

You're Better Respected When You Carry Yourself as a Man: Black Men's Personal Accounts of the Down Low "lifestyle"

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Abstract Although the notion of a down low life style, called various things at various times, has a long history in the black community, the past few years have been marked by an exponential increase in attention of this phenomenon in both the mainstream press and scholarly work. However, much of this work has focused on exploring whether men on the down low present a unique threat for HIV infection to black women. Currently, there exist very few scholarly works exploring the lives of black men who have sex with men and women that specifically address their own experiences living on the down low or how these men personally define what it means to be on the down low. In this article, we explore why black men who have sex with men and black men who have sex with men and women, including those who self-identify as gay, bisexual or as being on the down low, come to use the down low label and what it means to them to be on the down low.

Keywords Gay black men · Bisexuality · Down low

Introduction

Although the notion of a down low life style, often referred to as being “on the DL,” has a long history among both black and white men (Ford et al. 2007; Phillips 2005; Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2013), the past few years have been marked by an

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exponential increase in attention given to the phenomenon, specifically as it is thought to be practiced by black men. Much of this current work has focused on examining the down low phenomenon as a potential “bridge” for HIV transmission between male partners and female partners of men who keep their homosexual activity a secret from their female partners in order to explain the increasing rates of HIV infection among black women.

Yet despite this increase in attention, various attempts to explain the sexual behavior of men allegedly on the down low, and to assess HIV risk to black women because of that behavior, have led to mixed results. For example, in their study of non-gay identified, non-disclosing men who have sex with men and women (MSMW), Siegel et al. (2008) found that men reported significantly more male sexual partners than female sexual partners but reported more frequent sex with females than with males. More importantly, respondents in their study reported more instances of risky sexual behavior with steady partners of both sexes than with casual partners of either sex. In interpreting their results, the authors noted that the discrepancy in the number of sexual partners may indicate that these men are, indeed, in primary relationships with females but having casual sex with males. However, in a different study of MSM who considered themselves to be on the down low, Wolitski et al. (2006) found that although men who self-identified as being on the down low were more likely to engage in unsafe sex than men who did not and were more likely to have had a female sex partner than men who did not, few of the MSM who self-identified as being on the down low actually had a primary female partner. As such, self-identification of being on the down low did not necessarily include the desire to keep clandestine sexual activities from “unsuspecting” female partners or involve engaging in sexual activity with men while simultaneously being in a primary relationship with a woman. Rather, self-identification as being down low was independent of many of the men’s relationships with women. Bond et al. (2009) arrived at similar conclusions. In their study, they found that black men who self-identified as being on the down low were not more likely to engage in unsafe sex with women or men than black men who did not self-identify as being on the down low. Also, men who self-identified as being on the down low were more likely to also identify as bisexual rather than “straight,” indicating that they were not attempting to hide their sexual activity with other men. Their findings challenge conventional wisdom that down low men are solely attempting to hide their sexual activity by identifying as “straight” while engaging in clandestine sexual activity with men. Given their findings, it is possible that the down low is just another way of self-definition of sexual identity rather than an attempt to hide sexual behaviors. More importantly, being on the down low is not exclusive of other ways of sexual identification.

In addition, there is little agreement within the academic literature regarding how wide spread this practice is among black men, why black men continue to be allegedly on the down low, or what constitutes being on the down low. Although Barnshaw and Letukas (2010) found significant support that the down low phenomenon is wide spread among black and Latino men, the authors also noted that “there is no universal agreement that the down low refers to a behavior” (p. 487). As the authors noted:

In separate accounts, the down low may refer to an identity that is a transitional identity from straight to gay, or the down low may refer to an identity that is entirely separate from gay (p. 487)

Given these different accounts, there isn't a consensus as to what it means for these men to identify as being on the down low, with some scholars arguing that the down low can be seen as a transitioning period from heterosexual and homosexual identification and others arguing that the down low may be a way for black men to identify with their homosexual behavior but not with a "gay" identity that is largely perceived to be white (Malenbranche 2008; Millett et al. 2005). Also, disclosure of bisexual behavior among black men is much more complex than simply attempting to keep it a secret from female sexual partners. As Dodge et al. (2008) have found, bisexual black men's decision to disclose their bisexuality to both male and female sexual partners involves a number of different factors including length of the relationship, their own beliefs regarding how their bisexuality would be received, and a desire not to disappoint both male and female sexual partners.

Although there is evidence that black men are less likely to disclose same-sex activities than white men due to a number of various reasons (Benoit and Koken 2012) and men who do not disclose their same-sex sexual activities go to great lengths to conceal these activities from others, including their female sexual partners (Schrimshaw et al. 2010), previous studies have also found that black MSM are generally less likely to self-identify as being "gay" when compared to white men, even when they are open about their sexual preferences (Cochran et al. 2004). Viewed this way, it is possible that the down low may be a way of creating and claiming a new sexual-identification rather than a way of hiding one's sexual orientation. It is possible that men self-identify as being down low in order to reject the label "gay" rather than to hide their sexual orientation (Martinez and Sullivan 1998). For example, many homosexual black activists, both male and female, who are "out of the closet" by virtue of their public and political activism have rejected the label "gay" and opted for such terms as "same gender loving" (SGL) coined by scholar/activist Cleo Manago in the early 1990s (Roberts 2008). Much like the self-selected label of SGL, the down low may represent a way for black MSM who reject the label of "gay" for a variety of reasons having little to do with the rejection of themselves as men who have sex with men or as a way of hiding their sexual behavior from unsuspecting women.

Despite raising many possibilities about the lived experiences of black MSM, current research on the down low continue to neglect the central question of how black MSM define what it means to be on the down low, what entails being on the down low, or why some of them continue to self-identify as being on the down low, even when their sexual behavior is readily known by others. The question that still arise is, is being on the down low a way of hiding male to male sexual activity from female partners or is being on the down low something else entirely?

To date, there have been only two articles in the academic literature that specifically asked black men who have sex with men and women how they define what it means to be on the down low. In their exploratory study of six black men who have sex with men but don't identify as gay, Martinez and Hosek (2005) found

that the definition of being on the down low is not only contentious but also resisted by the men that the mainstream media may label as being on the down low. Although the authors explored issues of sexual risk, they did not expand their analysis to include why these men do not self-identify as gay or if they attempt to hide their sexual orientation from others by using the down low label. In addition, the authors don't address the central question of who identifies as being on the down low and why they do so. While there has been much conjecturing, there have been no studies to date that have explored what black men who have sex with men and women have to say about why they do or do not identify as being on the down low and if they do or do not disclose their sexual activities to others, particularly female sexual partners.

In a more recent study exploring the down low phenomenon among black men, Lapinski et al. (2010) found that men gave a number of different reasons for being on the down low. Specifically, the authors found that some men perceived the down low as an attempt to be identify themselves differently from the way that they perceived what it meant to be "gay," allowed them to have privacy over their sexual behaviors which they viewed as being of no concern to others, and an attempt to conform to masculine norms. While some participants in their study stated that it may be an attempt to hide their sexual behaviors from female sex partners, they also were quick to point out the impact that stigmatization of homosexuality, particularly in the black community, may have on leading more men to remain on the down low.

In this paper, we examine the down low phenomenon as experienced by those who are most likely to be accused of living on the down low, black MSM and MSMW. In doing so, we explore how members of this particular group define the down low and why some black MSM and MSMW choose to self-identify as being on the down low.

Methods

The data for this study come from seven focus group meetings conducted in 2003 with black men who have sex with men (MSM) and black men who have sex with men and women (MSMW) which were conducted as part of a larger project to better understand the cultural, social, environmental, and psychological factors that may lead to increased HIV risk behaviors among black MSM. The IRB approval for this project came from the Public Health Management Corporation Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants included 60 black MSM and MSMW who participated in seven focus groups (5–10 participants per group). Men were eligible to participate in a focus group if they were 18 years or older, lived in the nine-county Philadelphia metropolitan area, identified as black, and had sex (anal, oral or mutual masturbation) in the past 12 months. 45 % were 40–49 years old, 31 % were 30–39 years old and 24 % were 20–29 years old. All of the men were born in the United States. Slightly more than one-quarter of the men had a High School diploma

or GED and two-thirds of the men reported having completed some college or more. Two-thirds of participants (67 %) reported a yearly household income less than \$25,000, 11 % reported \$25,000–\$34,999, 13 % reported \$35,000–\$44,999 and 9 % reported \$45,000 or more. Of the total sample, 29 % identified as bisexual, 59 % identified as homosexual or gay, and 7 % identified as heterosexual or straight. Six out of ten men (59 %) reported unprotected anal sex with a man in the past 3 months. Twenty-two percent of the men reported that they had sex with a woman in the past 3 months. Half of the men (52 %) reported they were HIV-positive, while one-third (36 %) reported being HIV-negative and 12 % did not know their HIV status.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through both passive and active recruitment methods. *Passive recruitment* included the posting of fliers and advertisements in community settings such as bars and clubs, bookstores, and community based organizations. The fliers included a phone number for interested men to call for more information and to be screened for eligibility. *Active recruitment* involved study staff engaging potential participants through presentations to groups in community settings or street outreach in public locations such as bars and clubs or special events. Those men who were interested were screened at the time of recruitment or were given a phone number to call to be screened over the phone.

Once eligibility was established, men were asked if they would prefer to be interviewed individually or would like to participate in a focus group. Those men who agreed to participate in a focus group were informed that there were focus groups for HIV-negative men or men who do not know their HIV status, and focus groups for HIV-positive men and were asked which group they felt was most appropriate for them. They were then given information about the date, time and location of the appropriate group, which was prescheduled for the same night or within 1 or 2 days of recruitment. Contact information was gathered, and if men were not available for the scheduled group, they were called to participate in the next available group. In some cases, men arrived at the focus group with friends. In these cases, the men were screened for eligibility and if space permitted, were included in the focus groups.

The focus groups were held at the offices of a local non-profit health management corporation that provides many health care services, including HIV/AIDS services to minority communities. As soon as men arrived for a focus group, informed consent was obtained, and men were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. Each participant was assigned a unique ID number by study staff. Trained facilitators used standardized, semi-structured interview guides and posed 14 open-ended questions with follow-up probes to elicit further information and clarity. Questions were designed to gather a cross section of information about various topics including:

1. Experiences with the larger gay community.
2. Experiences with the black community.

3. Issues of sexual disclosure.
4. Reflections on the meaning of the DL.

Each focus group lasted between 1.5 and 2 h. Refreshments were provided for all focus groups, and each participant was compensated \$50 for his time at the end of the focus group. All focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company contracted by the CDC. Transcriptions were then reviewed against the original audiotapes by study staff to verify accuracy of the transcribed files and cleaned.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative description methods as outlined by Sandelowski (2000). As a research methodology, qualitative description draws from the general tenets of naturalistic inquiry in that, “there is no pre-selection of variables to study, no manipulation of variables, and no a priori commitment to any one theoretical view of a target phenomenon” (Sandelowski 2000, p. 337). Instead, the focus is on providing a comprehensive summary of an event or a phenomenon in the everyday terms of those events. In examining the focus group data, we took an inductive approach and examined the themes found within the narratives rather than counting frequencies or assigning codes to their answers. The rationale for this approach was due to the fact that participants in the focus groups were specifically asked to discuss their experiences of disclosure, reflect on their perception of what it means to be on the down low, and issues of racism and homophobia. As such, all focus groups included a robust discussion regarding those topics.

In qualitative description, themes are generated from the data themselves with the expected outcome of a straight description of the data (Sandelowski 2000). We began data analysis by reading through the transcripts and deciding “what was there.” As we read the transcripts, we discovered that men often spoke about a number of concerns regarding racism, homophobia, and masculinity which we began to note as themes. From their answers, we identified a number of themes that emerged and compared the themes across the focus groups to see if men in other groups had the same concerns. Themes were then condensed into similar themes. In doing so, we identified four themes that were most common in the focus group discussions about the down low, which we describe below.

Although all descriptive studies are highly influenced by the perceptions and inclinations of the describer (Wolcott 1994), the goal of qualitative description is for descriptive or interpretive validity. Descriptive validity refers to the factual accuracy of the events or phenomena under study, that is, researchers are “not making up or distorting the things they saw and heard” and that what they say is in the data is actually in the data (Maxwell 1992). To test descriptive validity, we recruited an independent researcher to read the transcriptions to provide a judgment as to whether what is “there” is what “most observers would agree is in fact ‘there’” (Sandelowski 2000). In doing so, we ensured that the themes that emerged during the data analysis phase were indeed evident to an independent researcher and not a result of our own biases. Although certainly not a scientific test of validity in

the quantitative sense, it nonetheless addresses a “realist approach to validity” based on “how qualitative researchers actually think about validity” (Maxwell 1992).

Results

Analysis of transcript data revealed four basic themes about the down low phenomenon. First, the men in our study rejected the notion that black men had to hide their sexual behaviors or risk being isolated from the black community. Given this, the men in our study saw being on the down low as a way of presenting masculinity rather than an attempt to hide their sexual behavior. Because of their marginalization in the larger gay community, black MSM and MSMW have come to reject what they perceived to be a white definition of what it means to have sexual relations with other men. Thus, down low was a way for them to identify as men who have sex with men while allowing them an option other than “gay” for self-identification. Finally, experiencing both racism and homophobia, the men in our study characterized being on the down low as a way of minimizing the double jeopardy of being the target of both racial and sexual discrimination.

Down Low as Masculine Presentation

Despite the stereotype that blatant homophobia in the black community leads black gay men to lead down low lives, many men in our study indicated that their sexual activity was not a point of contention in the black community. For example, one man stated:

Everybody in the neighborhood knew. They knew my story. But nobody would bother me because they knew that about me.

The above participant went on to explain that the down low is not about hiding their sexuality but about presenting oneself as a “man.” Like the above participant, many of the men in the focus groups noted that the down low had little to do with shame about homosexual behavior. In fact, many insisted that homosexual behavior, per se, is not as stigmatized within the black community as much as the popular press might lead on, but rather the feminine behaviors that are stereotypically associated with gay men. As one participant stated:

I mean, like you can be a man havin' sex with men. It's the way you carry yourself. If you don't, if people respect you, like before they knew you were [having sex with men], you know what I mean, gay or bisexual or whatever may have you, they'll respect you long as you don't cross those boundaries and stuff... nobody really is in your business.

The above participants, and many others like them, attributed the homophobia in the black community to the non-adherence to gender roles rather than to sexual activity. As such, it wasn't homosexuality, per se, that was stigmatized in the black

community but femininity. One informant who stated that the people who know him don't have a problem with his sexuality had this to say:

[Other Black people] respected you because you respected yourself. You wasn't flaming and you wasn't all being just cutting the fool and acting up all in broad daylight. You had your time and you had your place.

To some extent, being "flaming, openly gay," was perceived to be a choice. While the men routinely noted that "being" gay was not a choice, they nonetheless believed that "acting" gay was a choice. As one informant stated:

You know, then they decide they're gonna become a woman, or you know, they want to be on bottom, so therefore, they have to tie their shirts up in a knot and be, you know, have their butts out, and then two years later, you may see them a little more toned down, looking more manly, but still, in a sense, that person.

"Acting" gay, according to the above informant was a way of "finding yourself." When you come out, you don't know how to be gay and assume that to be gay is to be "flaming." However, the above informant's statement exemplifies a common theme we noted among the participants in our study that "acting" gay and "being" gay were two different things and that it was the outward acting, the non-adherence to gender norms, that ultimately led a gay man to be marginalized in the black community, not his sexual behavior.

Given that many of the men believed that "acting gay" (but not being gay) was a choice, the down low was seen as a way of managing gender norms within the black community rather than hiding one's sexuality. In fact, many of the men indicated that being on the down low was to present a masculine façade rather than a way of concealing their sexual activity.

Rather than a rigid and unchanging personal trait, the men in our study perceived masculinity as an "act" that one shifted in and out of depending on the circumstances and the situation. As one participant noted:

There's a lot of that going around. You know, you got some people portraying like they're not down, and one minute they, they want to be (in deep voice) Joe Hard and the next minute (in a feminine voice) hi, how you doin? You know?

The above statement was met with laughter from the group who agreed that for many of the men, the down low was largely a way of presenting yourself as being masculine rather than a "lifestyle" as it is often described in the popular press.

Because they viewed those on the down low as maintaining an image rather than trying to hide their sexuality, the men in our study were critical of those who claimed to be on the down low but failed to perform masculinity. For example, one participant stated:

What's the purpose of keeping it on the DL when you gonna be out there puttin' it out? You know what I mean? [They're] no longer on the DL after ten o'clock at night. Everybody knows. You know what I mean? If you're

standing on the corner, they know what you standing on the corner for. But um, I guess that's the purpose of just going out late at night 'cause most people know that's when they come out. Freaks come out at night.

While popular press coverage of the down low phenomenon suggests that black men try to pass as straight, the men in our study are not attempting to pass as straight but simply behaving in a way that they believe are gender inappropriate.

Down Low as Reaction to Gay Racism and Stereotypes

For many of the men in the study, being on the down low was a necessity given the hostility they encountered in the larger gay community which they perceived to be white and unwelcoming of black men. As one participant noted:

I did not know that I was African American until I came out of it, 'til I was on my own. And somebody called me a, a nigger, and then I, well, you know, you might have all this, but you know, no matter what they see, you're still African American. I was recently at a bar in New Hope [a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania known as a gay getaway]. This queen said, talking to someone that I was talking to, said well, you know once you black there's no turning back... you know, I guess what I'm trying to say is like, um, my struggle has been, you know, always alone... I hung out with, with the, um, the white gay crowd for a while and then, and you, and you're not really, you're in the crowd and you're, you're the flavor of the month, but you're not a part of the crowd.

The racism in the gay community was thought to be a reflection of the racism in the larger society. Remembering his first experience with racism, one participant noted:

The first time I was discriminated against, it wasn't because I was HIV or wasn't because I was gay. It was because I was black. This white guy, he called me a nigger. I had my nephew, he's a little baby. And we were on the bus, and we was coming from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and the car pulled up alongside the bus, one of those little green and tan buses they had back then, you know, no real chance for us to say anything to him... Anyway, what I'm saying is this guy called me a nigger. It really didn't bother me because, like I said, I was a young guy, I was like 16 at the time. You know, that didn't bother me. But what I want to say is, I get discriminated against within the gay community because you have some gay folks who think they're a lot better than you... You know, but I've been discriminated against more so in the gay community.

When asked how these instances of discrimination may influence sexual identification, another participant noted:

With discrimination comes hiding... when you find that kind of discrimination, you find yourself saying, well I don't fit this category, I fit in this [other] one. And then, well, by putting yourself in a category that you don't belong in, you're hiding. And when you start hiding from yourself, you're hiding from everybody else.

When faced with discrimination from the gay community, the black men in our study often attempted to disassociate themselves from the larger gay community.

Rejection of Gay Stereotypes

As noted in the previous section, many of our participants often disassociated themselves from the larger gay community. A part of this disassociation from the gay white community was a redefinition of what they considered to be stereotypically “gay behaviors.” So while many self-identified as gay, they were quick to point out that they did not behave in a way they believed was stereotypically gay. Instead, they drew distinctions between themselves as “gay” men and “gay behaviors.” For many of the participants, “gay behavior” was described as failing to behave in a masculine way while out in public while “being gay” was more closely linked to their choice of sexual partners. As one participant noted about men who self-identify as gay:

They’re flaming, openly gay, switching and clicking. You know, the whole thing. You know, it’s just you know, it’s not necessary. Really, it’s not necessary at all to carry on like that just because you’re gay. I mean, you don’t have to act like that. And it, I think you’re better respected when you carry yourself as a man.

Because the label “gay” is associated with certain types of behaviors, values, and attitudes, independent of their choice of sexual partners, that they do not feel that they possess, and the larger gay community is seen as being hostile towards them, some black men in our study used the label of down low to define themselves outside of what they come to see as being stereotypically “gay.” For these men, down low does not imply that they are hiding their sexual orientation, or that they are hesitant to self-identify as gay, but rather that they are not flaunting it openly like “gay” people do. As such, it was not uncommon for some of the men in our study to self-identify as being both “gay” and “on the DL.”

Minimizing Double Jeopardy

As noted above, the down low identity does not necessarily include an aspect of limited self-disclosure regarding sexual behavior. Rather than a way of hiding their sexual orientation from unsuspecting women, not disclosing one’s sexual orientation and remaining on the down low was seen as a way of minimizing “double jeopardy.” When asked why he might not share his sexual orientation with others, one informant stated:

I always felt like this because I got this double jeopardy thing because I’m black and I’m gay. There’s a problem with that, so I don’t know.

For the above informant, not sharing his sexual orientation with others was a way to protect himself from a double dose of discrimination. The belief that gay black men experienced double discrimination due to their race and sexuality was common among the men in the study. As another informant noted:

The way I experienced discrimination, I've experienced two-fold from my brothers and sisters in the African American community, all I've experienced is nothing but homophobia... From my brothers and sisters in the white gay community, all I've experienced, nothing but racism, either covert or overt. So for us, we're in this unique situation where we're in no-man's land... Are you an African American who's gay or are you a gay person who happens to be African American?

The inability to hide their Blackness within the white gay community leads them to attempt to build and/or maintain their bonds with the Black community. Often, maintaining these bonds is perceived to require maintaining an appropriate gender façade, even when their sexual orientation was known by others.

Conclusion

In popular discourse, men on the down low are often portrayed as living “double lives” (Denizet-Lewis 2003). In the mainstream press, down low men are often vilified as men who have secret sexual encounters with other men while maintaining heterosexual “life styles.” Read loosely, it has always come to imply “gay” men who choose to remain closeted with little regard for the safety of others. However, this characterization seems simplistic at best. The men in our study note that they do not have two separate lives nor do they actively hide their sexual preferences, even when they self-identify as being down low.

First, the premise that these men are somehow leading double lives is problematic because it connotes men who have two separate lives that do not intersect in any way. True, some of the men are not being honest with their female sexual partners about having male sexual partners. However, none of the men in our study indicated that they entirely separate the two aspects of their lives. Rather than seeing themselves as keeping an active secret, men in our study largely viewed themselves as simply not “putting their personal business” out for everyone to see, even as they acknowledged that many, if not most, people knew about their sexual preferences. As such, self-identification as being “on the DL” does not seem to imply an immediate intent on deceiving others regarding their sexual preferences and behaviors. If the entire intent of being “on the DL” is to deceive others, the identification of being “on the DL” would end with discovery. This does not seem to be the case. In their perspective, they are not living a “double life” per se, but simply maintaining their privacy.

Rather than a way of hiding their sexual behaviors from others, the “DL” was often viewed by the men in our study as a way of maintaining appropriate gender norms, which they viewed as being separate from their sexual behaviors. As Malenbranche noted (2009, p. 91), “black communities have specific perceptions, ideals, and expectations of masculinities.” Among black men, ideals of masculinity are embedded in beliefs about appropriate gender behaviors which are taught to boys from an early age and is a central part of black men's self-concepts (Davis 1999; Wise 2001). Given that peer acceptance among black men depends on

masculine performance, it isn't surprising that the men in our study were more concerned with projecting a masculine "front" than with hiding their sexual behaviors. By projecting a masculine façade, the men in our study were able to still claim an identity that is valued in the black community, despite their sexual behaviors.

Another theme found in our study was that being on the down low and presenting a more masculine façade was not an attempt to hide their sexuality but an attempt to redefine what it means to be "gay" from a black male perspective. Other scholars have also noted that black men who have sex with men often avoid self-identifying as "gay" (Brown 2005; Conerly 1996; McKirnan et al. 1995). Although a number of different reasons for this have been explored, such as homophobia, racism, and conflicts between their racial and sexual identities (Icard 1986; Loiacano 1989), the findings from our study suggest that the men avoid self-identifying as "gay" due to their beliefs about the gay community being largely white and their stereotypes about "gay" behaviors. As such, the down low was not so much a behavior involving sexual concealment but a way of self identification. Much like the self-identity of same gender loving, which defines homosexual identification outside of the mainstream gay white norm, down low was seen by the men in our study as a self-identification that allowed them to self-identify as someone who has sex with members of their same sex outside of the "gay" label.

When men did use the down low label to hide their sexual behaviors, they were likely to cite the larger structural reasons of homophobia and racism rather than a desire to hide their behaviors from unsuspecting sexual partners. Black men who have sex with men must often negotiate both racism in the gay community and homophobia in black communities (Loiacano 1989). As other scholars have noted, racism in the gay community may prevent some gay people of color from coming out and openly accepting a "gay" label (Han 2007). In these instances, the down low label seems to provide these men with a way to construct an identity as a man who has sex with men but also maintain a black identity.

Our study has some important limitations. Like all qualitative studies, our findings cannot be generalized outside of our sample. Nonetheless, our study raises important questions that will need to be explored in a larger, more representative study. In addition, we should note that the primary focus of the original study from which this data is derived was about HIV risk behaviors. Because the primary focus was not to explore and examine how black men who have sex with men and women self-identify, their narratives are most likely limited. Future research that specifically focuses on identity development among members of this group will help validate our findings. Finally, we should note that the data for this study was collected in 2003. While one would hope that much progress has been made in alleviating the impact of racism in the gay community and homophobia in communities of color among members of this group, more recent evidence suggests that racism and homophobia still impact the lives of black men who have sex with men (Choi et al. 2011). The continuing racism and homophobia that gay black men experience will probably make many of the themes identified in this study still relevant in explaining their lived experiences today.

In addition, our findings also highlight the need for more culturally appropriate and culturally relevant intervention programs for those working with members of this group. First, it should be noted that some men who self-identify as being on the down low may not be intentionally hiding their sexual behaviors but may be avoiding self-identification as “gay” due to other factors. As such, they may be less willing to attend workshops or enroll in programs that are publicly affiliated with primarily “gay serving” organizations. Programs targeting members of this group must recognize that black men have a number of different ways that they may self-identify, even when their sexual behaviors might be considered “gay” by mainstream service providers. In addition, because their experiences of racism in the gay community plays an important part in how they come to self-identify, programs must address larger structural issues that these men face rather than focus only on their personal behaviors. Removing blame and acknowledging that there are multiple ways of self-identification will help men in this group to fully develop a stronger sense of self and help them construct an identity that is consistent with their own personal experiences and cultural beliefs which may help them lead more happier lives.

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