

Experiences of Being a Queer Black Male: Identity Politics, Education, and Work

Devin D. Moss
Loyola University Chicago

The intersectional experiences of queer Black males have not been widely documented in education and the work force. Using an integrative review framework, this article explores the experiences of queer Black men. The first portion of the paper draws on identity development to illustrate the multidimensional identity of queer Black men and how these identities are often oppressed within different communities within society. The second portion of the paper explores how these two identities encounter educational and work environments. What is evident is that there is a need for intersecting policies that are equally multidimensional in ending systematic racism and homophobia in school and work.

Keywords: Black males, queer, identity

America's commitment to building a diverse nation with equal access to uplifting opportunities often falters, and the intersectionality of being both queer and Black leaves males with stunted potential for obtaining an education and future employment due to systematic oppression. Educators, especially, become excited to speak about diversity and multiculturalism, but quickly limit the discourse to only race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender—mostly a binary between male and female (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Palmer, 2010). The inequities faced by queer students of color within education, and ultimately the workforce, are often neglected within research, which translates into little to no intersectional policy recommendations for educational institutions and the workforce.

Noting the level of commitment to diversity and the inequity gaps that occur in research and practice, this paper seeks to explore, two-dimensionally, barriers that exist for queer Black males in relation to education and ultimately the workforce. Understanding the intersection of Black and queer male identity helps us to also understand the double-edged sword of systematic discrimination and oppression placed on these individuals, which leads to the woes of being undereducated and underemployed. My intent is to illustrate that there is an equal need for more intentionally inclusive policies to ensure that educational and work environments alike are safe places for these diverse identities.

There is minimal information published on the intersectional experiences of queer Black men in education and work directly; therefore, I will use integrative review framework to analyze multiple previous works on queer and Black male experiences. Specifically, I seek to explore how publicly constructed social institutions disenfranchise queer Black males in education and work. In the first part of the paper I will employ knowledge of the *public*, given that the public is a social space (Dewey, 1927), to illustrate diverging and converging social ideologies in relation to queer Black male identity. I aim to explore how social influences impact intertwining identity development of queer Black males. The second part of the paper will explore the dual educational and work attainment struggles of those who identify as queer individuals and Black men. The paper will end with a brief exploration of the importance of policies that intentionally intersect identities in education and work.

Social Identity Politics

Asking about social barriers, which prevent access to education, leads us down the path of considering who truly has control to bar individuals from achieving certain goals. Black boys often experience academic and social strife within education (Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton,

2010; Prager, 2011; Staples, 1982). Additionally, queer students' experiences are often impacted by heteronormative practices (Biegel, 2010; Mayes, 2014; Walton, 2014). The intertwining of academia and social issues becomes a two-dimensional hurdle for queer Black male students. This begs the question, who created these structural barriers? Dewey (1927) believed that "...the public has no hands except those of individual human beings" (pp. 82). Therefore, he believed it is the wayward individuals who act upon their own interests on behalf of the state who create acts where progress ebbs and flows. Furthermore, beyond these elected individuals, the publics formed around various issues appear to be too plentiful—each with their own ideology—and often to large too function cohesively. Dewey (1927) suggests that communication is the means by which you can unite publics and their ideologies in order to progress forward. This very notion is present in the rhetoric of the Black Civil Rights and Gay Liberation Movements, but tensions arise as attempts of cohesion have occurred.

Strides Toward Freedom: A Step Forward, A Step Back

The Civil Rights Movement started around the time of *Brown v. Board of Education* with tentacles stretching a few years prior (Hall, 2005). Much of this movement was in opposition to the historical treatment and social conditions of Black individuals. Mainly, Black people were seeking freedom from their oppressors. While the Civil Rights Movement was maturing, the Gay Liberation Movement was developing. The Stonewall Riots are often equated with the start of the queer movement, where queer individuals were responding to historical harassment from police officers (Morris, n.d.). From there, the movement has taken on efforts to build equality, allowing for equal access to socially established institutions such as education, marriage, and military service, to name a few.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement have crossed paths in recent years regarding public discourse around equity and equality. On the cusp of the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* and first same-gender marriages in Massachusetts, supporters for marriage equality went on record drawing comparisons between the two historic moments, stating, "...both *Brown* and this new day revolve around a single, simple and yet deeply elusive idea: integration" (Russell, 2008, pp. 101). The proponents of marriage equality believed that both historic events allowed for citizens to be equal in the eyes of humanity and politics. However, many clergy and civil rights leaders were quick to dismiss the link between the two movements, citing Biblical reasons as distinctions and arguing that Blacks cannot change who they are, but queer people could. Therefore, the movements were not the same to these individuals. Russell (2008) believed that the two movements only converge around ideologies of respectability politics for members within the group such as principles of cultural "productivity, selflessness, [and] responsibility" (pp. 101). Nonetheless, this discourse has created a lingering split between race and sexual diversity, positioning queer Black males in the middle.

Double Consciousness: The Queer Black Dilemma

The cycle of socialization (Harro, 2010) positions individuals to be born into a world where the construction of identity is "socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed at both the institutional and individual levels" (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007, pp. 2). Given this lens, W.E.B. Du Bois' (1986) theory of double consciousness demonstrates how individual and collective identities are developed based on socially constructed contexts. He theorized that Black individuals have an ever present two-ness where the individual is American (the oppressor) in one sight and a Black (the oppressed) person in the other, creating an identity that is in conflict with itself. Black individuals move through their experiences engendering this two-ness in order to exist. I argue that due to the highly scrutinized nature of queer and Black

identities being two separately constructed social identities, Black queer males are often negotiating aspects of their identities as they navigate various social spaces within America.

“Multiple Dimensions of Identity”: The Great Fall Divide

Queer-identified individuals are often the targets of discrimination just as many other minority groups are within American society (Bourke, 2008). Bourke (2008) postulates that degrees of discrimination based on racial and ethnicity identity could be drastically different than discrimination based on sexuality, given race and ethnicity are often visibly represented, whereas sexual orientation is not. Nonetheless, the social identities are sometimes interwoven. Medina (2004) proclaims that research illustrates the "messy network of interdependencies" (p. 94) of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In order to understand this, we must first understand the social construction of identity.

Jones and McEwen (2000) found that the “dynamic construction of identity and the influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions, such as race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class” (p. 2), exist within everyone. Additionally, these social and personal identities are continuously intersecting and influencing the other, not allowing for individual identities to act in isolation. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) updated this model to also include meaning making as an influence to multiple identity dimensions. In this regard, contextual influences such as relationships, knowledge, and experiences based on social, historical, political, and cultural are filtered through an individual’s meaning making abilities in order to influence an individual’s holistic identity. In other words, outside influences may impact an individual’s concept of self. This is how intersectionality—the intertwining of identities—is engendered, or a moment when “multiple aspects of identity are present and considered at the same time” (Bourke, 2008, p.12).

This is how it plays out in queer Black male identity development according to Bourke (2008):

The individual becomes aware of same-sex feelings/attractions within the context of the Black community; the individual faces both racism of the White world and heterosexism/homophobia of the Black community; the individual seeks information and contact with other Black-gay men; the individual makes a commitment to personal change and self-acceptance; the individual engages in meaningful activities within a concept of a Black-gay community; and, the individual recognizes that being Black-gay is merely a part of his whole being. Additionally, issues of disclosure are presented as a part of this model. (p. 12)

What is significant about Bourke’s (2008) theory is that his model highlights multiple conflicts along the way to identity synthesis. First, he acknowledges that same-sex attraction may not be a part of the communicated norms of the Black community, which, as Evans et al. (2010) points out, may be cause for identity development foreclosure. Secondly, Black males, regardless of sexuality, experience racism. Additionally, queer Black males often seek affirmation within the queer community, which also may be a space where racism exists given the Euro-centric influence on queer culture. Bourke (2008) points out that the heteronormativity of the Black community and the racism of the queer White community leaves queer Black males “homeless” in regard to community belonging. Although the model suggests that individuals can come to understand themselves as queer, Black, and male simultaneously over time, the split created between race and sexuality becomes apparent in the development process.

Diversity, Inequities, and Education

The dual identities and the discourse around them continue to create barriers within education and employment, lessening the opportunity to participate in the global arena. First, I explore America's commitment to diversity via Darling-Hammond's (2007) argument, which posits that America has to address disparities in education for ethnic and racial minority and low-socioeconomic groups in order to create an equitable playing field. In agreement with her, the solution to *Brown v. Board of Education* was meant to be an equitable move that closed the access and achievement gap between Black and White students. However, Darling-Hammond (2007) states that large gaps between minority and White and Asian students still exist and that access to education is a greater issue after more than 50 years post-*Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Due to this gap, many individuals are undereducated and therefore unable to fill roles within the labor market. Further, her research found that there were more Black males in prison than in higher education in 2000. Darling-Hammond (2007) states that given this scenario, the practice of producing undereducated individuals drains the American economy versus stimulating it. Her resolution is that America must find ways of educating all students well.

Black Males, Education, and Globalization

Wang (2007) discusses globalization and finds that it "is a most inclusive structural context that provides a horizon of action that makes contemporary people think globally, even though they may only be acting locally, and develop a direction for their capital accumulation strategy and economic plan" (p. 24). In this regard, access to capital and economic markets become goals sought through actions such as education for local individuals. Given this, Wang argues that because globalization has created change within the global community, local individuals must change in order to maintain or keep up with the trajectory of global ideologies around capital and economic endeavors. However, access to quality education, even within the United States, hinges on globalization given the assessment landscape used to rank nations that often sets a standard that causes some students to falter. Echoing Dewey (1927), Wang (2007) quotes researchers by stating "globalization is not an active entity in itself but one that is set in motion through the mechanisms of government or interpretation and action on the part of individual participants" (p. 27). Therefore, policy makers and enforcers who interpreted global policies are acting in ways in which Black men become disenfranchised.

Palmer et al. (2010) follows this lead by proclaiming that addressing the academic needs of Black males within education is vital in order to give Black males access to the globalized community. He first notes that American education has historically been less proactive in supporting Blacks. Further, academic research has often described Black males as "endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous" (p. 109) within society and within educational settings. He continues by saying that the issues that hinder Black males from graduation begin early within their educational experience. First, teachers and counselors often write off Black males in regard to being able to have successful futures. Secondly, Black males have higher suspension rates than their White counterparts. Next, Palmer et al. (2010) points out that Black males are underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement courses, due to ability tracking standards. In opposition, he points out that Black males are disproportionately present in special education courses based on perceived behavioral issues and learning disabilities. Given this experience, Palmer et al. (2010) found that only one out of 15 Black males were adequately prepared for college education, which is in close relation with the invisibility of Black males within the global economic market.

Black Males and Employment

Black males are often underpaid and underemployed in relation to many of their White counterparts and this is linked to the educational attainment of Black males. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2013) reports that in 2012, 14.0% of Black males were unemployed, which created a labor market that was composed of 80% White individuals and 12% Black (non-Hispanic) individuals. The organization also found that Black men were least likely to be participants within the labor force at 67.7% compared to White-Hispanics and Black-Hispanics at 81.0%.

Furthermore, BLS (2013) found that educational attainment of the labor force varied amongst races. Black (non-Hispanic) individuals had participants in the following ranges: 8% less than high school diploma; 33% high school graduates with no college; 33% some college or associates degree; and 26% bachelors or higher degree. This is in comparison to White labor force participants who ranged from: 9% less than high school diploma; 27% high school graduates with no college; 28% some college or associates degree; and 36% bachelors or higher degree. Though these numbers may have small gaps in comparison, many have found that White undereducated individuals are more likely to be employed than Black individuals who complete high school or attend college (Adams, 2014).

The job market has seen turbulence within recent years starting with the financial crisis in 2008 up until the market turn in 2012, when for the first time since 2009, unemployment rates fell below 8% (Kuehn, 2013). Kuehn (2013) says that the disparities, such as those found by the BLS (2013), tend to hold true through “boom years and recessions” (p. 1). Moreover, based on data from 2010, Kuehn (2013) found that 15.6% of young White men and 9.2 % of older White men were unemployed after the 2008 financial crisis compared to 30.0% of young Black men and 13.5% of older Black men who were also unemployed.

Kuehn (2013) states that obtaining a high school diploma is essentially an opportunity for young men to illustrate potential to prospective employers. Furthermore, those Black males who do not earn a high school diploma or apply for a GED are more often unemployed than those who obtain the high school diploma, 48.0% and 28.0% respectfully. Ironically, White males who drop out of high school and Black males who graduate from high school have about the same unemployment rate at 28.0% (Kuehn, 2013). Kuehn (2013) also found that entering college can shift the national percentages of the job market participation rates; however, enrollment comparisons, 51.6% of White males were enrolled in higher education in 2010 compared to 47.7% of Black males, still highlight gaps within education and the job market. The picture painted here shows that Black males have seen great economic strain in relation to employment. The researchers have drawn connections between employment and education, which shows, as Palmer (2013) states, that the economic problems faced by Black males start early within education.

Queer Individuals and School Environment

In America, queer students often experience unwelcoming educational environments. In 2009, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that 84.6% of queer and trans* students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported physical harassment, and 18.8% reported being physical assaulted (Dewitt, 2012). Derogatory language toward queer and trans* identities was also often heard in schools. Dewitt (2012) says that some students rise above the oppression and find their niche. However, there are some, even as young as elementary grade level, students who educators can do more for. Noting a slew of suicides that have plagued the queer and trans* community in recent years, Dewitt (2012) believes that educators can play a more integral role in creating welcoming educational spaces for queer and trans* students. As Dewitt (2012) suggested, teachers as role models can prove beneficial for students in that queer

and trans* students are able to learn more about their identities. However, due to various state laws, many educators are not able to be out in the workplace and can therefore not serve as role models (West, 2014). The existence of these social conditions and policies are barriers to queer student achievement in school, which leads to poverty within the queer community (Albelda et al., 2009).

Queer Employment and Related Issues

In 2012, the Williams Institute estimated that over one million queer and trans* individuals were employed in the public or government sphere with another seven million in the private sector (Burns, Barton, & Kerby, 2012). Collectively, queer and trans* workers compose 6.28% of the workforce within America. There is not a wealth of information about queer and trans* workers due to most worker surveys not asking questions about sexual orientation and gender identity. However, it is worth noting that queer individuals have experienced significant discrimination within the labor market:

- 15% to 43% of gay and transgender workers have experienced some form of discrimination on the job;
- 8% to 17% of gay and transgender workers report being passed over for a job or fired because of their sexual orientation or gender identity;
- 10% to 28% received a negative performance evaluation or were passed over for a promotion because they were gay or transgender;
- 7% to 41% of gay and transgender workers were verbally or physically abused or had their workplace vandalized. (Burns & Krehely, 2011)

Additionally, the U.S. Senate passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) in 2013, which prohibits the discrimination of queer and trans* persons in the work force (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). However, there is strong opposition to the bill in the U.S. House of Representatives. Therefore, queer people can still be fired in 29 U.S. states (Short, 2014).

It is also worth noting poverty levels within the queer community in relation to access to the labor market. The Williams Institution (Badgett, Durso, & Schneebaum, 2013) found that queer, same-sex couples were “more vulnerable to being poor” (p. 1) compared to heterosexual couples based on 2012 U.S. poverty thresholds of \$11,815 for a single person, \$15,079 for two persons, and \$23,684 for four persons. Specifically, Black queer couples were more susceptible to higher poverty rates. Although men in same-gender relationships of all races and ethnicities were generally less likely to be in poverty, single men who specifically identify as gay (20.5%) and bisexual (25.9) experience higher poverty levels than heterosexual males (15.3%). The Williams Institution (Badgett, Durso, & Schneebaum, 2013) also found that race, ethnicity, and geographic location impact poverty levels for queer individuals. Furthermore, White same-sex couples have the lowest poverty rates, with White male same-sex couples having lower rates than White female same sex couples. On the other hand, African American same-sex couples had higher rates of poverty than Black different-sex couples and were “six times more likely to be poor than White men in same-sex couples” (Badgett, Durso, & Schneebaum, 2013, p. 12).

Conclusion

Dewey's (1927) theory exerts the ideology that publics are formed when a group is able to define a collective problem. In that case, America, we have a problem. Two socially constructed structures—racism and homophobia—created and maintained by publics serve as barriers to queer Black male achievement. First, access to equitable education in regards to race continues to be a problem for Black males. Second, the heteronormative policies and practices that exist create barriers to success in schools for queer individuals. The plight of queer Black males is two-fold and therefore requires politicians, researchers, educators and other citizens to

reconsider why all diversity is important and why we must continue to remove barriers. If we are to believe that "...all *men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Jefferson, 1776, para. 3), then racial equity and acceptance of diverse sexualities must be achieved in order for all students, inclusive of queer Black male students, to have the ability to attain an education and ultimately have access to the work force.

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