious biases. These elisions flow from the confluence of at least five factors. First, scholars may assume that people partner with someone of the same race, thus race does not matter in the relationship. Although it is true in the U.S. that many White people partner with other White people, interracial couples increasingly make up a significant subset of the population (Emens, 2009). Moreover, queer relationships are more likely to be interracial than their heterosexual counterparts (Kastanis and Wilson, 2014). Queer Asian-American, Latinx, and Native American people are particularly likely to partner with a White person (Kastanis and Wilson, 2014). Some scholarship suggests that queer people in interracial couples may have access to less social support than those in same-race relationships (LeBlanc et al., 2015). This diminished social support network may create a distinct vulnerability for those in abusive queer interracial relationships. Thus, the need to attend to race is especially important when studying queer relationships.

Second, scholars of QIPV may hold a “colorblind” perspective of their subject. In general, White Americans are socialized to deny the relevance of race (Apfelbaum et al., 2012). From a mainstream White American perspective, the practice of ignoring race is seen as a measure of racial equality (Norton et al., 2006). By contrast, Black people typically understand attention to race-consciousness to be integral to their ability to avoid discrimination and protect their health and well-being (Robinson, 2008). Thus, White researchers may not see the racial dimensions of QIPV because of how they have been socialized. This colorblind mindsets fuels what Crenshaw calls a “single-axis” form of analysis. Queer experiences are perceived as distinct from race, even though queer people of color tend to experience them as intertwined (Bérubé, 2001). A third and related factor is that many research teams include no or just one person of color (Goldenberg et al., 2016). That said, even some studies that are led by people of color fail closely to examine race and racism (Houston & McKirnan, 2007). However, in general, a scholar of color may be more likely than a White

researcher to raise race and argue for its inclusion in the analysis.

Fourth, to the extent that scholars of QIPV think of interracial couples, they may have a romanticized view of such relationships. That is, they may assume that White people who partner with a person of color are not racist or are anti-racist (Goel, 2007). Such scholars may assume that the love that the White person holds for her partner evidences a lack of racial animus. Accordingly, such scholars may not see the need to inquire whether the White partner has racist attitudes that may manifest in episodes of IPV. This is a facile, overly optimistic view of interracial relationships (Goel, 2007). Scholars ought not assume anti-racist attitudes and racial harmony in interracial relationships—the excerpts in the final section provide some counter-examples, including situations in which a person of color experienced racial harm, while their White partner seemed unaware of it. Of course scholars should not assume that queer interracial relationships involve racist abuse; they should explore the full range of positive and negative experiences in such relationships (Robinson, 2018). Researchers should develop measures that reflect intellectual curiosity as to how race may inform IPV in complex ways. The general failure to ask these questions means that we have limited data that can verify or undermine assumptions about how power is exercised in interracial relationships.

Finally, the failure clearly to define “emotional abuse” is prevalent in QIPV literature. The American Psychological Association (APA) has defined “emotional abuse” as “a pattern of behavior in which one person deliberately and repeatedly subjects another to nonphysical acts that are detrimental to behavioral and affective functioning and overall mental well-being” (American Psychological Association¹). The APA cautions that “[r]esearchers have yet to formulate a universally agreed upon definition of the concept, but they have identified a variety of forms that emotional abuse may take, including verbal abuse; intimidation and terrorization; humiliation and degradation; exploitation; harassment; rejection and withholding of affection; isolation; and excessive control” (American Psychological Association).

My review of the QIPV literature on emotional abuse (also known as “psychological abuse”) suggests that not infrequently studies fail to define this concept or provide an incomplete definition (Goldenberg, et al., 2016; Kubicek, et al., 2015). When QIPV studies do define “emotional” or “psychological” abuse, they rarely reference race (Whitfield, et al., 2021, p. NP6047). The general ambiguity and inattention to defining the core concept may facilitate the omission of racial dynamics and vulnerability.

¹ American Psychological Association. (n.d.) *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. <https://dictionary.apa.org/emotional-abuse>.

How Race Falls Through the Analytical Cracks

The section argues that the mainstream literature on queer intimate partner violence often imagines intimate queer relationships and violence within those relationships as if they have nothing to do with race and racism. It seems that race and racism are often assumed to be of minimal relevance to power dynamics and vulnerability to abuse in queer relationships (Kubicek, 2015). For instance, a study by Houston & McKirnan asked participants in Chicago about “physical and sexual threats, physical humiliation, or control in a relationship” (Houston & McKirnan, 2007). Although the sample included mostly people of color (just 22% of participants were White), the authors appear not to have raised as a possibility how race could be wielded to threaten or humiliate a partner. While the study found no differences in prevalence of IPV based on race or ethnicity, the authors seemingly failed to inquire about distinct racial experiences. Similarly, a study by Whitfield (2021, p. NP6047) relied on a question that defined “emotional abuse” as “e.g., [being] called derogatory names, yelled at, [or] ridiculed.” The study included examples that were specific to bisexual and transgender participants: “withholding medications or funds necessary for a transgender partner’s medical treatment, and telling a bisexual partner they should be gay/lesbian” (Whitfield, 2021, p. NP6045). Along the same lines, the study could have included an example of racial abuse, including something like “derogatory names, such as a racial epithet.”

A study by Salter (2021), provided participants with six vignettes describing scenarios of abuse and asked participants what advice they would give a friend who experienced that treatment. One vignette specifically addressed HIV-positive people, some of whom make up a subset of the LGBTQ community, by referencing “threats to ‘out’ a partner’s HIV status.” Another vignette in the Salter study involved a man “putting down his partner in front of others.” This could easily have been made race-specific, for instance, “putting down his partner *because of his race or ethnicity*.” These scholars’ attention to gender identity, bisexuality, and HIV did not extend to race.

The missed opportunities on race are most glaring when the study purports to examine structural inequalities. Goldenberg’s study on “struggling to be the alpha” is illustrative (Goldenberg, et al., 2016). The study was designed to reveal “the structural power imbalances that can occur in same-sex male relationships.” The sample was unusually diverse, including 53% Black men. The analysis considers income, education, employment, and age differences as potential factors in QIPV, yet it largely overlooks race. The only reference to Black identity is a comment by a man of unspecified race who claims that it is harder for Black

men to come out. This idea is not explored with any depth or nuance. It is difficult to understand how race barely surfaced in focus group conversations including multiple Black men in Atlanta. However, the fact that a White gay man led all the conversations may have signaled to the Black men that racial dimensions of IPV were not of interest to the researchers. An excerpt further reveals the scholars’ limited engagement of race. A participant of unspecified race/ethnicity/immigration status reported the following:

My ex-boss, he was about 50, and he has a little house boy that he calls his partner, for two years, and he was only about 25, doesn’t have a college degree, doesn’t have a job, and I don’t think he’s even here in the state legally, so, we would see a lot of physical abuse, where the relationship got so bad that the 25 year old just said I had enough of this, y’know, two years of hell, and he actually broke my boss’s nose, and actually had knife and weapon because ...he just couldn’t deal with it any more, it just got so bad that the mental violence, that, y’know, the passive aggressive, that ‘if you don’t do this I’m gonna report you, I’m gonna deport you,’ whatever, had just gotten so bad that he just finally said enough (Goldenberg, et al., 2016, p. 880).

The authors’ brief commentary of this episode refers to the “little house boy” as having a distinct “nationality,” but never reports his race or ethnicity or seriously engages his partner’s threat to deport him. (The sample did not include any Latinx or Asian-American participants or report citizenship status of the participants.) The article’s reference to the “victimized partner”—which appears to be a reference to the younger man breaking the older man’s nose—makes one doubt whether the authors even recognized that a threat to deport one’s partner is a form of emotional abuse, even though the participant characterized the threat as “mental violence.” In fact, there were two “victimized partners.” The authors did not unpack the racial and immigration dynamics of the excerpt, the racial perspective of the man recounting his ex-boss’s experience, and the participant’s derogatory framing of his ex-boss’s relationship (“he has a little house boy that he calls his partner”) (Goldenberg, et al., 2016, p. 880). Although the study included an excerpt brimming with suggestions of race, ethnicity and citizenship inequality, the authors did not explore these dimensions.

Race is also conspicuously absent in a study by Kubicek and her co-authors that was “designed to provide insight into how power is conceptualized within YMSM [young men who have sex with men] relationships and the role it may play in relationship challenges” (Kubicek, 2015, p. 83). The authors conducted eleven focus groups with a total of 84 participants in the racially diverse city of Los Angeles.

To their credit, the authors recruited substantial numbers of Latinx, Black, and multiracial participants; the sample was just 15% White. Moreover, the authors stratified the groups by race, although they did not explain how this approach related to their research questions. Focus group discussion disclosed several factors that participants perceived as linked to power imbalances in YMSM relationships, including sex roles (top/bottom/versatile), notions of masculinity and femininity, maturity and relationship experience (with men who had more relationship experience generally perceived as holding more power), breach in trust, money and education, and outness. Out of all of these power dynamics, the only one that was described as intersecting with race was masculinity. The complete analysis of the relationship between masculinity and race follows:

Some respondents felt that masculinity was partially constructed by one's race or ethnicity, relating that one could dress in 'booty shorts and a tank top' in certain cultures such as Asian and some Caucasian communities—'a little surfer guy or a little hippie guy'—and still be perceived as masculine. However, this would not be considered masculine in Latino or Black communities (Kubicek, 2015, p. 93).

While this point—that Black and Latino men are held to higher standards of masculinity—is valuable, the authors did not explore its implications for power imbalances in interracial or same-race YMSM relationships. They left the point dangling in the air. Further, the discussion of the other vectors of power, such as money and education, contained no consideration of race despite well-known racial disparities in terms of wealth and educational opportunity. Finally, the researchers developed a model that catalogued the various vectors of power listed above. It also identified the following “societal influences,” which are said to contribute to QIPV: “homophobia, limited social bonding, marriage laws, acceptability of violence between men, sense of value as a gay man.” Race appears nowhere in the model. Nor does the model acknowledge that race could shape factors such as one's “sense of value as a gay man” and “acceptability of violence between men.” The study recruited a robust sample of gay men of color, but in the end, their racial experiences were left on the cutting room floor.

Attention to Gender, but not its Intersection with Race

Scholars generally understand that gender identity and gender roles are critical elements of QIPV. Thus, most scholars anticipate that the experiences of gay men and lesbians with QIPV may diverge because they are subject to different

gender socialization. For example, IPV in a lesbian relationship may be minimized, even by the victim, because of a gender stereotype that women cannot inflict real harm (Hassouneh & Glass, 2008). Meanwhile, violence in a gay male relationship may be downplayed as a natural part of male identity, i.e., “boys will be boys” (Kubicek, 2015). Some scholars also differentiate between bisexual men and bisexual women, who may have distinct experiences and vulnerabilities, setting them apart from each other, as well as gay men and lesbians.

However, this attention to gender falters when it comes to the examination of how race inflects gender. A significant body of scholarship demonstrates that race and racism operate to sculpt distinct experiences and forms of vulnerability among gay men of color (Ro et al., 2013; Wilson, 2009; Han, 2017; Raymond & McFarland, 2009; Robinson & Frost, 2018). These racialized, divergent expectations are especially pronounced for Black and Asian-American men. Black men are widely perceived as “hypermasculine,” while Asian men are regarded as naturally effeminate. These racial stereotypes may dictate how men of color are supposed to behave within the gay community and within their relationships. For instance, some authors argue that gay men struggle to be the “alpha” in their intimate relationships, and this competition contributes to QIPV (Goldenberg, 2016). Studies attempting to verify this theory should account for how Black men are often perceived as “hypermasculine” and Asian-American men are widely denigrated as feminine within the mainstream gay community (Wilson, 2009; Han, 2017). Asian-American men often enter dating and relationship contexts saddled with a perceived masculinity deficit (Lim, 2021; Han, 2017). Because many gay men perceive masculinity and desirability as interwoven, the “emasculatation” of Asian gay men creates a perception that such men are less attractive and less powerful in their relationships. By contrast, Black men must shoulder the expectation that they are “alphas,” or “hypermasculine.” This pervasive stereotype may mean that Black men must do extra “identity work” to meet a heightened expectation of masculinity. Black men who display feminine mannerisms or who identify as bottoms may experience a devaluation reminiscent of the subordination of Asian-American men.

Moreover, because Black men more than any other group in U.S. society are regarded as inherently violent and criminal, Black men may be uniquely vulnerable to false accusations of abuse. Black men may be subject to an identity-based “double bind”: they must demonstrate masculinity to be valued in the mainstream gay community, but perceived dominance may make them vulnerable to false accusations of abuse and/or an aggressive police response. A Black man considering calling the police because his Black partner is abusing him may wrestle with the fear that

police will kill or injure his partner because even unarmed Black men are viewed as unusually dangerous (Carbado, 2017). Some research suggests that Black same-sex male couples are the most likely of all same-sex couples to be arrested after a call to the police (Hirschel & McCormack, 2021). Relatedly, a Black man who suffers abuse in a relationship may worry that police officers will not perceive him as vulnerable because he is Black. If norms of hegemonic masculinity expect men to fight back, be self-reliant, and not ask for help, Black men may experience intensified assumptions that they are naturally strong, invulnerable, and cannot be victimized (Robinson, 2011).

While these pressures influence Black men who date and partner primarily with other Black men, the effects of these racialized masculinity stereotypes may be most pernicious when a man of color dates or partners with a White or non-Black man. In short, scholars who fail to explore the racialized dimensions of masculinity among gay, bisexual, and queer men will emerge with insights and interventions that mainly reflect the experiences of White men. This also means that such scholars' understanding of gender dynamics in male intimate relationships will necessarily be limited and incomplete.

Although the body of scholarship on racial differences among queer women is less developed (Moore, 2011), especially with respect to IPV (Hill, 2012), Black women have long been subject to the gender stereotype that they are less feminine than White women (Crenshaw, 1994; Goff, 2008). In an interracial queer relationship, Black women may be perceived as a "butch" or "stud," and, as the more masculine partner, perceived as predisposed toward violence. Black women may also be stereotyped as "innately promiscuous, animalistic, aggressive, and therefore not truly victimized" (Hill, 2012, p.405). Queer Latina, Asian-American and Indigenous women may also be vulnerable because of gendered racial stereotypes. In short, investigations of QIPV may miss important differences in lived experience by treating race as irrelevant. The next section attempts to suggest some of the distinctive experiences that queer people of color may have to navigate in an abusive interracial relationship.

Sexual Racism as Emotional Abuse

It's like slapping somebody in the face in the middle of sex.

--Carl.

Methodology

This section draws on excerpts from interviews from the LGBT Relationships Study to demonstrate how racial power may be wielded in queer relationships. These excerpts indicate the types of scenarios that scholars may miss when their investigation of IPV is "colorblind." The LGBT Relationships Study is a qualitative study that began interviewing LGBTQ people in fall 2015 and completed interviews in summer 2019. The study is grounded in intersectionality, and it explores how systems of subordination, such as racism, patriarchy, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, converge to produce distinct forms of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989). This analytical lens shaped the construction of the research team, the sampling method, and the drafting of the interview questions. The interview protocol contained multiple questions concerning the general topics of experiences with relationships and discrimination over the participant's entire life span. The interview protocol covered several specific topics including race, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, family dynamics, sexual behavior, stigma of various forms, and health issues, including HIV, alcohol and substance abuse, and mental health concerns.

The research team obtained participants from a wide range of venues associated with LGBTQ populations in three major cities, Chicago, New York City, and the San Francisco Bay Area. A list of venues created for the Generations Study served as a model for this study.² A team of young and LGBTQ-identified research assistants helped to update the database, adding newer venues and removing venues that were no longer active.

The study design deliberately limited the number of participants from each venue to two, being particularly cautious about overreliance on mainstream LGBTQ venues, such as Pride parades and bars and nightclubs. Other types of venues included coffee shops, bookstores, barbershops, street fairs, people of color-oriented community groups, and churches. The study also recruited participants through ads placed on Facebook. In addition, the researchers tapped their professional networks for potential participants. Finally, through snowball sampling, participants who sat for interviews referred people in their social networks. Advertisements for the study included a link to a brief online screening questionnaire to assess eligibility. Participants were eligible if they were between ages 18–65, did not identify as heterosexual and cisgender, and had any experience with dating or relationships.

The study design set quotas to make sure to include a substantial number of Black, Latinx, and Asian-American participants. Transgender and non-binary people were

² For information on this study, see <http://www.generations-study.com/>.

oversampled because these groups have often been overlooked in dating and relationships research. Interviews typically lasted 60–90 min and took place in a research office or private location of the participant's choosing. Participants received a \$50 pre-paid visa card as a token of appreciation for taking part in the study.

The team interviewed 100 participants. The recording of one interview was defective, which resulted in an ultimate sample of 99 interviews. People of color (68%) made up the majority of the participants. 30% of our sample identified as Latinx. 23% of participants identified as Black; 13% identified as Asian-American; and 31% identified as mixed race (many of whom also identified as Latinx). 32% identified as White. 56% of participants reported that they were assigned male sex at birth; 41% were assigned female sex at birth; and 1% identified as intersexed. The majority of participants were cisgender; nearly one-third of participants were not cisgender: 10% were transgender, and 15% were gender-queer. 7% identified their gender as “something else” and wrote in a particular identity or identities, such as “straight male with queer tendencies.”

This study is subject to some limitations. The LGBT Relationships study asked about sexual racism and IPV in two different sections of the interview guide, but it was not designed to explore how these phenomena intersect. Although the interview guide extensively engaged racial discrimination in queer relationships, its questions about IPV were brief and could have been more specific in distinguishing physical from emotional abuse. The epiphany that sexual racism and IPV might intersect occurred to me after completing interviews and was in the context of my immersion in the sexual racism literature, while also lecturing on sexual abuse and the #MeToo Movement. Future studies should be more intentional in excavating the intersection of QIPV and sexual racism.

Results and Discussion

Although the following excerpts do not involve physical violence, they show the power imbalances that some queer people of color must manage when in interracial relationships. Further, because the QIPV literature recognizes verbal, emotional, and psychological harm as a category of abuse, these excerpts raise the question whether certain manifestations of sexual racism should be understood as a type of emotional or psychological violence and studied systematically within the IPV framework. Consider the following example: “It’s like slapping somebody in the face in the middle of sex,” said Carl, a tall, muscular, Black man who wears dreadlocks, as he described a hookup with a White man that went awry. Carl, who lives in the San Francisco

Bay Area, described having White men pursue him because they expected him to be dominant in bed. Carl explained: “if you’re a Black man and you’re with someone outside your race, they always tend to, 90% of the time, they tend to want you to be the aggressive.”

During one of Carl’s hookups, his White sex partner blurted, “Fuck me, you nigga. Fuck me, you big Black nigga.” This phrase made Carl “shriveled” and recoil. Carl compared the sudden utterance of a racial epithet during an intimate moment to an unexpected slap from his partner. While one can imagine a couple agreeing in advance that one will choke or slap the other during sex, such an act requires consent in order not to be categorized as a form of IPV. Carl’s analogy raises the question as to whether a verbal attack that is not part of consensual role play should similarly be understood as a form of verbal, emotional or psychological abuse. Other Black people in the study described being exposed to similar unwanted racial rhetoric in intimate contexts.

Further, Carl’s experience suggests a far more complex understanding of gender roles in queer relationships than is typical in the QIPV literature. Carl, who is sexually versatile, reported pressure to play the top role with White men. He said that such men were drawn to his body size and color and expected those physical traits to determine the contours of their sexual relations. At the same time, Carl’s White sex partner can be understood as trying to turn the tables on Carl in the middle of sex. By unleashing the N word, the White man sought to put Carl “in his place,” or at least a Black man in Carl’s position could have reasonably interpreted the epithet in that way. The White man’s message may have been essentially, “You’re on top of me, but as a White man, I still hold the power.” Carl described such White men as subject to a conflicted mindset: a simultaneous desire to denigrate Black men and submit to them:

It’s like you [White men] want them [Black men] to dominate you [in bed], you want them to lead you, you want to surrender to them, it’s all this stuff that’s so opposite of what the other side is [outside of the bedroom], so that’s so weird that you would want me to tell you what to do. .. but in the reality, when we walk out the door, your family or the way you think, especially if you’re White American, you’re thinking, ‘Oh, they’re beneath me.’

Carl’s story suggests that sexual racism may be a tool that some White queer people use to teach their partners of color their value in the relationship and in the broader LGBTQ community. From this perspective, a partner of color’s value is tied to his race and his willingness to embody a particular racial stereotype.

Asian-American men in the LGBT Relationships Study also reported grappling with interactions that taught them that many White men perceived their racial identity as limiting their sexual possibilities. Kevin, who is Asian-American and identifies as a gay man and gender non-conforming, recalled the formative experience of hooking up with White male sex partners on Craigslist beginning when he was a teenager in San Francisco. Kevin recalled that most Craigslist profiles that mentioned Asians excluded them as partners or expressed a fetishized desire for Asians. He often felt he was being plugged into a White man's sexual script without them caring about his interest in and consent to their racial fantasy. Moreover, because structural racism (the widespread devaluation and stereotyping of Asian gay men in San Francisco) constrained Kevin's sexual opportunities, he did not see himself as being in a position to negotiate different terms of the sexual exchange with any particular White male partner. Kevin reported that "[t]here were assumptions about how I would treat them, how I would service them, the expectation that I was just more of a receptacle, and my pleasure wasn't really taken into account." To these White men, "I'm just a hole. It doesn't matter if it hurts or if I feel any certain way about it." In this comment, Kevin implies that some White partners may have refused to stop penetrating him when it hurt him. He describes them as indifferent to his pain. This suggests that Kevin may have been sexually assaulted. Moreover, at least one encounter involved a verbal assault.

In Kevin's first online hookup, a White man who was topping him yelled "chink" right before ejaculating. "It was like he was getting off on [uttering the racial epithet]. That was pretty traumatic," Kevin stated. Kevin's story is particularly concerning because of the young age at which he confronted virulent racial stereotypes. Whether they intended to or not, these (typically older) White men who had sex with Kevin were teaching him his value in the gay community. If he wanted to have access to sex with White men, he would have to conform to the role of debased, submissive, Asian bottom. He would have to act as if he was an object—"just a hole"—instead of a full person.

Kelsey, a lesbian in New York City who is half-White and half-Cuban and does not speak Spanish, had a related experience in a long-term relationship. Kelsey's partner, Linda, was a White woman who was fluent in several languages, including Spanish. Linda would speak Spanish during sex, and this made Kelsey uncomfortable. Kelsey explained: "I'm like, 'I don't speak Spanish. I can't do this with you.' When you do that, even though I tell you that I don't speak Spanish, it tells me that you're not really seeing who I am here. You're just having a fantasy that I'm here to serve that." Linda, who had "only dated Hispanic women," continued to speak Spanish while having sex with

Kelsey. One way of making meaning of this dynamic was that Linda was teaching Kelsey who she would need to be if she wanted to be Linda's partner. She would need to play up her Cuban heritage, at least in the bedroom. By pressuring Kelsey to "act like a Latina," Linda aligned Kelsey with the other Latinas Linda had dated.

This discussion has begun to make manifest a unique form of harm that queer people of color may experience in coercive intimate relationships. Legal scholarship has theorized that people of color experience pressure to "work their identities" to assimilate into various institutions, such as the workplace (Carbado & Gulati, 2000; Yoshino, 2002). For example, a Black person may face pressure to play down or play up their Blackness in certain contexts (Carbado & Gulati, 2000). Moreover, legal scholars have argued that sexual harassment can be a means of "gender regulation," typically feminizing women and masculinizing men (Franke, 1997, p.772).

These ideas may be extended to the context of emotional abuse and sexual racism. Prior scholarship has established that many young people and other newcomers to the LGBTQ community may search for a framework for understanding how to conduct a queer relationship (Kubicek, 2015). This search for meaning and order may involve exploring how to adapt heterosexual scripts and also how race intersects with desire (Robinson & Frost, 2018). Exposure to sexual racism, as exemplified by the excerpts above, may instill a constrained sense of self in these people, channeling them into racial stereotypes. Linda may have taught Kelsey that White partners would expect her to play up her Latina heritage in order to be desired. Through multiple interactions with White men, Carl apparently learned that his color, height, and muscularity slotted him into a dominant top role, even though that jarred with his personal sense of self. Repeated interactions with White men who automatically assumed that he would perform the role of an abject, Asian bottom may have limited Kevin's ability to imagine and enact a broader sense of self in the gay community and in his relationships.

These participants' experiences were consistent with a broader theme in the LGBT Relationship Study. Namely, multiple participants of color described being accosted in bars, clubs, and online by White people who linked their desirability to a racial fetish. For instance, a White woman told a prospective Black female partner that she had "jungle fever," and a Black man recounted a White man who said "I bet you're Black all over" (Robinson, 2023). Most observers might not think such offensive statements severe enough to constitute emotional abuse. However one resolves that question, these sexual advances seem to serve the same identity-channelling function: they may instruct their targets that their desirability stems from their Blackness and

their willingness to conform to stereotypes of “wild” Black sexuality. Moreover, in a separate article, I draw on multiple excerpts from the study to argue that White privilege fuels sexual racism (Robinson, 2023). Emotional abuse may be just one of many ways in which certain White queer people try to put queer people of color in their place. Future scholarship on IPV should ask more specific questions about how power operates in interracial relationships. These questions should include the exploration of race-based insults, pressure to inhabit a racialized sex role, and non-consensual sexual racism.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion sought to make manifest the racialized power dynamics in some queer, interracial relationships. These excerpts sit at the intersection of sexual racism and emotional abuse, yet such scenarios have rarely surfaced in the QIPV scholarship. Although some scholarship attends to intersections with gender and age, scholars should also explore racial dynamics in abusive relationships. Recent events may have troubled the tendency of QIPV scholars to ignore racism. Virtually all the studies critiqued above were designed and conducted before spring 2020, when police officers murdered George Floyd and triggered an unprecedented, global protest movement. People of various races, notably including large numbers of White people, marched to condemn the murder of Floyd and other unarmed Black people and to support the Black Lives Matter (“BLM”) movement. This “racial uprising” sparked mainstream conversations on White people’s complicity in the endurance of White supremacy, concepts including White privilege and structural racism, and the goal of abolishing the police and mass incarceration. One idea that circulated at BLM protests and on social media during the racial uprising was “White silence is violence.”³

This provocative claim argues that White people remaining silent about or failing to pay attention to racism makes them complicit in the violence. What, we might ask, should this statement require of White scholars who study intimate partner violence?

The potential shift in race consciousness prompted by the racial uprising creates the possibility that researchers studying QIPV post-2020 will be more aware of the harms of ignoring race and assuming that IPV and racism are separate silos. Universities have been a key site of antiracism protests, and many universities have responded with new initiatives and policies that they have promoted as anti-racist interventions (Wood & Hudson, 2021).

This study calls for QIPV scholars to be aware that constructing a study that does not include people of color researchers and does not ask about racism will distort the study and effectively align it with the experiences of White people instead of reflecting the entire LGBTQ community. However, adding a “token” researcher of color may not shift the consciousness if that person is not race-conscious and empowered to ask critical questions about how the study intersects with race and racism. Each member of the research team should embrace the hard work of making a study intersectional, rather than delegating this burden to the person(s) of color on the research team. Further, scholars of QIPV, like everyone who studies LGBTQ relationships, should educate themselves on the broader literature on interracial relationships and obtain a clear-eyed view of the distinctive challenges and benefits experienced by people in interracial relationships. Finally, QIPV scholars should consider adding scholars of sexual racism to their research teams. Sexual racism scholars may be ideally situated to think through how sexual racism may constitute emotional violence and also identify how the sexual racism literature may benefit from looking to IPV frameworks. Sustained engagement with racism requires vigilance, as it is common for movements for change to dissipate; in time, scholars may fall back into easier, “colorblind” practices (Crenshaw, 1988). Scholars are just beginning to ascertain the significance and endurance of a possible shift in public consciousness because of the racial uprising, and they differ as to their skepticism that 2020 will lead to lasting, meaningful change (Dunivin, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021).

This study suggests that sexual racism fits within the definition of emotional or psychological abuse and yet is overlooked in many queer IPV studies. Intersectionality teaches that people who inhabit multiple stigmatized identities may experience distinct forms of violence and discrimination. Studies that do not explore such intersections may produce a flawed and narrow understanding of emotional abuse. Given the enduring importance of race in society and in intimate relationships, we cannot fully understand power and abuse unless we closely consider race and racism.

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³ For example, <https://twitter.com/blackoutdoors1/status/1374723419296702468?lang=en>.

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