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*Journal of Black Psychology* 2002 28: 371

DOI: 10.1177/009579802237543

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## Strategies for Managing Heterosexism Used Among African American Gay and Bisexual Men

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*Oppression and oppression management are focal topics of inquiry in research on African Americans' social behaviors. Previous research has failed to investigate the methods that African Americans who are also bisexual and gay use to cope with oppressive experiences associated with their status as sexual minorities. In the current study, the authors use in-depth interviews with gay and bisexual African American men (n = 37) to examine the strategies that they employ to manage their sexual minority status. Six minority status management strategies for coping with heterosexism and the contexts in which these strategies are used are identified. The functions these strategies serve, such as avoiding stigma or building support systems, are also identified. The data suggest similarities among the strategies these men use to cope with heterosexism and the strategies that theorists have identified for coping with racism. Implications for research and theory about dual oppression management are discussed.*

Mounting empirical evidence suggests that oppressive experiences are associated with stress (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999) and negatively affect psychosocial functioning (DiPlacido, 1998; Gilman et al., 2001; Moritsugu & Sue, 1983). Members of ethnic minority groups must develop

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AUTHORS' NOTE: *This article was based on the first author's master's thesis research supervised by the second author. We are grateful to Barbara Bedney, Rebecca M. Campbell, Susan Ryerson Espino, Erin Hayes, John L. Peterson, Tina Ritzler, Bernadette Sanchez, Joseph P. Stokes, and Marina Tolou-Shams for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article. All correspondence should be sent to Bianca D. M. Wilson, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology (M/C 285), 1007 West Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607; e-mail: biancaw@uic.edu.*

JOURNAL OF BLACK PSYCHOLOGY, Vol. 28 No. 4, November 2002 371-391

DOI: 10.1177/009579802237543

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unique cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage stress, cope with institutionalized and overt racism, and mitigate the negative psychological outcomes that result from living in an oppressive environment. Particular minority groups, such as African American bisexual and gay men, must learn to cope with two distinct forms of oppression: heterosexism and racism. We know little about the strategies these men use to cope with heterosexism and the extent to which these strategies are similar to or different from the strategies that they might use to cope with racism. In this article, we explore the coping strategies that African American men who have sex with men use to manage living in a heterosexist world and discuss these strategies in light of existing theoretical frameworks for coping with racism.

### **COPING WITH HETEROSEXISM**

There is a dearth of research that describes coping with heterosexism, the institutionalized negative beliefs about and systematic discrimination against people who are not heterosexual (Appleby, 1995). Coping with heterosexism has been typically understood as a process of identity management in which an individual monitors his or her self-presentation and prevents disclosure of his or her sexual orientation to avoid stigma. For example, Woods and Harbeck (1992) examined identity management among 12 lesbian physical educators. All of the women believed that they would lose their jobs if they were open about their sexual identification. As a result, the women engaged in a variety of behaviors to conceal their sexual identities from their colleagues, such as passing as heterosexual, distancing themselves from others, and publicly distancing themselves from homosexual topics and issues. These women also engaged in behaviors that intentionally put them at risk of revealing their sexual identities, such as obliquely or overtly overlapping their personal and professional lives, actively confronting homophobia, and supporting gay and lesbian students. However, the women most often employed strategies designed to conceal their sexual identity.

Other researchers have similarly framed the coping process as a continuum of disclosure, with staying in the closet at one extreme and openly expressing sexual identity in all contexts at the other extreme. Cody and Welch (1997) found that attempting to conceal gay identity was a common strategy used to deal with the pressures to be heterosexual among a predominantly White, gay-identified sample of men in rural New England. In one of the few studies to examine coping among African American gay and bisexual men, Edwards (1996) also found that monitoring self-disclosure was a

primary means by which young men managed the stress of living as a sexual minority.

Traditionally, studies examining strategies for coping with heterosexism have focused on White gay men, and more recently on White lesbians. In contrast to the literature grounded in the experiences of White sexual minorities, researchers interested in describing the oppression coping strategies of African American gay and bisexual men focus on the affiliation decisions that result from being caught between a homophobic African American community and a racist gay community. Authors such as Icard (1986; see also Icard, Schilling, El-Bassel, & Young, 1992) and Peterson and Marin (1988) have suggested that African American gay and bisexual men deal with heterosexism and racism by affiliating with one community more than the other. In essence, these authors have suggested that African American gay and bisexual men cope with heterosexism by removing themselves from the predominantly heterosexual Black communities and cope with racism by removing themselves from the predominantly gay White communities. Terms such as "Black gay" and "gay Black" have been used to describe this phenomenon. The former term refers to a man who sees himself as a Black man that happens to be gay and therefore primarily identifies with his racial minority group. The latter term, gay Black, refers to a man for whom a gay sexual identification is the primary identity.

Choosing to affiliate primarily with one community is a plausible strategy for dealing with dual sources of oppression, although there is little in the way of empirical evidence to suggest that this is a widely used strategy for managing oppression in the Black and gay communities. Furthermore, belonging to various communities and struggling against various forms of oppression within the communities with which one identifies is a highly complex process and is not well understood (Miller & Humphreys, 1992; Myrick, 1999). The affiliative coping model has merit in that it suggests that there might be distinct ways of coping with heterosexism specific to ethnic minority gay and bisexual men. However, it is simplistic because it does not take into account the complex task of managing multiple types of oppressions in different contexts.

### **COPING WITH RACISM**

Because African American gay and bisexual men are likely to have been socialized to manage racism before they develop strategies for managing heterosexism, these men may generalize racism coping strategies to their

experiences of heterosexist oppression. The extant literature on coping with racism may prove useful for making inferences about the strategies African American gay and bisexual men use to manage heterosexism. Racism can be defined as the "beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation" (Clark et al., 1999, p. 805). A growing body of theoretical and empirical work has explored the ways that African Americans psychologically manage racism. Traditionally, this work has characterized African American coping styles within one of two coping frameworks: (a) a social change framework in which coping styles are described along maladaptive-adaptive continua, with assimilationist and internalized racism coping styles at one end and authoritarian and social change-oriented coping styles at the other end (see, e.g., Cole, 1970; Harrell, 1979), and (b) a classic coping style framework in which coping styles are described within problem-focused and emotion-focused dimensions and along an avoidant proactive continuum (see, e.g., Outlaw, 1993; Plummer & Slane, 1996; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000).

Current theories of Black psychology also affirm the inherent bicultural-ity of African Americans. Extending the work of DuBois (1903), present-day scholars of racism and of Black American psychology have described coping behaviors as strategies for melding the dual identities of American and Black. The Triple Quandary Theory (Boykin, 1985; Boykin & Toms, 1985) is perhaps the best known framework for describing the diverse, yet unique, life experiences of Black Americans and their coping strategies. In this theory, similar to ideas expressed by other 20th-century African American scholars (Jones, 1991a, 1991b), Boykin and Toms posit that African Americans continuously negotiate three realms of experience: mainstream, minority, and African American cultural. African Americans possess and express African-rooted values. These values are balanced against those in mainstream society.

Boykin (1985) and Boykin and Toms (1985) suggest that bicultural-ity is particularly challenging for African Americans because attributes associated with Blackness and Black culture are antithetical to those desired in dominant society. For example, West African perspectives emphasize spiritualism, harmony with nature, rely on organic metaphors, are oriented toward expressive movement, emphasize interconnectedness, value affect, and have event orientation toward time. In contrast, European American perspectives emphasize materialism, impulse control and mastery over nature, rely on mechanistic metaphors, value separateness, and have a clock orientation toward time.

As they balance two distinct value systems, identities, and cultures, African Americans also manage their status as members of a stigmatized minority

group. For African Americans to do so successfully, they must continuously negotiate a maze of oppressive and discriminatory experiences. Boykin and Toms (1985) discuss three dimensions along which the coping strategies that African Americans use to traverse the racial minority experience may lie: (a) active to passive, (b) engaged to disengaged, and (c) maintenance to change. The active-passive dimension refers to the extent to which a coping response is aggressively mounted by the individual. Engagement-disengagement refers to the extent to which a coping response removes an individual from mainstream institutions and systems. The maintenance-change coping dimension describes the extent to which a particular coping response seeks to alter the status quo.

Elements of the Triple Quandary are evident in other theories. Similar to Boykin and Toms's notion of the African and mainstream cultural realms, Jones's theory of biculturalism (1991a) suggests that Blacks who have adapted to racism positively maintain both American and Black identities and cultural values but express each identity in different contexts. Knowing when and how to express each identity to gain instrumental and social reward is a sign of bicultural mastery. LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1995) have proposed that African Americans respond to their social marginalization by acculturating to the mainstream, behaving pluralistically, or fusing cultures. Melding cultures and multiculturalism are viewed as adaptive. Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, and Buriel (1990) identified role flexibility and family extendedness as two other adaptive strategies for coping with racism. Role flexibility involves behaving differently to suit specific contexts and situations, not unlike Jones's biculturalism. Family extendedness involves creating a sense of interdependence and community among friends and family (Boykin, 1985). Similarly, Post and Weddington (2000) illustrate how kinship assists African American physicians to cope with racist situations at work. Scholars have suggested that creating extended families of fictive kin is an African American coping strategy that evolved in response to the destruction of traditional family units during slavery (Willie, 1988).

In summary, the racial minority stress coping strategies that have been identified fall along several continua. These paradigms suggest that minorities who cope well with racism move between or meld the cultures of which they are a part, taking the best of each as is situationally appropriate. Maladaptive coping responses might include assimilation to the dominant culture or monoculturalism. The paradigms also suggest that coping strategies may include attempts to change the status quo and engage with the systems that structure mainstream society, attempts to distance oneself from the mainstream society, and passivity in the face of oppression.

### CURRENT STUDY

Because oppression can be a source of psychological distress, we believe that it is important to identify the strategies people use to manage it to prevent negative outcomes. In the present study, we explore how African American gay and bisexual men manage their sexual minority status. Prior research on gay men and lesbians has suggested that monitoring self-disclosure is the primary coping strategy for functioning in a heterosexist society. Theoreticians working with African American gay and bisexual men have proposed that selecting a primary affiliation is the principal coping strategy that ethnic minorities use to manage heterosexism. Current thought on how African Americans cope with racial oppression describes strategies that fall along multiple continua and that vary with context. Given the diverse array of strategies that have been identified among African Americans for coping with racism, we would expect a more diverse array of coping strategies to be used by African American gay and bisexual men than has been described in the existing literature on heterosexism.

### METHOD

The data we used for the current study were originally obtained to investigate relationships among psychological, social, and behavioral factors affecting high-risk sexual and drug use practices among African American gay and bisexual men. (For a detailed description of the original study, see Stokes and Peterson [1998].) The community identification process (Higgins, 1996), developed to locate historically hard-to-reach groups at high risk for HIV infection, was used to recruit the men in the sample. In Step 1 of the process, semi-structured individual interviews are conducted with people who have formal and informal contact with members of the target population (e.g., service providers, bartenders, ministry personnel, sex workers, family, and friends) to learn about the target population, including what subgroups exist in the population and how a diverse cross-section of the population could be recruited for further study. In Step 2, relying on the information collected in Step 1, members of the target population are recruited for interviews through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Stokes and Peterson used this process to interview African American adult men who reported having had sex with a man within the 6 months prior to the interview.

The interviews that Stokes and Peterson conducted in Chicago constitute the data for the present study. Chicago contains one of the largest urban

populations of African Americans in the country. Despite its diversity, Chicago is a highly segregated city, with the majority of its Black populations residing in primarily Black neighborhoods on the south and west sides of the city. Whites are more likely to live on Chicago's north side and in the central, downtown area. Chicago's gay community is centered in the heart of the city's north side, in a largely middle- and upper-class, White area.

### **PARTICIPANTS**

For the purposes of our analyses, 37 cases were selected from the original sample of 41 interviews conducted in Chicago. Because the current study's purpose was to explore strategies used to manage one's sexual minority status, respondents who were heterosexually identified ( $n = 3$ ) were removed from the sample. In addition, one interview was dropped because the interviewer did not believe the respondent provided truthful responses.

The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 36 years old. When asked to describe their sexual orientation, 11 of the respondents self-identified as bisexual and 26 self-identified as gay. All men self-identified as African American. All of the respondents are from Chicago's south and west sides and most are native of Chicago, living with or near their families of origin.

### **PROCEDURES**

Men were recruited by project interviewers in known congregation sites, such as bars and parks. After identifying eligible and interested potential respondents, interviewers scheduled an appointment for an interview at the university or gave individuals a card with information about how to call to schedule an appointment. In some cases, the interview was conducted immediately in a private area of a bar or club. All interviewers were African American gay men.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions exploring HIV-risk behaviors, social and psychological factors affecting African American gay and bisexual men's risk behaviors, and social networks and sense of community among African American gay and bisexual men. Respondents were instructed not to reveal their identities during the interview to protect their confidentiality.

The length of the typical interview was between 60 and 90 minutes. Respondents were paid \$35. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were proofread against the audiotapes and corrected.

### ANALYSES

Data analyses proceeded in stages, following a grounded theoretical approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We began the analyses by identifying all of the textual passages in which respondents described their experience of being members of a sexual and racial minority group. Text identified at this stage included discussion of issues that were unique to being gay/bisexual or being Black and gay/bisexual, such as what it was like to first disclose their sexuality to family members or experience discrimination in the workplace. This text constituted the data used for the next stage of the analyses.

The next stage of our analyses focused on open coding. Open coding is an inductive process in which instances of the phenomenon of interest, in this case, respondents' experiences coping with their minority group status, are identified and labeled. We initially identified 18 codes, for which we created detailed definitions. The initial codes focused on all aspects of being a racial or sexual minority group member.

We then hired a research assistant to check the stability of the open codes. Code stability refers to the extent to which a code definition is clear enough that another person can reliably identify data that fits the description of the code (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Code stability is achieved once the second coder and the original coders agree that the codes are clear enough that they can be easily applied to the interview text. Our stability coder read 15 interviews, 5 at a time, and identified text that he felt represented the 18 codes that we originally identified. Once a week we discussed with him the appropriateness and utility of the codes. Through these discussions, we added, dropped, and collapsed codes, revised code definitions, and recoded text. We also became more focused on the specific strategies that were used by our respondents to cope with their minority status, because this was the most prominent theme in the text.

We were almost always able to come to a consensus on our understanding and categorization of the text with our stability coder. When we were unable to achieve consensus, the first author documented the conflicting thoughts on the issue, discussed the conflict with the second author, and coded the text with the first author's interpretation of the relevant passage in the text. We favored the first author's interpretation of the text because she had far greater familiarity with the existing literature on gay and bisexual African American men and was also more knowledgeable of Chicago's African American gay and bisexual community than was the stability coder.

After we had revised the codes based on our initial discussions with the stability coder, we had him check the stability of the revised codes for the remaining interviews ( $n = 22$ ). In this second stage of open coding, the focus

was on the specific coping strategies described by the respondents. We coded the same interviews simultaneously. Our coding sought to identify what actions respondents took to manage heterosexism and in what context each action took place. Our final set of open codes comprised 34 action codes and 9 context codes.

After open coding was complete, we began axial coding. Axial coding consists of comparing and contrasting patterns among open codes and examining the dimensions and properties of those codes. Axial coding is an analytical exercise in examining relationships between concepts. We examined the dimensions and properties of the various coping strategies, paying special attention to the importance of context. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe dimensions as subcategories of the codes, and properties are the descriptive characteristics of each dimension. As part of this process, we looked for commonalities and differences among the specific actions taken to cope with oppression. This process yielded six primary categories of coping strategies and two primary coping contexts, which we present in detail in the results.

Credibility describes the truthfulness or believability of results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Attaining credibility can be achieved in multiple ways and at varying times within the study. Methods of seeking credibility include incorporating data analysis results into future data collection plans, verifying with participants the truthfulness of the representation and interpretation of their statements during or after the study is completed, discussing with disinterested peers whether the researchers' interpretations make sense, and demonstrating that the results of the study speak or add to existing theory regarding the phenomenon of interest. Because we used data that were already collected and the original respondents were anonymous, we relied on the latter two of these methods. In a weekly meeting, we discussed the data analysis procedures and emerging patterns in the data with colleagues who were not involved in this research project. These discussions provided us with support for our interpretations of the data and, at times, challenged us to reassess our conclusions. The colleagues with whom we discussed our work regularly examined our logic and the quality of our evidence for the conclusions we had drawn from our data. In addition to these discussions, we made ongoing comparisons of our findings to relevant psychological literature as another means of establishing the credibility of our analytic work. This process included reading theoretical and empirical works to assess whether the concepts and relationships among concepts that were emerging from these data had been found among other populations who shared similarities with our sample (e.g., coping with heterosexism among non-Black sexual minority groups and coping with racism among Black sexual majority groups).

## RESULTS

Respondents described five categories of approaches to managing their sexual minority status, as well as one technique that was used to manage their racial and sexual minority status. Respondents' experiences suggested a pattern of strategy use specific to context (setting). Some strategies were used in non-gay friendly situations and settings, whereas others were used in gay-friendly situations and settings. One strategy was used across settings and situations. What follows is a description of each coping strategy in its distinct context. We also present the specific functions that these coping strategies serve.

### NON-GAY FRIENDLY CONTEXTS

The non-gay friendly (NGF) contexts were settings that the respondents identified as intolerant of homosexuality. The settings respondents identified as inhospitable included their family, the workplace, the church, school, and public areas, particularly those that were predominantly African American. Respondents explicitly described the intolerance exhibited by people in these non-gay friendly contexts. In response to a question about his experiences in the church, one respondent said, "I remember [homosexuality] being discussed on several occasions by the pastor of our church who is 100% against it" (kp 14). Punishment by God for being gay was commonly mentioned as a message that respondents had received in non-gay friendly contexts. Another respondent offered the following observation about life in a local housing development:

It's just like if you go, like they say, here on [street name], because that's in the projects, or to like [name of affordable housing development] and you gay and they just gonna beat you down and try to kill you cause you gay. (kp 37)

Five strategies were used to cope with minority status in these contexts.

### Role Flexing

The majority of the men in the sample reported that they altered their actions, dress, and mannerisms in non-gay friendly contexts, a strategy we hereafter refer to as "role flexing." Role flexing was generally used to keep the respondents' gay and heterosexual worlds separate and distinct and was enacted when a situation was perceived as hostile or homoantagonistic. Men role flexed in several distinct ways.

The macho extreme strategy describes actions taken by respondents to conform to group norms regarding masculinity. This strategy is characterized by asserting one's manliness so that suspicions that the respondent is gay are eliminated. Engaging in homoantagonism (taunting and possibly behaving violently toward gays), avoiding public intimacy with men, "acting like a thug/hard criminal," and "butching up," defined by one interviewee as "acting manly" and "cocking your hat back" (kp 36), are macho extreme behaviors. An example of this strategy, perhaps at the more drastic end of the continuum, is illustrated by the following quote:

But then, you know, by me being in the projects, it's a lot of gay people in the projects. Shit, you just as cool as a gay as you was with anybody else unless, you know what I mean—it all depends though. You know you play them so far—and you know like say for instance, I went with a guy name \_\_\_\_\_. Now he is just as gay as he can be when I get to my boy's house, I play with him and trip with him and all like that. Because all of us be up there tripping and laughing together, but we get outside that door, [he] know not even to come close to me because I might hit him in the jaw. You know what I mean?" (kp22)

This respondent's insistence on creating a manly public impression is typical of the macho extreme behaviors that respondents described.

A second category of role flexing strategies we call being sanctimonious. The being sanctimonious strategies are similar to those characterized as macho extreme in that the intent of being sanctimonious is to assimilate to group norms, although in this case the norms are those established by church teachings. For example, one participant believed that he lived completely different lives in different situations and described himself as "being heavily sanctimonious" around his "church friends." He altered his behavior, playing a part, to fit in.

The third role flexing strategy, the cover up, involved using deceit to conceal one's sexual identity from others, such as lying about hanging out in gay clubs, being discreet about sexual relationships with men, avoiding discussions about sexual orientation, identifying as heterosexual around heterosexuals, and maintaining sexual relations with women for the primary purpose of concealing one's sexual orientation.

The fourth type of role flexing, passivity, included strategies such as maintaining a quiet and reserved demeanor in the presence of heterosexuals and listening to degrading antihomosexual comments by coworkers without saying anything. The men who used these strategies opted not to lie or fight back but simply to suffer in silence and be invisible. For example,

KP30: You know, when I'm around straight people I'm more like I'm quiet, you know. I don't say—I don't say much. When I'm like, you know, around my own people, my own kind, gay people, then I just open up and just have a real good time.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel supported by it? Is it—what does it give you?

KP30: Yeah, I feel supported by it. It just, I don't know, it just—it just makes me feel more, you know, really at ease and I guess all my guards are down and I just feel more at ease like no one's going to hurt me and more so with the gay community. Because, I mean, with the straight community because you just—if your guards are not up or whatever, they'll find something to pick at you with.

Passages such as these illustrate the vulnerability these men feel in contexts that are not gay-identified. They also highlight the dramatic change in behavior among some men once they are in contexts in which they feel their sexual identity is supported.

### **Keeping the Faith**

Faith was used by many of the men in the sample as a means to cope with heterosexism. Participants who kept the faith sought to cope with their sexual minority status by remaining close to God. These men sought the advice of ministers at Gay Christian organizations, attended church, and participated in worship practices/services. Ironically, the church also was identified as among the most oppressive of non-gay friendly contexts, because numerous times respondents described heterosexist experiences within the church.

### **Standing Your Ground**

A number of respondents described using strategies in which they openly confronted people who spoke badly of gays or stood their ground. The following excerpt illustrates how one respondent used this type of strategy:

KP24: . . . and I believe in standing up for what I believe in and that's not—I'm not going to let no little thug on the corner selling drugs intimidate me. I'm not going to do that. I'm going to stand my ground. If they walk past, I'm smart enough to understand that I'm not going to respond to their ignorance saying, "Oh, look at that fag." "Hey," they're going to be like, "hey, baby." You know those little . . .

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

KP24: . . . tormenting things they do . . .

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

KP24: . . . but I'm going to pass and totally ignore them. Totally, because I'm not going to put myself lower than what they want me to be.

As in this case, standing your ground did not always involve physical or verbal action but could include using the power of silence. This respondent not only refuses to accept heterosexism but he resists oppression by not concealing or denying his identity and standing up for himself.

### **Changing Sexual Behavior**

A final strategy, one that was not being used by any participant at the time of the interview but was mentioned as a strategy men had previously used to cope with their nonacceptance, was abstaining from homosexual behaviors all together. Respondents mentioned that at some earlier point in their lives they had avoided sexual contact with men to avoid the perceived negative consequences of being gay in an anti-gay society.

### **Gay Friendly Contexts**

One coping strategy was associated with gay-friendly contexts (e.g., gay clubs, gay parts of town, places in which the respondent was surrounded by gay or gay-friendly people) among the men in our sample. These contexts were often private, such as an individual's home. Behaviors that were used to cope with oppression in non-gay friendly contexts were not used in the gay-friendly contexts. In gay-friendly contexts, respondents reported being affectionate with other men, openly showing sexual interest in men, letting their guard down, "queening out" (acting in an exaggerated feminine manner), and discussing their sexuality freely. An important coping strategy among the men in our sample was to create gay space.

Men created gay space by bringing together cliques of men (i.e., friendship circles). These cliques were often described as an alternative family by the men. Our respondents reported that they

get a sense of community feeling from that . . . whole fact that yes, we are gay and we are open about it to people, so you know, it's no big deal. We have this like family bonding, if you will, a family outside a family. (kp11)

This alternative family provided some of the emotional support that biological family members were unable to provide. "I get things that my family has not—they're not at a point to give me. I have that sense from that clique, a sense of extended family" (kp 08).

A unique feature of creating gay space was that this strategy also was used by some participants to cope with racism. Some men created space for Black gay men and, by doing so, minimized their exposure to racism and heterosexism simultaneously. Creating separate spaces for Black gay men provided respondents with a support system made up of people who were empathic and supportive. As one participant put it,

I think Black men have a special sort of identity, you know, even within the gay community. Because there are certain things, certain dynamics that distinguishes us from other gay men. And so I definitely sense that from, you know, a lot of the Black friends that I have who are gay and feeling drawn towards other Black men because of those common experiences. (kp 32)

### **Accepting Self**

All of the strategies identified thus far were used in either gay- or non-gay friendly settings exclusively. Accepting self, the final coping strategy, was used in all contexts. Accepting self was characterized by a respondents' choices to replace negative attitudes about themselves as sexual minorities with positive attitudes. A few men in the sample mentioned their love and acceptance of who they are as sexual minorities as a strategy for dealing with other people's disapproval or dislike of them. These men recognized the heterosexism as a form of oppression. These men chose not to act differently in non-gay friendly contexts, despite the possibility of being antagonized. As one respondent noted, "I don't change myself for nobody" (kp15). Respondents discussed the role of age in coming to accept and be open about their sexual orientation. As they got older, respondents said they came to accept their sexual identity and were unwilling to change simply to fit in.

### **Functions of the Coping Strategies**

Strategies for managing minority status served several functions for African American bisexual and gay men. The six primary management strategies served three main functions: avoiding stigma, buffering experienced oppression, and attempting social change (see Table 1).

### **Avoiding Stigma**

Some respondent's actions were intended to avoid the stigmatization or negative consequences of being gay. As described by Meyer (1995), stigma

**TABLE 1**  
**Functions of Strategies Used to Manage Heterosexism**

| <i>Strategy</i>          | <i>Context</i>          |                     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|                          | <i>Non-Gay Friendly</i> | <i>Gay-Friendly</i> |
| Role flexing             | Avoid stigma            |                     |
| Changing sexual behavior | Avoid stigma            |                     |
| Standing your ground     | Social change           |                     |
| Keeping the faith        | Building buffers        |                     |
| Creating gay-only spaces |                         | Building buffers    |
| Accepting self           | Social change           | Social change       |

includes expecting to experience discrimination and rejection. In potentially stigmatizing situations, respondents sought to eliminate or minimize the possibility of their being associated with homosexuality to avoid discrimination and rejection. In the current study, role flexing, changing sexual behaviors, and creating gay spaces were strategies that served the function of avoiding stigma. Role flexing strategies helped to avoid stigma by creating a heterosexual persona or image. The desired result was to blend into heterosexual culture to deflect negative attention and hostility. Respondents' pro-active maneuvering to surround themselves with men of their own racial and sexual minority status (e.g., creating gay space) served as a means of avoiding discrimination and rejection from those who were of racial and sexual majority groups. By segregating themselves from those who were unlikely to accept them, the men avoided stigmatization. Finally, by not participating in gay behaviors, the men in the sample sought to eliminate the stigmatizing consequences of being a sexual minority in a heterosexist society. Respondents described times when they had resisted all homosexual desires in hope that they would stop feeling them all together. These drastic actions were taken to completely disassociate themselves from an identity that was stigmatized by society in general as well as by the African American Christian churches in particular.

### **Building Buffers**

Although coping mechanisms designed to avoid oppressive situations can be useful, strategies for coping with the inevitable, experienced oppression also must be developed. Some respondents took actions designed to create a buffer between themselves and oppressive experiences. Creating gay spaces

and keeping the faith functioned as buffers between external and internal oppression, respectively.

The experiences of heterosexism and racism within society as a whole and within the Black and gay communities, specifically, are mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically taxing. Creating gay-only space offered men a supportive context. The respondents built buffering systems to mitigate negative experiences, such as rejection by their families or by White gay men. Participating in religious activities served to buffer the respondent from his own internalized oppression. This is particularly interesting because in the public realm of spirituality, such as the church and worship ceremonies, participants experienced homoantagonism and role flexed to avoid further stigma. Faith provided hope for redemption and forgiveness on the part of God.

I feel like because of what I'm doing, what I'm doing is a sin in God's eyes. . . . I like to think that the only sins that I commit are with man. I mean, I'm not a killer, I don't use drugs, I don't do this, I don't do that. I don't worship other gods. I mean, I think that He—He'll look upon it, and when my day comes, I'd like to think that He'll look at the good that I've done. . . . I just feel like it gives me something like—like a rock. (kp 33)

### **Social Change**

Most minority status management strategies revealed in this study were used as survival techniques in a heterosexist and racist society but were not aimed at changing society per se. Rather than avoiding places or people, acting differently to suit group norms, or seeking support, a few men challenged people's heterosexist ideals by either refusing to back down in the face of bigotry or making a change within themselves. Standing your ground and accepting self served the function of challenging the status quo as a means of managing oppression. When presented with heterosexism, some men in this sample of African American bisexual and gay men chose to oppose heterosexism. Respondents stood their ground to interrupt a stream of bigotry, thus changing the overall dynamics between oppressors and oppressed.

Accepting-self strategies were also social change attempts, but these actions were focused inward and were aimed to cease the perpetuation of internalized oppression. Respondents recognized their role in endorsing anti-gay sentiments and saw their rejection of these negative beliefs as a necessary step in changing the dynamics of the oppressive contexts in which they participated.

## DISCUSSION

We have presented six contextually grounded coping strategies that African American gay and bisexual men use to manage their sexual minority status. The strategies men used to manage heterosexist contexts included role flexing, in which men change the image they present to suit the situation; relying on faith for emotional comfort; and standing up for oneself. Men also sought to change their sexual behavior and feelings. Men also described accepting their sexual orientation and creating gay social networks. These various strategies were employed by men to avoid stigma, buffer oppression, and change the status quo.

Our data suggest similarities among the strategies these men use to cope with heterosexism and the strategies that theorists such as Boykin (1985) have identified for coping with racism. Boykin describes two overarching strategies used to cope with racism, mental colonization, in which the individual accepts their fate in a racist society and does not make any effort toward social change, and resistance, in which the individual defies the racist system. Within these overarching strategies, coping efforts fall along passive-active and engagement-disengagement continua. Role flexing, keeping the faith, and changing sexual behaviors can be characterized as mental colonization strategies. These three strategies perpetuate the status quo and reinforce cultural norms favoring heterosexuality. Role flexers pretend to be heterosexual by either presenting such an image or by allowing others to assume that they are heterosexual. Our respondents often hid their identity while participating in heterosexual contexts. Just as mental colonization involves overemphasizing White mainstream values, or, as Boykin (1985) calls it, "out-Whiting White people," role flexing often involved "out-butching" heterosexual men. In this way, our respondents promoted their own oppression by accepting and succumbing to societal norms. These strategies reflected, indeed were responses to, engagement with dominant social institutions and therefore occurred only in the context of heterosexual settings. Those who kept the faith or changed their sexual behavior engaged in an extreme form of mental colonization. These men accepted heterosexist norms and adopted the belief that homosexuality was wrong and sinful. These men also employed coping strategies that maintained the heterosexist status quo.

In our data, we identified three system change/system defiant coping strategies. African American gay and bisexual men defied the system by surrounding themselves with men who are in the same minority group. This strategy bears some resemblance to the Black nationalist strategy described by Boykin in which African Americans develop a separate community that is constructed around their own culture and values. These men actively created

alternative social networks and disengaged themselves from oppressive social interactions. Men in our sample also stood up to heterosexism, not unlike the strategies Boykin describes in which African Americans challenge mainstream perspectives, interpretations, and worldviews. These men engaged the system, but with the goal of challenging its fundamental disregard for them.

The decision that some of our respondents made to love themselves as they are does not have a direct parallel in Boykin's framework, although self-acceptance is an element of coping strategies that are aimed at challenges to the system. Boykin also describes a strategy in which African Americans pretend to adopt White values and perspectives infiltrate White society and plot against it. We saw no evidence of strategies in which sexual minority men pretend to accept heterosexist values to infiltrate and plot against heterosexual society. The failure of this pattern to emerge in our data may reflect important differences between racism and heterosexism. Although it is not universally so, racial minorities are seldom assumed to be part of the racial majority and their daily experiences of racism are not typically characterized by false assumptions that they are White. Otherness is an explicit and implicit part of daily experiences of racism. Day-to-day experiences of heterosexism often include multiple instances in which the explicit or implicit assumption is that an individual is heterosexual. Challenging such assumptions and making sexual minorities visible is an important component of addressing heterosexism. Thus, although both forms of oppression denigrate and devalue individuals and both forms of oppression contribute to the invisibility of sexual and racial minorities within mainstream media and culture, claiming visibility and establishing otherness may have greater importance in the day-to-day fight against heterosexism than in the day-to-day fight against racism.

We found little evidence among the men in our sample of affiliative decision making as a coping strategy. Although some of the men in our sample did characterize the gay community as racist and the Black community as homophobic, men did not describe managing these stressors by selecting one group with which to affiliate or in terms of switching affiliations between the two communities. Some men did change their behavior in the context of each community, but their sense of belonging to both communities appeared to remain unaltered. It is possible that this could be an artifact of the interview context. Men may not have talked about race in the interview because it was framed as focused on men's sexual behavior. However, many of the questions focused on the unique experiences of being Black and a gay or bisexual man, so race was in fact salient. It is also possible that the failure to describe affiliative decision making is driven by what it means to be Black and gay in a

segregated city in which participation in an established, organized gay community is determined by class and race. Black gay and bisexual men in Chicago may not perceive that affiliating with the predominately White gay community is a viable option. In fact, many of the heterosexual contexts that men described were predominately Black. Finally, men simply may not view their identities as African American and sexual minorities as separate per se, or at least not view one as subordinate to the other.

We did find that disclosure was among the dimensions along which men's coping strategies varied. Some of the strategies we identified were aimed at concealing identity (e.g., role flexing) and others at making it visible (e.g., standing ground). But, the strategies in our data did vary along multiple continua, including the extent to which the coping effort was passive, reflected normative expectations, sought to alter the status quo, and engaged dominant institutions and settings. Thus, our data suggest that managing heterosexist oppression involves a complex and varied arsenal of coping strategies. Although these data shed important light on the strategies that men use to manage their sexual minority status, they should be viewed in light of the limitations of our work. A significant limitation of our study is that our data were not collected to study how men cope with being a sexual minority. The original study did not contain questions about oppression management. Although we obtained rich data about how these men cope, there may be other strategies that were not identified in this study because it was not a focal interest of the original investigators. Issues of discrimination and prejudice were nonetheless salient in these men's lives because a majority of them discussed coping with heterosexism. Our results also are consistent with existing theories regarding how African Americans cope with racism. Future research ought to confirm that the strategies we identified are used by other samples of African American gay and bisexual men and explore the extent to which the coping strategies used by African Americans are also used by gay and bisexual men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Research also might evaluate whether African Americans generalize strategies learned to manage their racial minority status to managing their sexual minority status, because our data suggest this might be the case.

The twin effects of racist and homophobic beliefs are likely to have severe consequences for the health and well-being of African American gay and bisexual men, as well as on all Americans. Until we better understand how racial minorities manage sexual minority stress, we will fall short in assisting African American gay and bisexual men to resist oppression and fail to fully articulate the oppressive effects racism and heterosexism have on us all.

## NOTE

The key participants were each assigned a number to maintain confidentiality while also allowing the authors to correspond the key participants' interview responses to their demographic information.

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