A Framework for Understanding MSM
and Down-Low Sexuality
Among Cultural Minority Men

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The practice of "down low" sexuality in African American and Latino American cultures is a pattern in which a man identifies as straight yet engages in sexual acts with other men. This paper examines the forces that cause men who have sex with men (MSM) to reject a queer identity in favor of a closeted one. A framework for understanding down-low sexuality among ethnic minority men is proposed based on the premise that ethnic MSM are influenced by a trifecta of cultural pressures unique to their minority status and not experienced similarly by white MSM. This premise rests on research suggesting that ethnic minority men are expected to achieve different standards of masculinity, experience compounded stigmas associated with minority status, and are more frequently involved in an interdependent family model when compared to white MSM. This complicates effective identity management among ethnic minority MSM. This framework is useful to people working in the mental health field because deepening our understanding of the cultural processes behind down-low sexuality as a sexual identity can help counselors work with this population from an informed standpoint of increased competence. Discourse about why some ethnic minority MSM may opt for a down low identity rather than being openly queer is important when the goal is to practice culturally competent, identity affirmative counseling. Note: The term "culture" will frequently be used in place of race because culture is an observable product of the undeniably existent racialization process.

Introduction to Down-Low Sexuality

"Down low" is a sexual identity comprised of men who identify as straight yet secretly or discreetly engage in homosexual behaviors with other men. This expression first arose within African American vernacular to mean any behavior done with discretion and was subsequently adopted by some ethnic communities as an identity label referring to men with closeted sexual practices (Sandfort & Dodge, 2008). These men are also often termed straight-identified men who have sex with men, or straight-identified MSM, especially among researchers of the subject. MSM is used in place of other terminology such as homosexual or bisexual, which do not aptly apply since the fundamental characteristic of men on the down low is that they testify to having heterosexual orientations. Thus, MSM is a behavioral marker used to distinguish between self-identification and actual actions.

This phenomenon came to broader public awareness in 2008 when author J. L. King appeared on Oprah to promote his book, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of 'Straight' Black Men who Sleep with Men*, which tells his story of being a black man

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married to a woman while maintaining covert sexual affairs with men for twenty-five years until the extramarital relationships finally ended his marriage (Sandfort & Dodge, 2008). The down low has been written about, both before and after King's appearance, for nearly two decades by other writers including best-selling novelist E. Lynn Harris, hip hop star Terrance Dean, and Keith Boykin, author of the 2005 book "Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America". Boykin cautions that the down low is not specific to cultural minorities and that these closeted minorities are now being unjustly blamed for the spread of HIV/AIDS as a result of down low discourse (Phillips, 2005). This paper does not assert that the down low is specific to ethnic minorities. Rather, this paper proposes that down low identities are more common among cultural minorities than among white men, and seeks an explanation for this by delving into the unique cultural challenges some minority populations face in being open about engaging in sexual activities with other men.

Existing research suggests that down-low sexuality is more prevalent among ethnic minority MSM than among white MSM. One survey-based study conducted by Pathela, Hajat, Schillinger, Blank, Sell, and Mostashari (2006) collected detailed sexual histories from a population-based sample of 4,193 men

aged 18 and older. They categorized the men by sexual identity and actual sexual behavior according to self-reports. Categories included straight-identified men who have sex only with women, straight-identified men who have sex only with men, straight-identified men who have sex with men and women, bisexually-identified men who have sex only with men, gay-identified men who have sex only with men, etc. The researchers found that 62% of straight-identified MSM belonged to ethnic minorities groups whereas only 28% of gay-identified MSM were ethnic minorities. The study also found that straight-identified MSM were significantly more likely than gay-identified men to have been born in a foreign country populated primarily by black and Latino people. Among the foreign-born, straight-identified men, 33% were from Latin America and 30% were from the Caribbean.

Other studies reiterate the high prevalence rates of down-low sexuality among minority men in that some ethnic groups are more likely to engage in MSM behavior but less likely to openly adopt non-heterosexual identities. A meta-analysis by Millett, Malebranche, Mason, and Spikes (2005) found that black MSM are more likely to be bisexually active or identified than any other ethnic group. Furthermore, when compared to white MSM, black MSM were demonstrated to be less likely to disclose their non-heterosexual identity to others (Millett, et al., 2005). A comparative evaluation of 208 black MSM and 142 white MSM found that 75% of black men compared to 36% of white men concealed their homosexual behaviors from their female partners (Stokes et al., 1996). An additional study found that white men were significantly more likely than black men to disclose their bisexual or gay identity to family (62% versus 46%), heterosexual friends (59% versus 35%), healthcare providers (48% versus 29%), church members (32% versus 12%) and other people (Kennamer et al., 2000). These findings suggest that down-low sexuality is more common among some groups of ethnic men, particularly black MSM, than among white MSM. Based on this demographic research, it thus follows that ethnic minority MSM are more likely to remain on the down low when compared to white MSM. Explaining the forces behind this trend is relevant to increasing cultural competency for clinicians. This paper proposes the influence of three interwoven social pressures particular to cultural minority groups in the U.S. which act in collaboration to make it more difficult for these men to identify openly as sexually queer, or non-heterosexual. These processes include differing constructions of masculinity among white and ethnic men, compounded stigmas associated with belonging to a minority group and owning a queer identity, and an interdependent family model emphasizing familial interdependence, or the tendency identified by social scientists for some cultures to place great value on family ties to inform individual decisions. These facets complicate identity management among ethnic minority MSM in that disclosing a non-heterosexual identity causes may be perceived as an abandonment of certain cultural values.

Masculinity

The premise of this section as it relates to down-low sexuality is that separate ethnic groups face unequal social pressures affecting the expression of their sexual identity according to ethnically or culturally differential standards of masculinity. With restricted access to financial and social status, males from some minority cultures become particularly invested in macho masculinity as a source of identity. When compared to white MSM masculine standards, the masculinity of many ethnic minority groups appears macho or hyper-masculinized, as these men present in overtly masculine ways in order to compensate for a lack of power or social status afforded more easily to white men (Acker, 2006, hooks, 1992). For this reason, ethnic minority MSM may be reluctant to forfeit their culturally valued macho masculinity and thus are more likely to remain on the down low to preserve this valued trait. Accordingly, an underrepresentation of ethnic minority MSM within the mainstream gay culture, which is disproportionately represented by affluent white males, discourages ethnic minority MSM from openly identifying as non-heterosexual since they may not identify with aspects of queer, white cultural values.

Masculinity consists of a set of physical and behavioral traits related to being born biologically male (Acker, 2006). These traits comprise a gender performance expectation that usually stands in contradiction

to the gender performance associated with females, femininity. Masculinity can be conceived of as a guideline for how men should behave, including how to have sex and with whom. Society teaches boys from a young age that correct gender expression in the form of enacting masculinity is inherent to personal growth and eventual success (Acker, 2006). This is especially relevant in the United States, where masculine gender performance is largely based on achieving economic success (Acker, 2004; Acker 2006). Achievement of masculinity can occur in a variety of forms but overall this gender performance serves to legitimize men as separate from women in many arenas of life including work and home (Acker, 2004; Acker 2006).

Similarly, differing expectations of masculinity also effect identities across ethnic groups, particularly the expression of sexual orientation. Hegemonic masculinity, or what is commonly known as traditional masculinity, refers to the ideal form of masculinity promoted by mainstream culture which men are encouraged to achieve (Acker, 2004). American culture essentially promotes being an affluent, white man as the ideal form of masculine achievement (Acker, 2004; Acker, 2006; hooks, 1992). Since hegemonic masculine ideals are historically defined by groups of people in the highest positions of power in America, the affluent white male, white ethnicity and social class are intrinsic elements of hegemonic masculinity (Acker, 2006; hooks, 1992). This is problematic for ethnic minority men in that satiating traditionally sought after standards of masculinity is prevented by a lack of white privilege necessary to achieve hegemonic masculinity. Acker (2006) and hooks (1992) detail the extent to which hegemonic masculinity is ingrained in American culture and how this is problematic for minorities. Acker writes, "hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the taken-for-granted, generally accepted form" of masculinity, and that it "legitimates the power of those who embody it" (2004, p. 82). Hegemonic ideals thus maintain and promote a system of power and oppression based on standards of ethnicity and social class.

Excluded from hegemonic ideals, some ethnic groups responded by carving out their own standards of masculinity separate from traditional expectations. This resulted in promoting forms of hypermasculin-

ity, or macho masculinity, among groups of ethnic minority men (Katz, 1999). Though traditionally ethnic minorities could not reap some benefits afforded by hegemony to white males, such as a stake in capitalism, other demonstrations of masculinity including sexual prowess and physical domination were accessible means for achieving masculinity. These overt expressions of masculinity may serve to compensate for the systematic lack of power associated with cultural or class-based disadvantages (hooks, 1992). A common pattern is for ethnic minorities to place great emphasis on sexuality as a source of masculinity to compensate for features acting against them (i.e. skin color and social class) in the attainment of masculine ideals or the power associated with masculinity (hooks, 1992, Nesvig, 2001). In this way, sexual identification becomes a source of achieving masculinity among ethnic minority men and may cause identifying as queer to further threaten the precarious standing of their masculinity.

For example, hooks (1992) discusses in detail how achieving black masculinity often tends to rely upon phallocentrism, or the notion that masculinity can be achieved by what a man does with his penis as opposed to how well he provides for his family. This type of masculinity is a direct response to hegemonic oppression, which has a history of making it difficult for minorities to succeed in the workforce (Acker, 2004). hooks describes how phallocentrism is "rooted in physical domination and sexual possession of women" (hooks, 1992, p. 94). Indeed, the black phallocentric masculinities hooks enlists, such as the wandering "playboy," the man with many women, and the woman-hating type embodied by Eddie Murphy's character in *Harlem Nights* seem to be overly dramatic takes on hegemonic masculinity which rely on sexual power relations between the sexes. Hooks notes that these efforts to assert masculinity are well-received because they are viewed as attempts to compensate for a sort of inherent deficiency that becomes internalized by minorities (hooks, 1992).

If within aspects of black culture a man's use of his penis, especially through the domination of women, becomes critical to achieving masculinity (hooks, 1992) it thus follows that gay mainstream culture contains connotations of submission which

are unsuitable to the hyper-masculine ideal valued by ethnic men. Under these prescriptions of gender expression, submitting to another man sexually or using one's penis in the wrong way to have sex with another man rather than a woman could potentially threaten masculinity and affect social standing. Identifying as queer could cause a man of color to forfeit some of his masculine qualities, a compromise many of these men may feel they cannot afford to make. Hooks (1992) voices the relationship of black masculinity's phallocentric dependence to coming out as queer when she writes, "challenging black male phallocentrism would also make a space for critical discussion of homosexuality in black communities" (p. 112). This drives home the point that phallocentricism is a barrier standing in the way of developing openly non-heterosexual identities for groups of black men.

Nesvig (2001) argues that the very same conundrum also affects Latino men. This researcher asserts that some Latino cultures similarly construe sexual masculinity based on penetration. He explains that "these models assume that Latin American homosexuality is based on a rigid male-female, active-passive, dominant-submissive dichotomy… The insertive, active partner is rendered 'male,' and the receptive, penetrated partner is considered to be subservient and plays the role of 'female'" (p. 692). Nesvig (2001) presumes that, as with the emphasis on phallocentrism among African American culture, this paradigm was a reaction to feelings of powerlessness. When Spain colonized Latin America, people were stripped of many of their personal freedoms (Nesvig, 2001). According to Nesvig (2001), sexual domination, or penetration, was a way to conquer another person and regain some symbolic semblance of power. Conquering a man might be seen as more difficult than asserting power over a woman, and thus more admirable. But because of strict anti-sodomy laws based in religion coupled with a weighty emphasis on machismo principles, sex with other men came with profuse social risks (Nesvig, 2001).

Thus, the penetration model in which one man was demoralized while the other reaffirmed his masculinity arose to satiate a perceived lack of manly power among colonized groups in Latin America. While Nesvig (2001) cautions that this is a highly

general description of Latin American sexual practices, contemporary remnants of this model continually operate today. Fear of being emasculated by receiving penetration may contribute to Latino MSM assuming a down-low sexuality. Additionally, under this penetrative paradigm, Latino sexuality cannot be adequately interpreted using the common categorizations of heterosexual or homosexual at all since sexuality rests on the sexual act rather than the sex of the partner (Nesvig, 2001). Sexual practices are an integral part of how men achieve masculinity. Since ethnic minority men are not afforded the masculine privileges associated with being included in hegemonic ideals, achieving masculinity through sexuality becomes crucial for these groups. Deviation from masculine standards surrounding sexuality entails great risk, and cultural conceptions of masculinity among ethnic groups contradict the adoption of a queer identity.

The situation is very different for the white MSM. The privilege associated with their race allows white MSM more freedom to deviate openly from heterosexist values. Their symbolic power (race) and substantiated power (financial means) allows white MSM greater room for the expression of unconventional sexual identities. Thus, mainstream queer culture seems to be designed around the needs and attributes of the white gay man, and it is a culture with disproportionately lower representation of ethnic minority MSM. Popular culture provides ample illustration of this point. Though pop culture is at best a distorted mirror of reality, media representations of queer masculinity can be a window into how gay people live their lives and can demonstrate how masculinity informs queer lifestyles. Cam and Mitchell, a gay couple on ABC's popular television show "Modern Family", are a quintessential example of the affluent, white, gay male couple. Mitchell, who works as a lawyer, earns sufficient money to allow Cam to stay at home raising their adopted daughter, Lily. They live in a large suburban house adorned with ornate, expensive belongings. In many ways, their household closely resembles the idyllic heterosexual mold in that one man acts as the provider and his partner is the stay-at-home nurturer. At the same time, other aspects of this lifestyle are stereotypical conceptions of how mainstream gay men should behave. While they

fulfill some features of hegemonic masculinity, such as delineating the roles of provider/nurturer, these characters are not the stoic, emotionally disinterested hegemonic prototype of masculinity. Nor are they, as two affluent white males, examples of ethnic hypermasculinity. Cam and Mitchell talk openly about their feelings and are emotionally expressive, traits that are more frequently associated with femininity and discouraged by masculinity as being inappropriate for men. It thus becomes evident that one substantial facet of mainstream gay culture which deviates from normative expectations of masculinity is the idea that the gay man can be effeminate without completely jeopardizing his position of power. In relation to how masculinity informs queer identity, it can be deduced that this departure from hegemony is permissible because the people whom the characters of Cam and Mitchell are based on, affluent white gay males, retain more freedom of gender expression.

Conversely, there are few explicit representations of minority queers within pop culture. Perhaps the most comprehensive examples in the current media are the fictional characters of LaFayette and Jesus from *"True Blood"*. LaFayette, a black male, and Jesus, a Latino male, are a gay couple featured on Season 3 of HBO's vampire series. Besides their queer sexuality, LaFayette and Jesus are the antithesis of Cam and Mitchell in terms of masculine expression. These men are not affluent; they are working-class. LaFayette works as a diner cook, drug dealer, and prostitute and Jesus is an orderly at a mental hospital. Furthermore, they do not exhibit effeminate behaviors such as emotional expression and physical restraint. Though LaFayette wears make-up and jewelry, these characters are macho or hypermasculine. They present as the extreme representations of masculine ideals that arise when ethnic minority men do not fulfill white, hegemonic ideals. They have hard bodies and quick fists and are more likely to fight than to cry. While the story lines of Cam and Mitchell are consumed with play dates and pre-school choices in the suburbs, LaFayette and Jesus are combating prejudice in their rural Louisiana town. This may or may not be an accurate portrayal of minority homosexuals and the daily challenges they face when deviating from masculine norms. It is not, however,

the queer world most media chooses to focus on.

Accordingly, if mainstream queer culture is built around and is more receptive of the affluent white male, it is more difficult for ethnic minorities to identify within this structure because their cultural values are not fully represented. It has been noted that ethnic minority MSM find it difficult to relate to mainstream gay culture because they view it as primarily white and feminine (Sandfort & Dodge, 2008). Besides ascribing to a sense of secrecy, down-low sexuality is also characterized by a markedly masculine sexual prowess in accordance with some ethnic cultural values (Layli, 2005; Sandfort & Dodge, 2008). Minority males may feel as though they have to exaggerate masculine attributes in order to compensate for a lack of privilege that comes with not being white. To men who are not afforded hegemonic privilege at birth as is the affluent white male, overt displays of physical masculinity may be perceived as a route through which masculine status can be earned. Masculinity is relevant to the framework for understanding down low identity since ethnic minority MSM may be less likely to disclose their queer behaviors because they are faced with stricter expectations of how men should exhibit masculinity based on their ethnicities. Thus, they are underrepresented in mainstream gay culture.

The complex interplay of race, power and competing visions of masculinity is challenging to MSM from ethnic minorities attempting to forge an identity within mainstream queer culture. Firstly, there are aspects of black and Latino masculinity acting to discourage them from adopting queer identities. Secondly, queer culture is primarily represented by the affluent white man and omits cultural ideals of ethnic minority MSM. Adopting a queer identity may reduce an ethnic MSM's perceived sense of masculinity, which is intrinsic to maintaining his social standing where privilege is already lacking. Therefore, ethnically differential expectations of masculinity wield an enormous influence over many ethnic MSM's choice to remain on the down low.

Compounded Stigmas

Since both minorities and gay men challenge the expectations of hegemony, that white, heterosexual males are the ideal, they are stereotyped as

being deviant or deficit (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). This creates stigma affecting the daily lives of people. Stigma affects the stigmatized by "limiting them socially and disempowering them psychologically (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002, p. 16)" and allows for discrimination. Being of both of a queer identity and of a minority culture makes a person vulnerable to compounded stigma because their sexuality and race deviate from privileged groups. Avoiding compounded stigma may be a motivation for remaining on the down low. In the current state of racial and sexual relations, perhaps the down low can be conceived of as a way to preserve one's mental health and physical safety in the face of compounded stigma.

Research supports the supposition that choosing to remain on the down low is influenced by efforts to avoid possible stigma associated with coming out, a possibility that is increased by being a queer ethnic minority as opposed to a queer white MSM. Miguel Muñoz-Laboy, a prominent researcher in the field of down-low sexuality, has argued that, "implicit in the notion of the 'down low' is the idea of avoiding the cultural stigma attached to non-heterosexual identities and for this reason keeping non-heteronormative sexual matters private" (2008, p. 774). Being private about sexual matters is therefore a function of the down low identity, likely because being openly queer causes ethnic minorities to be further vulnerable to discrimination resulting from stigmatization.

Managing two or more outlying identities, in this case ethnic minority status and queer sexual orientation, can be a struggle for these populations. "Ethnic gay men and lesbians need to live within three rigidly defined and strongly independent communities: the gay and lesbian community, the ethnic minority community, and the society at large. While each community provides fundamental needs, serious consequences emerge if such communities were to be visibly integrated and merged" (Morales, 1989). On one side of the coin, MSM members of minority cultures fear homophobia and threats of physical violence within their ethnic communities (Fullilove & Fullilove; 1999; Nesvig, 2001; Ward, 2005). Additionally, ethnic men are also concerned with being confronted by racism within the gay community (Han, 2008). A study of the mental health of openly identified gay

and bisexual Latino men in Miami, Los Angeles, and New York found that coming out was associated with a relatively high frequency of symptoms of psychological distress, low self-esteem, and social isolation resulting from experiences of social discrimination (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001). Thus, remaining on the down low may serve to protect ethnic minority MSM from further discrimination.

A specific instance of how stigma impedes identity formation is the stigma of HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS infection has long been associated with both MSM and ethnic minorities. When the disease was first reported on in the early 1980's, it was frequently pegged the "gay plague". "The AIDS story had finally made its way from the science section and the back pages of the news, but it was still reported almost exclusively as a gay disease (Kinsella, 1989, p. 75). In recent years, HIV/AIDS prevention has become a major concern for ethnic communities (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Millett et. al., 2005; Muñoz-Laboy, 2008). Figures 1 and 2 summarize infection rates per year by ethnicity and mode of transmission.

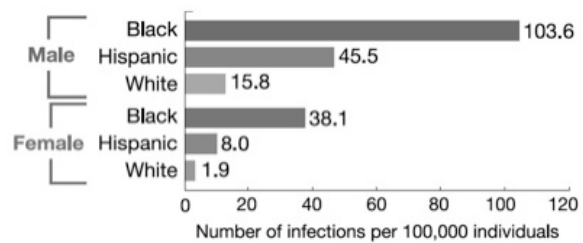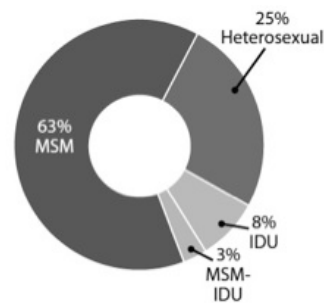*Figure 1: New HIV Infections in the United States, 2010, by Ethnicity*

Figure 2: Estimated New HIV Infections, 2010, by Transmission Category

Abbreviations
MSM   Men who have sex with men
IDU   Injection drug user

Rates of infection for these groups are disproportionately high when compared to other fractions of the population. Figure 1 demonstrates that black American males as a group accounted for the highest rates of new HIV infection in 2010 followed by Latino males (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Figure 2 shows that MSM, whether straight- or gay-identified, constituted over half of all new HIV infection cases in the same year (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). These figures serve to support the finding that ethnic minority males form black and Latino backgrounds as well as MSM have the highest rates of new HIV infections.

Furthermore, men on the down low are often blamed publicly for spreading the HIV/AIDS virus to women. Though this claim remains largely unfounded (Sandfort & Dodge, 2008), it contributes to the stigma experienced by ethnic minority MSM who have disclosed that they sleep with men, especially considering that the rates of new HIV infection are indeed highest among these groups. Openly gay and bisexual HIV-positive MSM face greater risk of experiencing symptoms of psychological distress including anxiety and depression (Diaz, et al., 2001). Thus, the high HIV/AIDS infection rates among both ethnic minorities and MSM create compounded stigmas about disclosing a non-heterosexual identity. Ethnic minority MSM may stand to face greater prejudice from societies who stigmatize HIV/AIDS by coming out as gay, since both ethnic minority groups and MSM have the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection.

What is risked when ethnic minority MSM become vulnerable to compounded stigmas? Men who choose to stay on the down low may be protecting their mental health since identity management is profoundly affected by compounded stigmas (Mondimore, 1996). As a minority of a minority, ethnic queers "bear the additional task of integrating two major aspects of their identity when both are conspicuously devalued" (Greene, 1994, p. 248). Thus, there is a tendency among queer minorities to feel forced to choose between a cultural versus a queer identity since the weight of compounded stigmas is so burdensome (Sandfort & Dodge, 2008). It can be assumed that this compounded stigma affects identity management by causing queer minorities to remain on the down low for fear of facing further discrimination.

Familialism in the Interdependent Family Model

The interdependent family model is a collectivist style of social relating which is exhibited in higher frequency among ethnic cultures than among white culture (Greene, 1994; Muñoz-Laboy, 2008). Due to the interdependent family model adhered to most often by ethnic people and less so by whites, minority MSM are more likely to desire inclusion within their culture and therefore to downplay their sexuality. This model is characterized by the tremendous emphasis placed on families being dependent upon one another for support, emotional connectedness, honor, loyalty, and solidarity, often referred to as "familialism" (Muñoz-Laboy, 2008). As Muñoz-Laboy explains, "In cultures where collectivism is a predominant value, the sexual orientation of individuals is no longer an individual issue, but rather a struggle between placing an individual's orientation over apparent collective social order" (2008, p. 776). Interdependent family members are expected to forgo personal opinion in favor of shared beliefs and attitudes and are in return rewarded with a sense of belonging. Since cultural minorities depend on family extensively for their psychological and often physical wellbeing, it logically follows that when faced with an identity dilemma they choose to remain faithful to their cultural identity. This means that minority MSM might assume a down-low sexuality in order to avoid possible familial rejection induced by homophobia.

Muñoz-Laboy's research leads to the hypothesis that interdependent communities characterized by familialism influences health practices amongst Latino MSM because individuals with high degrees of familialism are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (Muñoz-Laboy, 2008). With the stigmas attached to HIV/AIDS, homosexual behaviors are considered risky among Latino Americans. Muñoz-Laboy (2008) performed an analysis of several case studies of bisexually active Latino men. He found two common characteristics: 1) the desire to procreate in order to protect familial honor, and 2) a compartmentalization of sexual identity as separate and hidden from cultural affiliation. In order to procreate under these terms,

sex with men would be discouraged, which could contribute to the compartmentalization of a queer identity and, thus, down-low sexuality. This body of research demonstrates that values associated with interdependent familialism wield control over sexual identity among ethnic minorities and complicate identity management strategies. Familialism as part of an interdependent family model affects the choice to remain on the down low because family opinion, approval, and support are greatly valued among ethnic minorities, and disclosure could compromise this system by causing the MSM to be ostracized.

Clinical Implications and Directions for Future Research

The research included throughout this paper serves to provide insight into the down low identity. This is relevant when working with MSM populations because research on down-low sexuality is currently limited. The three-pronged framework presented here can be used as a tentative guideline for future research on the topic by identifying areas in need or further investigation and support. Understanding why ethnic MSM may be more inclined than white MSM to choose a down low identity rather than adopting an openly queer one is important for clinicians working with these populations. Because research on queer populations suggests that disclosure of one's queer identity is correlated with better mental health (Hill, 2009), many clinicians assume a pro-coming out stance, and in therapy will overtly or subtly encourage non-heterosexuals to disclose their true orientations.

The potential problem with this assumption, as the bulk of the research cited throughout this work demonstrates, is that ethnic minorities face unique identity management challenges that make it difficult to openly join the mainstream queer culture. Identity management among ethnic minority MSM is complicated by pressures to conform to cultural standards of macho or hypermasculinity that may be compromised by having sex with men. Successful identity management is also compromised by the need to avoid further discrimination by coming out as queer, such as being exposed to profound psychological distress and physical violence. The tendency

of ethnic minorities to greatly value familial support in the decision to come out should also be acknowledged and respected when conducting therapy with these populations. Clinicians are advised to be aware of these issues when practicing identity affirmative counseling since there is a great deal at stake when ethnic minority MSM begin disclosing their identities. The clinician and client may need to work together to determine whether the benefits of adopting a queer identity outweigh the risks in order to ensure beneficence and minimize harm done during therapy.

Conclusion

Research on down low identity points to the influence of masculinity, stigma and type of family model on the sexual identity of ethnic minority MSM. These pressures are interconnected, and together create a situation in which identifying as queer is more difficult for cultural minorities than for white men, and in which down-low sexuality is common among minority MSM. Facets of hegemony prevent the absorption of minority men's values into mainstream culture, thus impeding these men from candidly actualizing a queer identity of their own. In order to remain culturally competent and identity affirmative, the counseling profession must be aware of these factors when treating men belonging to racial and sexual minorities on the down low. This three-pronged framework for understanding the choice to remain on the down low can be utilized for further research as well as for counseling these individuals.

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