

Social Work Research Considerations with Sexual Minorities in the African Diaspora

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Abstract

This article provides guidelines and considerations for research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) people of African descent, particularly those living in developing countries. Recommendations are drawn from the International Sexuality and Mental Health Research Project, which studied experiences of black LGBTQ people in the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe.

Keywords: African diaspora, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ); sexuality; sexual minorities; social work research

1. Introduction

This article highlights critical issues in research with sexual minorities in the African diaspora and is based on research conducted as part of the International Sexuality and Mental Health Research Project (ISMHRP). The ISMHRP is a mixed methods study that examines how racism, heterosexism, and homophobia are experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) people of African descent in the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. For the purposes

of the project and this article, the terms black, African heritage, and of African descent are used interchangeably. The project has to date surveyed and interviewed 178 participants. The respondents were queried about their unique experience of race and or racism as well as their experiences as LGBTQ persons and homophobia and heterosexism as these phenomena manifest in their country or region.

Through focus groups and self-administered surveys, LGBTQ participants articulated their experiences, their ways of coping with discrimination, and their communities' needs, concerns, and resources. Psychometric scales were used in the survey to assess depression and anxiety, and there were also several self-report measures of racism, homophobia, and their internalized correlates as well as health service utilization queries. The survey included questions about the frequency and severity of racist and homophobic events in the professional, social, and familial contexts. The questions about internalized racism and homophobia allowed the respondents to share how they felt about being black and how they felt about being non-heterosexual, as well as their thoughts and feelings about other black people and non-heterosexuals.

The Center for Epidemiologic Depression

Scale was used to measure depression, and the Beck Anxiety Index was used to assess anxiety. Both scales have been shown to have validity and reliability across a wide range of cultural demographics. (Roberts, 1980; Naughton and Wilkund, 1993). Focus group questions included queries about respondents' process of becoming aware of their sexual orientation as well as their degree of openness with family and community, their supports and coping mechanisms, their intimate relationships, their experience of discrimination, and their vision for their country in regard to providing resources to their constituency.

The ISMHRP sites included Nassau, Bahamas, London, United Kingdom, Trinidad, West Indies, as well as Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town, South Africa. These locations were chosen based on the availability of local organizations to assist with the research effort. It was important that the work be collaborative, as the goal was to empower communities through both the process and products of the research. Also, researching hidden populations, particularly those targeted with discrimination, is challenging and it is necessary to have local site coordinators to assist with key tasks throughout the research process. ISMHRP local site coordinators participated in a range of research activities, including formulation of culturally appropriate queries (via adjustment of survey and focus group questions as needed), outreach to participants via announcements at formal and informal LGBTQ gatherings, and finding venues to host focus groups and other project activities that were accessible to and safe for the population under study. In this way people representing the various LGBTQ communities actively participated in the design, development, and implementation of the study.

Research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) people of color highlights the need for cultural sensitivity with regard to exploring how sexual orientation and gender are experienced for people of African, Asian, Latino, and Native American descent (Green, 1997; Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni,

Ronquillo, Bhuyan, 2006; Wheeler, 2003). People of color in the LGBTQ community experience "minority stress" because of their sexual minority status (DiPlacido, 1998). For example, ethnic minority gays and lesbians in the United States must function in three distinct communities: "(1) the Euro-American heterosexual communities, (2) the ethnic minority heterosexual communities, and (3) the Euro-American gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities" (Parks, 2001, p. 46). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people of color negotiate stressors that are often exacerbated by intragroup conflict.

In both developing and industrialized countries, LGBTQ people of African descent face some imposition, be it subtly or overtly expressed, of Eurocentric culture as well as oppression based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In developing countries, LGBTQ persons face additional barriers related to their sexuality, including educational and economic inequity due to harsh discrimination in education and employment. Some LGBTQ persons also face a lack of access to LGBTQ-friendly health care and services.

2. Emphasis on African Diaspora

There is limited research on the experiences of LGBTQ persons of the African diaspora. The African diaspora refers to "African-descended populations across spatial, temporal, linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries that do not always correspond to the borders of nation-states nor to the borders of academic disciplines" (Hancard, 2004, p. 140). Nnameka (2007) highlights Colin A. Palmer's reference to the African diaspora as a people of African descent who share emotional bonds with their dispersed kin due significantly, but not exclusively, to the history of racial oppression and the struggle against it. People in the African diaspora are consistently faced with navigating their identities in a context where racism is ubiquitous. This navigation is necessary because of the international scope of anti-black racism.

As conceptualized by Camara Phyllis Jones (2002), racism can exist and occur on three

levels: institutionalized, personally mediated, and internalized. Institutionalized racism limits access to power and material resources. Personally mediated racism includes prejudice and discrimination based on stereotypic race-based assumptions and judgments. Finally, internalized racism refers to an individual or communities' acceptance of negative messages concerning the racial or cultural groups with which they identify. In countries that are predominantly black in their government, administration, and leadership, the historical remnants of racism and colonialism must be examined with regard to their lasting, albeit elusive, manifestations in the psychological, social, and institutional realms (Jones, 2002). Homophobia and heterosexism also manifest in the three dimensions of institutionalization, personal mediation, and internalization. Therefore any examination of the LGBTQ black experience must consider the impact of internalized, social, and institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism as well as that of internalized, social, and institutionalized racism.

The experiences of African heritage people have been overlooked in much research (Hancard, 2004), and the authors here bring emphasis to the needs of sexual minorities in the African diaspora, especially those living in developing countries, to address this disparity. The goal of the ISMHRP is to attend the concerns of black people who share emotional and historical struggles in the context of poverty, colonialism, and challenges posed by homophobia and heterosexism.

3. Literature Review

Most of the social work research literature on LGBTQ people of color in the United States is focused on HIV/AIDS and domestic violence prevention (Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2001). Much of the research literature on the questioning population is limited to youth (Savin-Williams, 2001; Elze, 2003), and the intersexed population publications have focused on Native American communities (Meyer-Cook & Labelle, 2004). There is some research on the impact of multiple oppressions on mental health and social functioning (Herek,

Gillis, Cogan, & Glunt, 1997). However, in general, the experiences of LGBTQ people of African heritage throughout the diaspora are not well documented. While there are research articles on ethics and research considerations with LGBTQ communities (Martin & Meezan, 2003; Miller, Forte, Wilson, & Greene, 2006; Zea, Reisen, & Díaz, 2003), these do not focus on LGBTQ people of African descent.

To conceptually grasp the international black sexual minority experience, it is useful to consider writings outside the realms of experimental research and conventional scholarship. This includes examining personal narratives and testimonials that reflect the perspectives of the communities being studied. These writings guide the researcher to an authentic representation of the black LGBTQ experience as expressed by members of that population. Testimonials such as Audre Lorde's (1984) *Sister Outsider*, Hein Kleinbooi's (1995) *Identity Crossfire* and Stacy Ann Chin's (2006) *Me and Jesus* provide a succinct narrative of life as a black LGBTQ person that transcends the scope of most scholarship on these populations.

4. Conceptual Framework

One theory alone cannot adequately address the complex issues presenting in the experience of black LGBTQ people; therefore, a multi-theoretical approach is taken. Community-based participatory research, the ecological perspective, and the strengths perspective are discussed in reference to these populations. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) will serve as the overarching framework for discussion about research with LGBTQ communities of African descent. The central point of this type of research is that participants benefit from the process and products of the research.

The CBPR approach goes beyond community outreach and is systematic about relating community practice to research (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). The strengths and ecological perspectives create a comprehensive context for understanding

the experiences of LGBTQ people of the African diaspora.

4.1 Community-Based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research is not a specific method of research design, but rather an approach to the research process. As defined by Lantz, Israel, Schulz, & Reyes (2006), CBPR is a collaborative approach that includes community partners who are engaged and involved in all phases of the research. There are many similar approaches, which are referred to as “action research,” “participatory research,” “participatory action research,” and “participatory community research.” The overall goal of CBPR is to increase knowledge and understanding and then apply that same knowledge in the development of interventions and policies focused on improving health and well-being at the community level (Israel et al., 1998). Research indicates that this approach is particularly important in marginalized communities and communities of color, because empowerment of community participants is at its core (Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2003). While holding the community-based participatory research perspective as a foundation, it is crucial that the needs and challenges of individuals not be usurped. It is essential to address conflict and ethical dilemmas in ways that protect respondents while supporting overall community development. This paradigm is ideal for research with LGBTQ people of African descent.

4.2 Ecological Perspective

The ecological perspective is necessary, because the impact of all the systems in the participants’ experience must be considered. This perspective avoids the error of looking at communities and individuals without understanding their social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Economic issues affect sexuality and sexual choices, and conversely, sexuality and sexual choices have an economic impact on economics. For example, homophobia has made gay and lesbian sex

illicit. As a result, sexual practices of same-gender people are accessible only via the sex trade in many regions. The impact of economic issues on choices about and perceptions of sexual orientation bears thoughtful consideration. Other variables such as geographic location, religion/spirituality, quality and perspective of formal education in the region, gender roles and privileges (particularly the role of patriarchy and male privilege), closely knit communities, and the degree to which the government is involved in private affairs must also be considered for their influence on people’s experience of their sexuality.

4.3 Strengths Perspective

The strengths perspective invites the research community to move beyond the plethora of challenges facing black LGBTQ people in developing countries and seek out the wealth of resources, resiliencies, and contributions that invariably exist. Elements of the strengths perspective that are appropriate when working with LGBTQ communities include: empowerment, resilience, and membership.

Dennis Saleebey (1996) considers these elements to be central to the strengths perspective. In this perspective, the “person is identified as having unique, traits, talents and resources that add up to strengths,” “individuals, family, or community are the experts,” “possibilities for choice, control, commitment, and personal development are open,” “resources for work are the strengths, capacities, and adaptive skills of the individual, family, or community,” and “help is centered on getting on with one’s life, affirming and developing values and commitments, and making and finding membership in or as a community” (Saleebey, 1996, p. 298). In working with black LGBTQ people, this entails an emphasis away from pathology and victimization, and toward assets and resources within the individuals and communities under study.

With regard to community-based resources, there are allies to LGBTQ persons and communities in every region, although often part of the researcher’s contribution is to unearth them.

Community organizations, educational institutions, and health and human service agencies should be explored and assessed for cultural competence with regard to LGBTQ persons and issues as well as gay friendliness, or at least the willingness to become culturally competent or gay friendly. While it is important to recognize social and psychological challenges faced by these populations, particularly in light of the oppression they face, it is equally important to not view LGBTQ persons and communities in developing countries as being so blighted that they do not have significant strengths.

Examination of the unique experiences of both culture and oppression provides insight into the resiliencies unavailable to those with more social, economic, and racial privilege. Equally important is the need to examine the contributions of black LGBTQ community members in their respective regions and localities. Although many are not public about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, LGBTQ people of African heritage are often cornerstones of progress and development in their countries and in the world at large. Recognizing and utilizing that leadership is essential to contributive research.

5. Roles/Caveats for the Researcher

Researchers must explore their own values with regard to how they think about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, paying particular attention to biases toward one conceptualization versus another. They must also process their experiences with both racism and homophobia to eliminate the projection of their own reality onto the respondents. When working with LGBTQ communities in the African diaspora, it is important to include black and or LGBTQ researchers in the process; but having researchers of African descent, or researchers who identify as LGBTQ does not eliminate the need for cultural introspection. Each individual experience of being black or LGBTQ is by its very nature unique, so it is important that researchers not project their conceptualizations of sexuality and ethnicity onto the participants.

The leadership team for the International Sexuality and Mental Health Research Project included both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people of color as well as a white heterosexual student intern who participated in the South African component of the research. There is no doubt that the project benefited from having a combination of allies as well as members of the community under study as its leaders and administrators. As a mental health clinician and researcher of African heritage who also identifies as a lesbian, the principal investigator was able to discuss the challenges of racism and homophobia as an insider. This had the impact of making participants feel connected and supported and perhaps less “studied” than had the leadership been predominantly white or heterosexual. Furthermore, because local activists and community organizers who had served as site coordinators also completed surveys and participated in focus groups themselves, participants were further supported by and connected to their local leadership as they engaged with ISMHRP.

On the other hand, the leadership and commitment of ISMHRP’s non LGBTQ and/or white researchers who were able to guide the project without duplicating the experience of oppression was invaluable. These individuals showed genuine compassion for the participants’ struggles as well as initiative and enthusiasm for the elimination of the kinds of injustice the participants had endured and in so doing they created an expanded sense of safety. The presence of allies on the leadership team highlighted the reality that many people who do not identify as black or LGBTQ are available to black LGBTQ persons as resources, even comrades, in their battle against oppression. Hence allies contribute to a sense of psychological and emotional safety for people targeted by oppression. It is the safety that comes with the realization and reminders that not all who identify as “other” are unsafe.

This sense of safety combined with a sense of connection to the researchers and to the project’s aim, which was to improve understanding of and services for LGBTQ black people, facilitated open dialogues, which often lasted far

longer than typical focus group discussions. Participants in the ISMHRP expressed a perception that these discussions were an opportunity to tell their story in a venue where it would be validated, where they could openly discuss being both black and non-heterosexual in their cultural context. As ISMHRP explored the painful experiences of social oppression and the mental health sequelae thereof, the emotional and physical safety and support of the participants was paramount.

From the ISMHRP experience we can note that it does not suffice to simply have researchers of color or LGBTQ researchers in order to conduct culturally competent research with black LGBTQ populations. As with culturally matched dyads in the clinical context, researchers may counter-transfer their own experience of being black or LGBTQ onto the participants or the research as a whole. This will compromise the meaning of the work, as the experience of the community under study will only be understood as it relates to preconceived notions. Thus it is necessary for the researchers to consider themselves facilitators of empowerment and social development and work accordingly. Laying the foundation for the research may include educating law enforcement, service providers, and the community at large regarding the issues. In the ISMHRP study, this was done by engaging the community at large in public dialogues via media and community discussion groups prior to the actual focus groups and survey administration.

The researcher should also give thoughtful consideration to the utility of being out as an LGBTQ person. The advantages and disadvantages of self-disclosure regarding sexual orientation should be weighed, with the provision of resources to the community under study as the determining factor. The clinical rule regarding self-disclosure, that it should always be done in the service of the client, applies in the research context as well. The advantages of being out include empowering the community under study by example if the researcher does identify as LGBTQ. On the other hand, even though the researcher may identify as an LGBTQ person, other aspects of

the researcher's identity such as nationality may symbolize oppression for study participants. These types of considerations inform the development of culturally competent research.

6. Recommendations

The academic has many roles as a researcher, including initiator, consultant, and collaborator (Stoecker, 1999), and it is important to match skills and expertise with the needs and wants of the community being researched. In conducting research with LGBTQ people of color, certain considerations are imperative to sustaining the strengths perspective, which augments empowerment, resilience, and membership in a community. Based on research literature and the experiences of the authors as part of the International Sexuality and Mental Health Research Project, the following recommendations are made.

It is important that the developmental process of research in the LGBTQ community address issues related to partnerships between researchers and community members; human rights laws; safety concerns of both the participants and the researchers; compensation for participants; intersections of ethnic, gender, and sexual identity; use of the media; and strategies to overcome methodological barriers. Guided by the strengths perspective, local resources can be engaged in partnerships, human rights laws are considered, people's multiple identities addressed, and the media effectively engaged. It is hoped that the recommendations made here will also inform social work practice as well as policy to address the presenting needs and issues.

6.1 Partnerships

In the ISMHRP, working relationships between community-based organizations, researchers, local health departments, and nonprofit initiatives focused on the health and mental health needs of LGBTQ communities. Partnerships can aid in overcoming methodological barriers associated with research in hidden populations. Such collaborative partnerships are a useful mechanism for research in the LGBTQ community.

In order to be effective, the collaboration must support human and civil rights as they relate to the LGBTQ people under study. The fundamental principles of community-based participatory research that are critical include the following: it is participatory; it involves a joint process between community members and researchers; it involves a co-learning process; the development of systems and capacities of local resources is important; the process is empowering for participants; and there is a balance achieved between the research and the action taken on behalf of the community (Minkler, 2004, p. 685), such as advocacy for example. Building and maintaining partnerships with individuals and organizations alike provide for what some researchers term “partnership synergy,” which refers to addressing and challenging issues more effectively in partnership, rather than alone (Minkler, 2004, p.694).

Each location must have a site coordinator to serve as the local representative for the research project. This person works in constant communication with the research team in managing logistics related to finding an appropriate venue, securing a meeting time, working with local resources in terms of refreshments for study participants, etc. The local site coordinator is also involved in instrument development, and acts as an informant on local public issues affecting members of the LGBTQ community as well as resources available to self-identified LGBTQ people and their allies. This person is heavily involved in outreach, whether it is by word-of-mouth at local social events and/or by getting the project publicized over the Internet on appropriate listserves and websites so that interested persons know who to contact for more information on the research project and how to participate.

Identifying local site coordinators empowers the community and provides resources for local activists. A local site coordinator also strengthens the cultural competence of the research process by informing the researcher of culturally appropriate language and etiquette. Partnering with local community-based institutions and agencies and with individual activists affirms the work of locals who

strive on behalf of their LGBTQ communities. Researchers in turn gain some social acceptance from the community members with the active involvement of local leadership. The identification and utilization of a local site coordinator is a way of directly acknowledging the community partners as experts.

It is important to identify partners at the community level as well as at the academic and professional levels. Specifically related to local capacity development, engaging local colleges and universities as well as any available LGBTQ agencies, especially those focused on the needs of LGBTQ people of African descent, is pivotal. Making connections with national and international human rights agencies also helps to extend the reach of the project as a whole.

In the ISMHRP study, the assistance of the local LGBTQ agencies that were advocacy centered in nature served as an invaluable resource in helping the research team understand the challenges of being LGBTQ in the countries under study. The local agencies also helped with outreach and community “buy-in” and willingness to participate. Outreach involved activities such as face-to-face invitations to participate, hardcopy and online media postings, radio and television promotions, mailings, telephone calls, and e-mail correspondence.

In conducting LGBTQ research, local colleges and universities should always be explored for their community and student resources. There are often pro-diversity clubs or LGBTQ student organizations on college campuses. Students provide a unique perspective on the LGBTQ experience, particularly in regard to family, friends, and intellectual issues. In the ISMHRP study, the local universities served as a neutral venue for holding focus groups. There was always campus security onsite, and attending a meeting at the local university sidestepped concerns participants may have had about stigma associated with being seen in an LGBTQ-identified venue.

Appropriate Ministries of Health and Social Service officials should also be engaged early

in the research process and alliances between these and the community under study should be strengthened. Due to the stress caused by homophobia and heterosexism, LGBTQ persons are at an increased risk for negative mental health outcomes. Thus local substance abuse centers, mental health clinics and hospitals are key resources. By engaging with them, the researcher can both determine and enhance the cultural competence of these institutions with regard to LGBTQ issues. These agencies may also serve as an additional resource to draw respondents from or refer respondents to.

6.2 Human Rights Laws

While almost half of the countries in Africa have laws against homosexuality in general, there are some countries that discriminate and have laws against only male homosexuality and a few countries remain unclear as to their laws in this area. In the case of the Caribbean and Latin America, more than half of the countries in these regions have no formal law against homosexuality but as is the case with Africa, there are a few countries that ban male homosexual behavior. It should be noted that the absence of formal laws banning homosexuality does not mean that law enforcement is supportive of protecting the rights of the LGBTQ community. The presence or absence of law is not a sufficient indication of safety, and often police and government officials are complicit in discrimination and violence against LGBTQ persons regardless of the official policy.

For some of the locales under study, homosexuality was illegal. This was a critical context for the researchers to be cognizant of in terms of the type of public outreach that could be conducted, venue locations, and identification of resources. While this proved challenging in the beginning, particularly as the researchers were trying to connect with these hidden LGBTQ communities from across continents, once participants were contacted with the help of the local site coordinator, significant access to participants became available. Local partners also provided invaluable insight regarding

legalities and safety issues in an effort to assist the participants and researchers throughout the process.

In South Africa, the rights of gays and lesbians are constitutionally acknowledged. The Bill of Rights in the 1996 South African Constitution prohibits discrimination based on sexuality. While South Africa has been a transformative model for social justice globally, LGBTQ black people still face significant challenges in the region. One participant at a 1997 Gay Pride March in South Africa discussed how the Constitution means nothing at all in the face of hate crimes. (Christiansen, 2000, p. 62). Several black South African participants in ISMHRP had experienced hate crimes, often in the form of sexual and physical violence, with little or no legal redress. In this region, racism and the continued disenfranchisement of black people in the townships exacerbated the participants' experience of homophobia.

6.3 Personal Safety: Respondents and Researcher(s)

It is necessary that the researcher(s) be responsible for their own safety and make appropriate choices to protect the participants. The development of Institutional Review Board applications should include some discussion of how to protect respondents from social and familial discrimination (as well as negative legal consequences in countries where homosexuality is illegal) that could potentially come about based on their participation. When the research is conducted with the appropriate considerations, the researcher has the unique opportunity to share information about the experiences and strategies for change used successfully by LGBTQ people in other parts of the world. Thus it is imperative that one make efforts to create security and develop relationships with law enforcement and dialogue with community members about the social and legal risks and protective factors.

6.4 Compensation for Participation

Researchers must be thoughtful about the implications of paying respondents for their participation in regions where economic deprivation

prevails. Lasting resources need not be limited to money but must focus on developing social capital and providing inroads to future economic development. As part of the ISMHRP study, the principal investigator is working with regional LGBTQ leaders to support and chronicle black LGBTQ perspectives and contributions to the larger community's economic, social, and cultural development.

6.5 Ethnic Identity

Since the experience of people of African heritage is not monolithic in any community it is important to consider what it means to be black in the region under study and how that relates to what it means to be LGBTQ. Pride in nationhood and in one's unique representation of the black experience must be understood for the layers of meaning it contains. Thus it is important to distinguish what being Jamaican, Trinidadian, Senegalese, etc., symbolizes to members of these communities and the interplay between that and issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in their experience. Researchers must be mindful of the ways in which people of African descent self-identify, especially in the case of people with mixed-ethnic and/or mixed-national identity and heritage.

It is important that researchers not become a part of the problem and confine people to what they "appear" to be. All people are complex and multidimensional. In the poem *Me and Jesus* (Chin, 2006), the author expresses the challenges that LGBTQ people of color face in terms of identity, while emphasizing the unique capacities of LGBTQ black people to be "who they are" as visible, spiritual, intellectual, contributing members of society.

6.6 Gender Identity

The cultural context of gender roles and expectations is important to acknowledge, as it varies across countries and presents differently throughout the African diaspora. The preservation of patriarchy is no doubt in part responsible for the more emphatic opposition to male homosexuality in Africa and the Caribbean. In the African diaspora the economic and social exploitation of women is still prevalent.

It is in this context that consideration must be given to the gender roles transgendered persons may be seeking to transcend and the different experience sexual minorities may have based on gender.

6.7 Sexual Identity

The nomenclature of "LGBTQ" is not always embraced by individuals and communities, particularly communities of color. While it is used throughout this article for explanation, it must be taken into account that this reference term is not appropriate for all communities. Also, sexual identity may hold far less significance for individuals in developing regions than national/cultural identity, economic issues, or some other aspect of their experience. It is important to remember that the LGBTQ community is not homogenous, no matter the country. For many sexual minority youth in the United States for example, the term "gay" refers to belonging to a class of people who face prejudices, stereotypes, and hate crimes based on their sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2001). This same negative connotation of these identifiers is sometimes prohibitive for LGBTQ persons in developing countries.

6.8 Use of the Media

Engagement with the local media allows the researcher to participate in a healthy exchange of dialogue with the overall community. Through well-considered interviews in the press, the researcher can support local activists in bringing awareness to issues of concern to LGBTQ persons, thus educating the community at large while promoting involvement in and support for the research. In so doing there is the potential for creating lasting regional understanding of the strengths and challenges of LGBTQ persons that endures beyond the life of the research project.

Participating in dialogues via local television, radio, and print media can also be a vehicle to inform the public that there are many contributive LGBTQ citizens in their communities. Doing so also allows the researcher to address the issues of stigma and discrimination that LGBTQ people face in that region. Heterosexist and homophobic ideologies and actions

negatively impact the physical and mental well-being of heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals alike, and the social capital in communities as a whole is diminished by their presence.

6.9 Overcoming Methodological Barriers

Based on the work of Joan C. McClennen (2003), there are eight innovative strategies to overcome methodological barriers for the non-LGBTQ researcher, all of which are applicable to LGBTQ researchers as well. These strategies are: (1) education about the culture; (2) preparation for objections; (3) incorporation of instruments defined by those being researched; (4) implementation of various sampling techniques; (5) engagement of affiliated members for assistance; (6) immersion in the culture; (7) collaboration with scholars and other professionals; and (8) triangulation in data collection.

While the above eight strategies are based on the experience of a heterosexual researcher focusing on domestic violence in the LGBTQ community, the implications are far-reaching. Particularly in the case of African diaspora LGBTQ communities that face additional layers of stigma due to racism and economic oppression, these strategies are essential. Overall, commitment to the ethical contract between the researcher and those being researched is required.

7. Implications for Social Work Policy, Practice and Research

7.1 Social Work Policy

The policy arena may be the most pressing point for intervention on behalf of LGBTQ people of African heritage. Advocacy for basic human and civil rights, particularly in countries where homosexuality is illegal, is central to protecting LGBTQ people of the African diaspora from violence and the debilitating effects of social, familial, and internalized oppression. Efforts to reach out to and support refugees fleeing persecution due to sexual orientation-based discrimination and resulting

health disparities must be strengthened. Policy and resources for immigrant and refugee people of African heritage who are LGBTQ must be developed and supported.

The elimination of health disparities first requires a clear picture of what types of disparities exist; and in the African diaspora, particularly in developing countries, these needs are not yet clear. The ISMHRP study highlights key issues such as the need for legal and social protections (i.e., anti-hate crime legislation, and antidiscrimination policies in the public sector). However there are also indicators that emotional psychological and social support is needed due to the impact of social oppression on mental health and social functioning in these populations. Continued research to further quantify and qualify these needs is crucial.

7.2 Social Work Practice

The implications of the ISMHRP study and its recommendations are far-reaching with regard to their impact on social work practice as well. Practitioners continue to be informed by empirical research that qualifies the experience of understudied constituencies. Although there is a growing body of literature on social work practice with people of African heritage, this study is the first to offer insights with regard to the experience of black LGBTQ people throughout the diaspora. Throughout the ISMHRP study, implications for health service provider trainings on culturally competent black LGBTQ-sensitive health care provision have emerged. Ultimately, practice guidelines can be informed and developed from such studies to implement services and train providers in the provision of services to the LGBTQ community.

7.3 Ethics and Research

The ISMHRP study incorporated the values and ethics of leading social work organizations that may be used as guides for social work considerations with sexual minorities, given their implications for practice and research. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008) articulates a social justice commitment and emphasizes

the development of sensitivity and knowledge directly related to oppression. The ethical responsibilities of social workers include culturally competent service provision and advocacy for disenfranchised populations. In addition, social work researchers are ethically responsible for taking appropriate measures to ensure participants access to appropriate supportive services and ensuring confidentiality of participants and the data obtained from them. The ISMHRP provides an example of due diligence in this regard.

The joint International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (2004) code of ethics highlights the importance of human rights and respecting human dignity as essential to effective research and practice. These values have proven to be indispensable in work with sexual minorities of the African diaspora. As stated by renowned philosopher and educator Daisaku Ikeda (2008), "By focusing on the deepest and most universal dimensions of life, we can extend a natural empathy toward life in its infinite diversity" (p367). With an emphasis on engaging individuals holistically, recognizing the unique aspects of their human experience and challenging unjust policies and practices that affect them, social work research has the capacity to address the needs of marginalized constituencies and advance social justice for all people.

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