

Sexual Orientation and Race

Sexual orientation and race are social identities that matter. Both identities often influence perceptions of who a person is and what a person does or should do. Both can motivate discrimination from others, and both are contextual. For example, a woman may pass as straight in one place and time, bisexual in another, and as a lesbian in another; Hispanic in one context, Native American in another, and Caucasian in another.

Sexual orientation and race also intersect in complex and indefinite ways. For instance, "gay" is sometimes referred to as a "white" label denoting sexual orientation. One reason for this denotation is that, in the United States, "gay marriage" and economic equality are often positioned as the most pressing issues for all same-sex desiring persons. However, these are often the most pressing issues for privileged, often white, gay persons. Consequently, other issues are overshadowed and disregarded because of the focus on marriage and economic equality-issues like racism, religion, homophobia, immigration, and homelessness.

A White Label

Another reason gay is sometimes considered a white label is that for many white people, sexual orientation is contingent upon object choice-for example, a man intimate with another man must be gay; with a woman, straight; and with men and women, bisexual. However, members of other races, particularly African American, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern populations, treat sexual orientation as not stemming from object choice but rather the position played in an intimate sexual encounter. For instance, a man who sexually penetrates a man is not necessarily gay (or homosexual), particularly because the man assumes an active, dominant role. However, the man being penetrated may be considered gay, because he assumes a passive, feminized role. Among these races, the dominant and masculine "penetrator" is, or could easily identify as, heterosexual. What makes this view of sexual orientation and race fascinating is that a man's self-identification of sexual orientation—"I am heterosexual"-can be conceived of differently by persons of different races based on his intimate acts with others (e.g., for some races, the penetrator is gay because of object choice; for other races, the penetrator is heterosexual because of role played). In this example, there are also devaluing assumptions about sex and gender as gayness is marked by passivity, femininity, and weakness, whereas the penetrator is "safe" from such ascriptions by being masculine and dominant.

Coming Out

Coming out of the closet-disclosing a same-sex sexual orientation-can function differently depending on race as well. Coming out often happens when a person says, "I am gay or a lesbian," when a person engages in intimate affairs with another person of the same sex, or when a person assumes a particular position in a sexual act. However, the statement "I will never get married [to someone of the other sex]" might indicate, for others, that the person possesses same-sex desire, for example, a woman who says "I will never get married" can indicate, for others, that she is a lesbian. And such assessment may be tied to race: it seems that white women-the founders of feminism-have created social spaces in which they can live free of being attached to men. However, women of other races (e.g., Hispanic, Middle Eastern) may still be perceived as being tied to men and the institution of marriage, not only out of religious and cultural obligation but also because feminism is predominantly a white philosophy and movement.

The Afro-Latino phenomenon of "machismo" illustrates ways in which sexual orientation and race can intersect as well. This phenomenon stems from racial and ethnic contexts that position men as the undisputed authorities of familial units, as the ones who make decisions, serve as the sole financial contributors, and exert authority over other family members. These men must also be heterosexual-that is, able to love, marry, protect, and/or procreate with someone of the opposite sex. A man who does not demonstrate such traits or who does not find persons of the opposite sex attractive may thus be marked as weak and inferior. Consequently, same sex-desiring men who reside in such Afro-Latino contexts may have different experiences of sexual orientation than men who do not come from similar situations.

The machismo phenomenon implicates women as well. In Afro-Latino contexts, women may be relegated to a necessary-but-secondary role in a family. They may not have a legitimate voice in decision making, be able to work outside the home, or be able to refuse servicing men. Additionally, women-should they be unable to marry a

man or demonstrate maternal characteristics (e.g., childrearing)-may be evaluated as selfish by choosing to not contribute to family lineage or inferior by not being able to establish a relationship with a man.

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Further Readings

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