BLACK WOMEN WORKING TOGETHER:
DIVERSITY IN SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS

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Synopsis—As Black women choose to remain single longer, marry later or terminate through separation or divorce dissatisfying heterosexual relationships, relationships with other Black female become more critical to the maintenance of their well-being. Black women throughout history have been characterized by their intimate relationships with each other despite diversities in backgrounds, attitudes or beliefs. Variables of gender and culture/ethnicity are often overlooked in attempts to understand the interpersonal dynamics of their close relationships.

This paper examines the influence of the social constraints of racism and sexism on the same sex relationship behaviors among Black women. Research is presented on the interpersonal behaviors of a group of diverse Black women when both gender and ethnic constraints were minimized. Implications for further research and interventions methods to eradicate lateral oppression among Black women are discussed.

Diversity has long been viewed as an asset in interpersonal relationships. In the image of the ideal intimate relationship diversity is pictured as interesting and intriguing. It is seen as a factor which facilitates sharing and promotes the exchange of new attitudes and behaviors. Yet, in reality, diversity in interpersonal relationships can be a source of irreconcilable conflict. In the interpersonal realm, differences can be disturbing. Differing characteristics, behaviors, cultural norms or mannerisms may be viewed with a sense of shock, impropriety, feelings of inadequacy and/or embarrassment. These feelings are most likely to occur as the difference becomes less like any familiar experience or cultural norm. The result is interpersonal conflict from an inability to view these differences in a positive manner. An example are the 'isms' of racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia which illustrate rather dramatically inabilities to recognize or tolerate differences as assets (Lorde, 1978).

In choosing an intimate relationship, research (Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975) tells us that many people, particularly males choose someone similar. The adage that 'he married a girl just like dear old mom' is not far fetched when examined within the context of the role of familiarity in relationship choices. In some instances compatibility in relationships translates into sameness, or similarity. The question is, when and why does the perception of similarity or sameness override concurrent opportunities for the intrigue and potential excitement of diversity in intimate relationships?

THE IMPACT OF RACISM AND SEXISM

In seeking a better understanding of close relationships, we have done little to examine how ethnicity and gender are variables which can either enhance or limit relationships (Eriksen, 1980). Yet it is clear that these factors are relevant to the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships. Einstein (1979) and Dill (1980) noted that any understanding of women's behavior must be framed within the social context of power relationships which shape both behavior and ideologies about behavior. For Black women, the dual experience of ethnic and gender discrimination has the potential for both generating a basis of similarity that overshadows existing differences and enhances same sex close relationship formation. Or this experience can create a gulf based on small differences that insure such differences will interfere with same sex close relationship formation among Black women. Despite a lack of empirical studies to support this perspective, articles appearing in magazines like *Essence,* historical studies of Black women, fiction, poetry and non-fiction provide important data for beginning such an examination. Stories written by Black women about Black women abound in rich examples of the dynamics of diversity in same sex close relationships among Black women. Common to these writings is the theme of survival. Relationships develop which cut across potential areas of divisive diversity to encompass Black women from different walks of life reaching out to other Black women out of a cultural heritage and

herstory of female support (Angelou, 1971; Cade, 1970; Morrison, 1970, 1973; Russell, 1979; Washington, 1975).

Still, in spite of the common bonds of oppression among Black females, within-group differences sometimes serve to further the experience of oppression and alienation. Toni Morrison (1970) writes of the experience of intimate friendships among Black adolescent girls, underscoring the potential for rejection, anger, jealousy and envy that occurs based on differences in skin color. One character, Pecola, in her self-hatred and experiences of rejection for her dark skin, goes 'mad'.

Overcoming differences made relevant by racist ideologies to achieve supportive relationships can also be undermined by the need of Black women, who at a minimum are doubly oppressed, to achieve power through attaching themselves to higher status individuals. Morrison, like several other Black women writers (Cade, 1970; Walker, 1974; Washington, 1975; Naylor, 1982), writes of women who because of their fear of rejection by Black males negate the integrity of their individual relationship with certain types of Black women. The Black woman who will not invite a friend to a social event where potential mates may be present because the friend has the physical characteristics and behavior of a 'Sapphire' are familiar themes among Black women. Or social invitations which are not shared because Black women with more social or economic resources, or who are viewed as more personable and/or more attractive are characterized as potential competitors for male mates (Staples, 1981). These themes are particularly recognizable today because of the sex-ratio imbalance which has engendered a fierce competition for eligible Black males.

Stories are also written of the conflictual relationships among Black women who differ in moral values, the 'good' upright, righteous church-going one vs the 'bad' unmarried, imbiber of alcohol, fallen in the eyes of the Lord woman, each looking askance at the other, wondering why she wastes her life. Economic differences are also stressed. Black female heads of households with several children living in substandard neighborhoods clash with the upwardly mobile, employed, college-educated Black female. The conflict occurs not over the diversity in and of itself, but a perception by the poor woman that upward mobility was gained at the expense of denying Black heritage and seeking membership in the Anglo culture. This sense of conflict emerges when the upwardly mobile Black female as a result of the self-hatred dynamics of racism attempts to 'deniggerize' herself and therefore rejects her poor, less educated and non 'Anglocized' Black sister.

This same principle of jealousy guarding potential access to high status seems to operate in relationships among heterosexual and lesbian Black women. Heterosexual Black women historically have interacted with lesbian Black women only as long as it did not interfere with their confirmed status of heterosexuality with Black males (Joseph and Lewis, 1981; Shockley, 1979).

UNITING TO SURVIVE

Differences can become divisive amongst Black women when they act toward each other in the same way that the larger society oppresses them. But these same differences can also become rich sources of support when the goal of survival is better achieved by cooperation. Russell (1979) illustrated this point well when describing her work experience in a group of women engaged in a job previously held only by men. Under the apprenticeship of a male, with the women's job security based on their cooperative performance, initial internalized oppression led to women looking at themselves the way society did. They tended to categorize the female workforce into stereotypic groups of 'whores, good girls and butches.' As the stereotypes continued they began to play out the roles and remain divided, engaging in activities divisive to the other because of beliefs and attitudes regarding the stereotypes. Later though, through continued mutual support, advice, comfort, criticism and discipline a bond formed among the women. In spite of their differences, there still appeared a mandate to help each other and band together as a group against the forces of discrimination.

This tendency to overcome the divisiveness of ideologically-generated status differences for the sake of survival appears to have a historical tradition in the Black community. Black women have always bonded together in support of each other no matter how difficult or whatever the other's allegiance (Lorde, 1978). This bonding occurs often for the purposes of wisdom, strength or support, key elements of close relationships. Lorde (1978) refers us to an examination of the relationship between African co-wives and woman-identified marriages in Dahomey for a historical understanding of the depth of bonding among Black women.

Relationships between Black women are an important area for study. As women choose to marry later or terminate through separation or divorce dissatisfying relationships, the influence of their heterosexual connections to Black males may become less primary in determining their own relationships with each other. Indeed, this change may give new importance to same sex relationships. For some women, it is the recognition that when romantic (heterosexual) involvements end it is always another Black woman that is sought out for

comfort, advice and love that strengthens Black female bonding (Weems, 1979).

In an exploratory study designed to examine the dynamics of Black females in support groups with other Black female members and leaders, sources of political support were examined (Mays, 1984a). A total of 102 Black females ranging in age from 20 to over 50, diverse in occupational statuses participated in a five-session community intervention project using the Focused Support Group Model (Mays, 1984b). The Focused Support Group (FSG) model can be used for facilitating change in either a large segment of a particular community or within a small group of specific individuals. The FSG model was developed by the author based on several years of therapeutic, educational and political group work with a variety of diverse women.

The goal of the FSG model is to (1) build and enhance group bonding and group cohesion in a short period of time, (2) present participants with a model of facilitation which can easily be executed by them and (3) change patterns of response through increased awareness of behaviors, problems associated with those behaviors and maladaptive response strategies in the resulting situations. In addition, the FSG model endeavors to alleviate or buffer the effects of stress through the provision of positive support networks and by increasing knowledge of personal and political variables which may be significant sources of stress.

The FSG model is conceptualized primarily as an intervention and prevention strategy. It is designed to de-emphasize the role of the group leaders over time and to increase the consumer's competency in facilitating groups. One of the indirect goals is for the support groups to continue meeting after involvement by the initial group leaders is terminated. It is hoped that through perpetuation of the groups in a self help format they will eventually alleviate or obliterate the problem in a given segment of a targeted population.

There are three main procedures involved in the FSG model. The first consists in eliciting and clarifying the topics and their importance to the group. This procedure is best accomplished using a modified back translation procedure (Warwick and Osheron, 1973). Topic areas and their meanings are presented to the group. The topic is clarified and redefined until there is consensus about its importance for discussion within a limited time frame. The second step involves the facilitation of the small group using a three step procedure. First, an identification of the behaviors associated with the topic is sought. Participants are asked to cite examples e.g. on the topic of sexism, participants reported being called 'honey'. This was called 'naming the problem.' Second, identification of the moods and feelings associated with the problem were elicited—'recognizing the sources of feelings.'

In the example above women felt angry, disrespected, objectified and emotionally abused. The third step involves identification of the behavior used to cope with the feelings and moods,—i.e. 'How do I cope?' Facilitation focuses on pointing out maladaptive coping strategies as well as distinguishing the influence of personal style vs political influences. In this third step the entire group is engaged in a brainstorming strategy, i.e. 'discover a different way' for each member. All members contribute during each phase with the next phase not starting until each member has participated.

The FSG model was employed with a volunteer staff that varied in experience from being a participant in a group to 'credentials' of several years of experience in facilitating groups. All the facilitators were Black women. They met a half hour prior to the start of each group for orientation to the scheduled topic and again after the group to discuss the events in the small group and the large groups.

The groups met five consecutive Saturday mornings at a community center which was relatively unknown and politically neutral to most of the Black women. This was done on purpose in order to decrease the possibility of women not attending because of an ideological conflict. Groups met for 3 hr. The first half-hour was in a large group format. In this large group a didactic presentation covering the definition of the topic, behaviors indicating the presence of the problem and strategies of coping particular to Black women were presented. The purpose of this large group is to orient everyone to the topic in a similar way in order to ascertain if differences in the small group are a result of the group's particular composition and to lessen the influence of the group facilitator. This segment was followed by 2 hr in small groups where participants followed the structure outlined above. The remaining 30 min was spent in another large group format where participants from each group reported on the discussions in their small groups. Each small group recorded its results for each of the three phases on newsprint which was posted during the large group and presented by a selected member from that group to the large group. After all small group reports were presented staff summarized attempting to point out the similarities and differences in the experiences and method of handling the problem by the respective groups.

Small group composition was based on similarity of occupational responsibilities and status in order to increase the chances of professional and personal networks forming and to enhance group cohesion by maximizing similarities and minimizing differences. Small groups were kept to a minimum of 15 with 8–10 being the ideal. The number of small groups in this format does not matter as long as the large group which results is able to maintain a sense of intimacy. Often this latter can be accomplished

through positioning the chairs in circles within circles where participants can look around at each other.

Session one consisted of a 90-min presentation on issues thought to be facing Black women in the area of work for the 80s. This was followed by a discussion period in which participants were asked to determine the important issues regarding work in their life. Topics selected were: conflict/stress for Session Two, racism/sexism for Session Three, female–male and female–female relationships for Session Four and future planning for Session Five. Participants occupational status was gathered at the end of Session One and small group assignments were announced at the beginning of Session Two.

In Session Four information was sought from the participants in order to compile a directory for networking. Information included name, address, phone number, occupation of participants as well as which participants were looking for new employment. This directory was easily completed by having participants fill out xerox labels which were alphabetized and reproduced. The directory was completed and distributed at Session Five.

In Session Five small groups were reduced to 90 min while the second large group was increased to 60 min. Participants reported on what they wanted in terms of future groups. After receiving the directory it emerged that many of the women had skills which were either underutilized or not utilized at all in their employment. Participants shared these skills as well as information of individuals who were about to start independent businesses or were in positions to award contracts or solicit bids for services. This impromptu sharing proved to be quite valuable in assisting some individuals in gaining new employment or utilizing the services of other Black women.

Results of the project indicated that bonds of intimacy formed quickly among the Black female participants in spite of differences in occupational status. Relationships among the women in the group were characterized by a spirit of loyalty, hope and a tendency not to express negative affect. But within the realm of the labor force Black women characterised their relationships as disappointing and lacking in both support and understanding. It appears that when in competition for job advancement/security or potential mates Black women are influenced by a social ideology which advocates a higher status pairing or prestigous occupational positions and values competition rather than cooperation to achieve this. Findings from a second study imply that discussions of racism and sexism in the group were most helpful in developing the intimate bonds observed (Mays, 1984a). Results suggest that within a structure of the focused support group model (FSG), discussions highlighting mutual oppression in a cooperative environment

may enhance the development of supportive relationships among diverse Black women.

Further research is essential to understand the interplay between individual-based survival behaviors encouraged by the larger societal ideology and group-based survival approaches historically generated by Afro-American norms of cooperation in the face of pervasive racism. Only in this context can the role of diversity in same sex Black women's relationships be fully explicated. In addition to research, there is a need for the development of intervention strategies to alleviate and eradicate lateral oppression in the same sex relationships of Black women.

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