

## ABSTRACT

WRIGHT-HAERTEL, SHAWN CHRISTOPHER. The relationship between the disclosure of sexual orientation of black men who sleep with men and their attachment styles (Under the direction of Dr. Stanley B. Baker).

In the past several decades there has been an increased awareness of the dynamics of the parent-child relationship after a son or daughter comes out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. While numerous studies have examined the process of coming out, little is known about the disclosure of sexuality in Black men who sleep with men and their attachment styles. The research question of this quantitative study: Is there a relationship between attachment style and whether or not Black men who sleep with men have come out? A chi-square analysis of survey data from 68 Black men between the ages of 18-64 who met the selection criteria and completed the Experiences in Close Relationships scale was conducted. The findings offer insight into attachment styles and the disclosure of sexuality. That is, the findings suggest that there may be a relationship between a preoccupied attachment style and the disclosure of sexuality. No relationship was established with the remaining attachment scale categories: secure, dismissing, or fearful-avoidant attachment styles. The findings suggest that a greater need for emotional intimacy may compel individuals to come out.

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The Relationship Between the Disclosure of Sexual Orientation of Black Men Who Sleep  
With Men and Their Attachment Styles

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to my mother, Ms. Kathleen E. Häertel, MSN, BSN. Throughout her entire life, my mom encouraged, supported, and loved me unconditionally. Her love enabled me to live an authentically and attempt this dissertation. My love for my mother goes on forever.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Shawn Christopher “Giovanni” Wright Häertel was born on December 26, 1985, to parents Kathleen E. Häertel and Robert L. Wright. In 2007, Giovanni graduated from the University of North Florida with a Bachelor of Psychology. In 2010, Giovanni graduated from the University of North Florida with a Master's in Counselor Education.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The process of men who sleep with men disclosing their sexuality to others is ongoing throughout a person's lifetime. Colloquially referred to as "coming out," the process of disclosure is fraught with interpersonal challenges that intersect with a person's familial roles (LaSala, 2000), religious commitments (Daiute & Etengoff, 2014), education (Rasmussen, 2004), socioeconomic status (Rosario et al., 2001) and race (Groves et al., 2006). The extant literature often presents coming out as an essential stage of the given model (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Those who do not (or cannot) disclose their sexual orientation must now manage, often alone, the stigma of being less developed (Levy, 2009). Most of this literature has focused on the development of the sexual identity of White, affluent men (DiPillo, 2009). Research on Black gay men's experience is crucial for counselors who hope to help their clients navigate multiple oppressions.

Identity is the culmination of a multitude of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that form an individual's personhood (Kroger, 2006). Various researchers have explored identity, dating back to Erik Erikson (1968). Erikson (1968) envisioned identity as a developmental process characterized as a series of "crises" requiring an individual to process and reconcile in order to develop a healthy identity. Franz and White (1985) pointed out that, while Erikson's work continued to be influential for generations, the extant literature contends that theories like Erikson's do not fully account for all the factors that shape a person's identity (cited in Douvan, 1997).

Researchers employed an intersectional approach when exploring identity development starting in the 1990s (Collins, 1998). The extant literature presents various factors when

understanding identity development (Loiacano, 1989), including age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, disability, environment, ethnicity, and race (Nash, 2008).

Gay identity development has been conceived in the literature primarily as linear stage models (Loiacano, 1989). Stage models typically begin with a degree of awareness by the individual and progress to an integrated sexual identity (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). The tendency of stage models to culminate in an integrated identity is due to interpersonal congruence theory, “which submits that stability and change in a person’s life are influenced by the congruence or incongruence that exists in his or her interpersonal environment” (Hunter et al., 1998, p. 58).

While the final stage of linear stage models is typically an integrated identity, many models fail to account for how other identities may influence the integration of sexual identity. Gender, gender identity, religiosity, race, and other identities are interconnected and influenced by change (Rust, 2003). Most stage models vaguely describe disclosure, which is an ongoing process that occurs throughout a person's life. If a person is not out, most stage models imply that this person’s identity is not fully realized. This is problematic, as the coming out process for White individuals and Black individuals often is different (DiPillo, 2009). Some models, such as one proposed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996), make considerations for the reality that people may not fit neatly into stages, “Individuals may be in several stages of development simultaneously, not all individuals will negotiate all stages, and the process of moving from early awareness to identity integration is a lengthy one” (p. 520).

A consistent theme across Black identity and sexual identity models is the progression from a negative self-concept to a positive self-concept. William E. Cross Jr. developed one of the first and most influential models of the acquisition of a Black identity (DiPillo, 2009).

Cross's Cross et al. (1991) model details a pre-encounter stage in which a Black individual manages self-hatred due to race. This is not dissimilar from the stage identity confusion in Cass' (1979) model, which details finding homosexual thoughts as unacceptable and upsetting. Based on these models, researchers and clinicians have changed their focus from pathology to the experiences of oppressed people.

Researchers have written about the difficulty Black gay men often experience when trying to incorporate their racial identity with their sexual identity (Christian, 2005; Stokes & Peterson, 1998). When attempting to lay claim to either identity, gay people of color must deal with racism and homophobia (Stokes & Peterson, 1998). Green's (2007) research findings make note of the dynamic that exists between these two oppressive forces. His 30 participants, who were all Black men, described feeling ostracized from the Black community while remaining unwelcome in predominately White communities.

### **Purpose of Study**

Most societies have viewed same-sex attractions as outside of societal norms throughout history. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths face unique pressures, such as the anxiety associated with disclosing their sexuality, their sexuality being outed, and being ridiculed, that contribute to enhanced behavioral and health risks. From the 1970s until now, research has been conducted to understand lesbian, gay, and bisexual people better and to devise ways in which counselors may better serve them. However, a scant amount of research has been conducted to understand Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and most researchers have focused on high-risk sexual behavior (Heard, 2018). This situation impacts Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual people as it severely limits the counseling community's understanding of Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this lack of

information by examining the relationship between the perceived parent-child relationship and disclosure of sexual orientation.

The present study was designed to explore the experiences of African American males disclosing their sexuality to immediate family members as it relates to their adult attachments. This study uses adult attachment to care providers, such as parents, as a context for participants' current relationships (Bowlby, 1969). This study is justified in part by the deficit in the literature regarding the sexual orientation disclosure experiences of African American gay men. People have been documented as fearing that the disclosure of their sexual orientation will result in rejection, abuse, and negative consequences at their employment (Cramer & Roach, 1988). The goal of this study is to give voice to African American gay men who are not well represented in the extant literature.

### **Significance of Study**

The research focused on the coming out experience of Black men who sleep with men remains insubstantial (Loiacano, 1989). Although a handful of studies examine the unique experience Black men have when disclosing their non-heterosexual orientation, scarcely any studies examined the relationship between the quality of the parental attachment and disclosure of sexual orientation for Black men who sleep with men. This research will equip counselors to better understand their clients' needs and help them navigate what affirmative disclosure means for clients.

This study will also add to the scant amount of research available that examines the relationship between the disclosure of non-heterosexual orientations and parental attachment. Consequently, this study will also help illuminate the impact racial identity has on internalized homophobia and racism within the LGBTQ community on disclosure for Black men.

## **Rationale**

The role of parental and family attachment seems essential to the milestones of sexual identity development, including the milestone of disclosure or coming out. Very few studies (Gillies, 2013; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) have investigated the coming out process for Black men who sleep with men. Only a scant number of studies have applied attachment theory to the exploration of LGBT experiences, even less to gay men of color.

## **Research Question and Hypotheses**

The research question is as follows: Is there a relationship between attachment style and whether or not Black men who sleep with men have come out? The null hypothesis will be that there are no differences.

## **Definition of Terms**

1. **Black:** A racial identification term that covers large swaths with darker skin. This term is inclusive of but not limited to African Americans, Afro-Latinos, Afro-Caribbeans, and mixed-race people whose ancestry includes black people.
2. **Disclosure:** The act of telling someone that they are sleeping with others of the same gender or identify along the LGBTQ spectrum. This process is also known as "coming out."
3. **Gender:** A socially constructed system that classifies the qualities of masculinity and femininity to individuals. Gender characteristics differ between cultures and can change over time.
4. **Gender Identity:** Innermost concept of self as male or female or both or neither. A person's gender identity may align with the biological sex that was assigned at birth.

5. Gender role: A set of societal norms that dictate what are acceptable behaviors and manners of living.
6. Homophobia: The discrimination against, hatred of, or fear of lesbian, gay, or bi people.
7. Internalized Homophobia: Homophobic attitudes and beliefs directed at one's self.
8. LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, and Queer. This term is used to refer to either non-heterosexual people or genderqueer people as a group. This term is more common in White non-heterosexual communities.
9. Men Who Have Sex with Men: This term refers to male individuals who have sexual intercourse with other men, irrespective of how sexual orientation is or is not defined. This term is most common in the public health arena.
10. Minority Stress: The unique and chronic stressors experienced by minority peoples. Minority stress may play a role in a greater likelihood that gay men will participate in drug use, engage in anonymous sex with multiple partners, and be at risk for sexually transmitted diseases (Dentato, 2012).
11. Outness: The degree to which men who sleep with men disclose their sexual orientation. For the purposes of this study, outness will be measured by those who have disclosed their orientation to at least one parent (and are "out") and those who have not.
12. Sexual Orientation: Term that refers to being romantically or sexually attracted to people of a specific gender.
- 13.

## CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Viviane Cass' (1979) foundational sexual identity formation model follows other models of racial identity using progressive stages/phases by emphasizing an integration between a person's marginalized identity and the majority culture. Unlike racial identities, attempts to conceal sexual orientation are common, particularly in the Black community. The present study was designed to explore the experience of African American males with disclosing their sexuality to immediate family members as it relates to their current attachment styles. This study used attachment style as a context for current relationships (Bowlby, 1969). This study is justified in part by a deficit in the literature regarding the sexual orientation disclosure experiences of African American gay men. Participants in previous studies have expressed fear that the disclosure of their sexual orientation would result in rejection, abuse, and negative consequences at their places of employment (Cramer & Roach, 1988). This study aims to give voice to African American gay men, who are not well represented in the extant literature.

Research of the past decade has not been reflective of the ethnically and culturally diverse LGBTQ community (Potoczniak et al., 2009). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths in particular face unique pressures that contribute to enhanced behavioral and health risks, such as the anxiety associated with disclosing their sexuality, their sexuality being outed, and being ridiculed (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). Disclosing one's sexual orientation engenders fear of rejection, guilt, and adverse reaction (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Parents' reactions can vacillate enormously, including either embracing their now queer-identified children or abandoning them (Robinson et al., 1989).

## **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic theory that was developed in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. CRT came into existence as a reaction to the deficiencies of conventional civil rights strategies for confronting systematic racism and racial inequality. Legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado (Kumasi, 2015; Shaver, P.R. et al, 2016; Brayboy, B. M. J. (2021), among others, are credited with developing the framework of critical race theory in the 1980s to refer to a body of work that analyzes how race interacts with other forms of oppression and how law and legal institutions have maintained racial inequalities (Crenshaw, 2010).

## **Coming Out**

Coming out has been defined as the process by which individuals share their same-sex attractions or gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) identity with others who are typically heterosexual (Boxer et al., 2015). This process often begins in childhood and can continue for many years (Cass, 2014). Although heterosexual youth move through developmental stages in their sexual development, there is little research examining how these individuals perceive and make meaning of their identity. However, several authors have developed models of heterosexual identity development that consider the role of various social, cultural, biological, or religious factors that share some similarities with GLB identity development (Eliason, 2013; Worthington et al., 2012). Regarding the development of a GLB identity, much of the literature about coming out is based on qualitative studies that interview individuals of the gay community and family members.

However, an individual's disclosure of a gay or lesbian identity is typically seen as an integral part of a homosexual identity formation, and some individuals have examined this

process as part of an individual's entire lifespan (Boxer & Cohler, 2011; Cass, 2014). Socialization engenders homophily (Simon et al., 2008). The reorganization necessary for a positive group identity, as identified by Cass (1979) may cause LGBTQ individuals to disassociate from their peers.

Ben-Ari (2013) identified three stages in the process of coming out: pre-discovery experiences, the act of discovery, and post-discovery experiences. Pre-discovery experiences refer to themes regarding coming out and the process of deciding whether or not to disclose one's sexual identity to family members. Prior to disclosing their gay or lesbian identity, most individuals will first become aware of their attractions and potentially explore their sexual identity through avenues such as interactions with others, peer relationships, and potential sexual behaviors (Troiden, 2011). In Ben-Ari's (2013) study, 65% of young adults reported fears about coming out to their parents.

However, both the youths and parents in Ben-Ari's study (2013) perceived the desire to not hide or live a lie as one of the primary reasons for disclosing a GLB identity. The discovery stage experience included topics such as how parents were informed of their child's sexual identity and what information they were given in the disclosure. The findings suggested that the majority of individuals chose to come out to family members through a face-to-face conversation, as opposed to a letter or telephone call. It was also most common for individuals to come out to their parents separately rather than having the parents find out through another source or direct questioning by family members. Finally, post-discovery experiences are changes in the parent-child relationship that occur after a youth's disclosure. Some of the benefits listed were increased honesty and improved relationships. Participants reported that

there tended to be an enhanced quality of relationships with the mothers than the fathers, and the mothers reported higher levels of acceptance regarding their child's disclosure.

### **Typical Familial Reactions**

In much of professional literature and popular cultural representations, gay or lesbian individuals are seen as disconnected from their families and have experienced rejection from their family of origin (Laird, 2014; Weston, 2015). Many families experience a crisis when their child expresses same-sex attraction, and typical coping methods are not adequate. Parents often experience a wide range of emotions, including shock, loss, changes in self-esteem, and shame that can lead to isolation from others that they would typically seek out for support (Bernstein, 2013; Herdt & Boxer, 2013; LaSala, 2011; Saltzburg, 2012). Parents may turn blame inward or even blame their partner for their son or daughter's decision. It is not uncommon for one or both parents to feel as though they have failed and be profoundly confused about their child's decision.

Ben-Ari (2013) suggested that there may be a relationship between parent gender and reported feelings of guilt. In this study, fathers of lesbian daughters were more likely to feel guilty than fathers of gay men. Similarly, mothers of gay men reported greater feelings of guilt than those mothers of lesbian daughters. This is unsurprising, given that heterosexuals report higher levels of prejudice towards gay men than lesbians (Herek, 1991). These results may also be related to the experience of positive affect, such as reported levels of acceptance. For example, in the same study, parents of gay men reported higher levels of acceptance regarding their child's disclosure than did parents of lesbian daughters.

There is also a minority of parents who exhibit extreme, sometimes physical, reactions to their child's disclosure. Some sexual minority youths have reported experiencing physical and/or

sexual abuse at the hands of their family members post-disclosure and have been kicked out of their homes (D'Augelli, 2010; Potoczniak et al., 2014). Surveys conducted in the last decade or so have suggested that as many as a third of young adults who come out as GLB experience verbal abuse from parents (D'Augelli, 2010). In this context, verbal abuse has been defined as derogatory or particularly negative statements made by family members. In one study, over half of the participants expected their parents to respond negatively; however, none of the almost 200 respondents experienced physical assault at the hands of their parents (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 2013). It is important to note that these types of reactions have not been reported frequently by adolescents and can be considered the exception rather than the rule.

Adolescence is a formative time for many in which individuals begin developing a sense of personal identity. For those who experience same-sex attractions, this may be a time of greater complexity and challenge. Aside from having to work through issues of attraction and identity internally, GLB adolescents may experience increased distress regarding the perceptions of others, especially close family members. For many youths, specifically those who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group, family and cultural membership is often a foundational aspect of personal identity and support (Savin-Williams, 2011). As a result, it is likely that many sexual minority youths experience confusion and feelings of uncertainty when making decisions about self-expression and disclosure (Blummenfeld, 2014).

Having parents respond negatively (e.g., expressing anger and disapproval or pulling back from the parent-child relationship) to one's disclosure of same-sex attractions may present a potential health risk for some young adults. Individuals anticipate that their fathers will react more negatively than their mothers (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 2013).

Individuals whose parents react in a particularly rejecting manner may be at an increased risk for emotional and psychological difficulties (Radkowsky & Siegel, 2010). These issues may include social stigmatization, suicide, loneliness, feelings of depression, and health concerns (i.e., sexually transmitted disease or HIV/AIDS; Remafedi, 1994). On the opposite spectrum, children who can experience their parents as supportive and accepting have been shown to report higher levels of self-esteem and less maladaptive behaviors, as compared with individuals whose parents reacted more negatively (Savin-Williams, 2011).

### **Attachment Theory**

In his groundbreaking research, Bowlby (1969, 1973) explored how attachment to childhood caregivers affects the way children think and their relationships as adults. He postulated that attachment figures affected how people saw others and how they perceived themselves. In children, he identified secure attachment, anxious-resistant insecure attachment, anxious-avoidant insecure attachment, and disorganized/disoriented attachment categories. In platonic or romantic adult relationships, he identified four styles: secure attachment, dismissing attachment, fearful-avoidant attachment, and preoccupied attachment. These categorical styles in adulthood harken back to a child's attachment style, though dismissive attachment and fearful-avoidant attachment are styles unique to adults (Sieglar et al., 2003). Attachment anxiety and avoidance describe romantic attachments (Brennan et al., 1998).

Securely attached people find it easy to be emotionally open with people and are comfortable with depending on others. Securely attached people also can form lasting bonds with their partners that are characterized by openness, honesty, and trust. This secure attachment style in adulthood is associated with experiencing a secure attachment in childhood (Hardt & Rutter, 2004).

People with a dismissing attachment style typically report feeling comfortable without close emotional relationships and prefer not to have others depend on them or to depend on others. People with this attachment style typically value their independence more than emotionally intimate relationships (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). People with a dismissing attachment style typically view themselves more positively than they would their partner or the relationship they have with their partner. Fear of rejection typifies this attachment style (Hardt & Rutter, 2004).

People with a preoccupied attachment style have relationships that are characterized by seeking greater intimacy and responsiveness from their partner. People with this attachment style are often concerned about the status of their relationship and seek out reassurances from their partner. Contrasting with a secure attachment style, preoccupied people often have more positive views of their partner or their relationship than they do of themselves (Hardt & Rutter, 2004).

The relationships of people with a fearful attachment style are less intimate, as people with this style are more likely to suppress or deny their feelings. People with this attachment style typically report the desire to engage in an emotionally intimate relationship but also report being afraid of being hurt by others. People with this attachment style typically report more negative feelings associated with themselves and with their partners (Hardt & Rutter, 2004).

Feeney (2008) found that levels of relationship-functioning and satisfaction are linked to security in romantic relationships. Fear of abandonment typifies relationships for those with high attachment anxiety, resulting in them fretting over the potential of their partner abandoning them. Individuals with high avoidance understand their relationship with their attachment figures as one characterized by neglect and rejection. These people tend to avoid intimacy in

relationships. Secure individuals, those with low avoidance and low anxiety, are the most receptive to healthy relationships, valuing themselves and their partners.

Studies concerning parental reaction to the disclosure of sexual orientation are scarce (D'Augelli et al., 1998). D'Augelli et al. (1998) noted that the extant literature documents that parents are infrequently the first person to whom a child discloses. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people frequently indicate that their parents represented the most difficult people to inform of their sexuality (Ben-Ari, 1995). Nevertheless, queer people do disclose their sexuality to their parents (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Over the past few decades, and especially in the 1990s, youth have increasingly been disclosing their sexuality to their families (Savin-Williams, 1998).

These studies do not contain adequate participants of color to form a representative sample. Nevertheless, the extant literature does provide a conceptual framework for racially inclusive studies to operate. "Loving denial" was the most common parental reaction when their child came out and has been described by Muller (1987) as a positive relationship between parent and child. However, this reaction was also characterized by the denial of one's child's sexuality to non-family members, conveying disapproval. The parent limiting or ending contact with children ("resentful denial") was another typical response.

Strongly negative parental reactions to the disclosure of sexuality are well-documented. The work of D'Augelli et al. (1998) unearthed highly negative parental repercussions that did not result in the termination of the parent-child relationship. These results adumbrate that, when compared to mothers, fathers were two times more likely to have a negative reaction to a gay or lesbian child, with 10% of mothers and 26% of fathers exhibiting negative reactions. Moreover,

the fear of these negative reactions is generally the central rationalization that young people use to delay disclosing their sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2003).

Herd and Boxer (1993) studied adverse familial reactions to the disclosure of sexual orientation. A pertinent negative response they reported was that 3% of their sample were cast out of the household or estranged from their family. Floyd et al. (1999) found that, among 72 young adults aged 16–27 they surveyed, disclosure in 9% of parental relationships and 4% of maternal relationships "totally destroyed or worsened an already bad relationship" (p. 735).

For researchers such as Robinson et al. (1989), Kübler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief, that is, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, serve as a conceptual model for how parents process their children's disclosure of their sexuality. The extent to which individuals perceive their mothers to be trustworthy predicts if gay or bisexual men will come out to them (Boon & Miller, 1999). Gay men who perceived their parents to be authoritarian or indulgent reported worse reactions when disclosing their sexuality as compared to gay men who saw their parents as being more responsive (Willoughby et al., 2006).

### **Summary**

In the past several decades there has been an increased awareness of the dynamics of the parent-child relationship after a son or daughter comes out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB). These parents and families are often in need of higher levels of assistance and understanding than they have generally been given in the past. Personal visibility is when a person's membership in a group is known by those outside of the given group (Fraleet al., 1997).

While previous research has generated interesting and useful information about the disclosure process, no reports were found about how coming out relates to attachment for Black

men who sleep with men. The goal of the present study is to fill this gap in the literature and expand on the identity development literature for Black men who sleep with men.

## CHAPTER 3: Method

### Research Design

Competently constructed survey research can add significant knowledge to the fields of study that counselors are interested in exploring (Heppner et al., 2016). Sheperis et al. (2017) explain that surveys have sundry applications, including compiling comprehensive information about a particular experience in order to describe it, determining problems, explicating current conditions or methods, making appraisals or drawing comparisons, and exploring how peers are managing similar circumstances (Sheperis et al., 2017). The descriptive design of survey research helps close the knowledge gap of a particular occurrence, which enables counselors to potentially strengthen the efficacy of counselor interventions (Heppner et al., 2016).

Apart of what makes survey research so compelling is that information is gathered directly from the participant, typically in the form of questionnaires or interviews (Heppner et al., 2016; Sheperis et al., 2017). Questionnaires are often pen-and-paper or computer-based instruments that are self-administered (Trochim, 2006). Self-administered questionnaires will include a form returned to the researcher by the participant, typically by mail, in person, or electronically (Sheperis et al., 2017). Participants are tasked with responding to a set of fixed questions when completing questionnaires. Sheperis et al. (2017) noted a number of benefits to the electronic format of questionnaires, including "reduced cost, ease and speed of administration, the ability to provide anonymity, and the ability to "target minority and specialized populations that may be difficult to access using other means." (Sheperis et al., 2017, p. 257). That final point is particularly relevant to this study, as the participants may not have come out and may be wary of participating if they fear being identified.

Interviewing is the other approach to survey data collection. Interviews can be conducted in a one-on-one setting between the researcher or trained interviewer and the participant, in focus groups, and over telephone interviews (Sheperis et al., 2017). Interviews have the benefit of potentially establishing a personal connection between the interviewer and interviewee(s), allowing for more in-depth responses. Face-to-face interviews do not allow for anonymity.

Two pieces of information are crucial for the design of the present study. To conduct the Chi-square test, the primary investigator must capture the fact that participants' race, gender identity, that they have sex with men, and their attachment style. The instruments recorded below will be used to identify this information.

### **Participants**

Participants that self-identify as black males who sleep with men were recruited in the present study. Previous research has identified supposed differences between the identity development of people who identify as male and people who identify as female (Faderman, 1984; Groves & Ventura, 1983; Schultz & de Monteflores, 1978). Because of those differences and the paucity of identity development research focused on men, only men will be recruited as participants in the present study. Participants self-identified their gender. The present study did not include transgender men due to the significant differences between transgender identity development and gay identity development (DiPillo, 2009). Due to the nature of the data collection process, descriptive information about the sample of participants is located at the beginning of chapter 4 (Results).

## **Instrumentation**

### *Experiences in Close Relationships Scale*

The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) scale is based on the attachment theory initially developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bowlby, 1969) and is a recognized indicator of adult attachment style. According to attachment theory, the quality of early parent-child relationship influences the growth of attachment styles, which in turn impacts the way individuals approach close relationships throughout their lives. Researchers have found that these dimensions of attachment are relevant to parent-child relationships, with attachment anxiety being associated with feelings of emotional distance and low parental support, while attachment avoidance is related to a lack of emotional warmth and parental rejection (Rholes & Simpson, 2006).

The ECR was employed to measure attachment. According to the online version of the ECR, it should take most individuals no more than four minutes. The ECR is composed of 36 statements that participants rate according to how representative they are of the participants. The statements are very brief declarations; for example: "I worry about being alone," or "I worry about being abandoned." All of these statements are rated into categories, strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The ECR presents a participant's results across two categories: anxiety and avoidance.

Participants received a score for anxiety and a separate score for avoidance. The scores for anxiety and avoidance will have a range of 1 to 5. The ECR manual information describes avoidance as, "This personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open-up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely." The ECR manual describes anxiety as "This personality trait is

related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this."

The ECR plots the two scores on a graph. The intersection of the two scores reveals the participants' attachment style. The graph plots the ECR results across four categories: a secure attachment, a dismissing attachment, a preoccupied attachment, and a fearful-avoidant attachment. A secure attachment indicates a low score for both avoidance and anxiety. A dismissing attachment indicates a high avoidance score and a low anxiety score. A preoccupied attachment is indicative of a high anxiety score and a low avoidance score. A fearful-avoidant attachment result indicates a high score in avoidance and anxiety.

Originally tested among undergraduates, the ECR demonstrated high reliability and strong validity (Parker et al., 2011). This instrument had previously been used in a pilot study I conducted (Wright-Haertel, 2016). The findings indicated that the ECR could be successfully self-administered by participants. The Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale was created based on the attachment theory initially developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1991), and is a recognized indicator of adult attachment style. According to attachment theory, the quality of early parent-child relationship influences the growth of attachment styles, which in turn impact the way individuals approach close relationships throughout their lives.

Researchers have found that other intimate relationships, such as parent-child connections, can also be evaluated using the ECR scale in addition to romantic partnerships (Dozier, Stovall-McClough, & Albus, 2008). The ECR scale assesses attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, two aspects of adult attachment. The degree to which people worry about the responsiveness and availability of their attachment is referred to as attachment anxiety, whilst

the degree to which people try to avoid intimacy and emotional closeness in their relationships is referred to as attachment avoidance.

According to study findings by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), the ECR scale can be used to evaluate attachment styles in parent-child relationships. One hundred and seventy-nine parents and their adult children completed the ECR scale and had relationship interviews. The findings provided evidence for the validity and reliability of the ECR scale as a tool for assessing attachment styles in both parent-child and romantic relationships.

According to Fraley and Davis' (1997) research, parents' attachment types are related to those of their children. One hundred and fourteen undergraduate students completed questionnaires regarding their parents' attachment types as well as attachment style tests. According to the findings, there was a higher likelihood that anxious or avoidant parents will produce kids with comparable attachment types.

### ***Black Same Gender Loving Survey***

The second instrument used in this study was a portion of the Black Same Gender Loving survey (BSGLS) created by Sandra Lauren DiPillo (2009). This instrument was crucial in determining participants gender, racial/ethnic background, and sexual orientation. The BSGLS information also was used to determine a participants' eligibility for the study. For the sake of clarity and to capture the most accurate data, some questions were modified.

The BSGLS was developed to study the relationship between racial identity development and the development of sexual orientation (DiPillo, 2009). DiPillo (2009) sought to expand the understanding of the model developed by Cross (2001) and the model developed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996). Questions 3.1, 4.1, 4.2, 21.2 were used in the present study

Question 3.1 states, "Do you identify as male?" and allows the participant to select yes or no. This question was essential to the present study and ensured that data captured the demographic information needed. Participants who did not identify as cisgender males were not able to continue forward with the survey, and their data was not collected.

Questions 4.1 and 4.2 provided specific information regarding ethnicity and sexual orientation. Question 4.1 asks participants to self-identify their racial/ethnic background while allowing participants to select Non-Black, African, African American, Black, Black Latino, West Indian Black/Caribbean, and Mixed with Black. Question 4.2 reads as "How do you identify your sexual orientation?" and provides the following responses: bisexual, down-low, gay, homosexual, man who loves men, queer, same gender loving, straight, and non-heterosexual.

Finally, question 21.2 provides substantial nominal data crucial to the present study. Question 21.2 reads, "Of the following, which ones know you are gay/same gender loving?". This participant is asked to mark for their mother, father, female guardian, male guardian, and don't know/ haven't talked about it with them. I was unable to locate subsequent studies utilizing the BSGLS. This was not entirely unanticipated, as little research exists regarding this population. The information provided by the BSGLS was crucial to the chi-square test that was conducted.

## **Procedure**

### ***Data Collection***

A quantitative, descriptive design was used to collect data on the disclosure of sexuality and attachment style for this study. This information was collected using the internet survey program Qualtrics. Qualtrics enabled me to build, distribute, and analyze data online while providing participants with anonymity (Barhoon et al., 2014). Qualtrics allows users to build a

number variety of question types, such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and matrix-style grids for answering questions. I used the questions mentioned above from the Black Same Gender Loving survey to create multiple-choice type questions. I then created a matrix table and recreated all 36 entries in the Experiences in Close Relationships scale. Once the survey was complete, Qualtrics initiated a "soft launch," distributing the survey to a small number of participants. Once 80% of responses had been gathered ( $n= 5$ ), I reviewed the results and then the survey was distributed to the rest of the participants.

I attempted to recruit participants via list serves. Participants' responses were collected anonymously, and potential participants were instructed on protecting their privacy online in screener material. Participants were instructed to utilize private browsing to help conceal their browsing history. Qualtrics did not allow participants who did not fit the requisite criteria to perform the rest of the study. An anonymous consent paired with the internet questionnaire allowed the respondents to answer honestly.

### ***Data Analysis***

The Chi-square test of independence, also known as the Pearson Chi-square test and the Chi-square (McHugh, 2013), was used to analyze the data in the present study. A Chi-square is a distribution free statistical tool used to determine the degree to which the data generated aligns with the values dictated by theory (Tutorial: Pearson's Chi-square Test for Independence, 2008).

A null hypothesis is a common feature of the Chi-square. A null hypothesis is a proposed explanation stating that there is no association among groups. Researchers attempt to reject the null hypothesis to preclude other variables that potentially explain the studied phenomena. A  $p$ -value is typically used to establish if there is statistical significance. A  $p$ -value less or equal to

0.05 is generally used to signify if there is evidence against the null hypothesis. A  $p$ -value result less than or equal to 0.05 enables researchers to reject the null hypothesis.

A 2 x 2. The chi-Square design was used in the present study. The 2 x 2 design allowed me to compare participants on outness and secure versus insecure attachment dimensions (Heppner et al., 2008). This design utilized 1 degree of freedom (df). The creation of categories is a crucial component when designing a Chi-square test (Tutorial: Pearson's Chi-square Test for Independence, 2008). Categories four categories for the present study were Secure Attachment, Non-Secure Attachment, Out to One or More Parents, and No Disclosure to any Parent. See Table 1. The null hypothesis states that there are no differences across the four categories.

**Table 1**

*Diagram of Two-By-Two Chi-Square Design*

	Secure Attachment	Non-Secure Attachment
Out to one or more parents		
No disclosure to any parent		

A secure attachment is fundamentally different from other attachment types in that relationships are not characterized by elevated anxiety or avoidance (Buren & Cooley, 2002). Securely attached individuals are unique from those with different attachment styles in that they have a positive view of others *and* themselves (Buren & Cooley, 2002). Conversely, a dismissing attachment, a preoccupied attachment, and a fearful-avoidant attachment are characterized by elevated anxiety or avoidance or both (Bowlby, 1973). Because dismissing

attachment, a preoccupied attachment, and a fearful-avoidant attachment are all insecure attachment styles (Buren & Cooley, 2002) they are grouped together in the present study.

The disclosure of sexuality is often a later stage of queer identity development models. Kübler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief have been used to explore the disclosure process to parents (Robinson et al., 1989), illuminating the great difficulty individuals face when disclosing their sexuality. For this reason, the present study will place individuals who have disclosed to at least one parent in one category while those who have not into a separate category.

## CHAPTER 4: Results

### Introduction

The following chapter contains the results of the quantitative study designed to assess a relationship between a person's attachment style and the disclosure of their sexuality. The chi-square test is a statistical method used to determine if there is a significant association between two categorical variables. The data collection questionnaire described in chapter 3 was developed using Qualtrics. Qualtrics is a versatile tool that allows researchers to develop surveys, distribute surveys, and analyze responses.

### Participant Descriptive Data

Question 1. Question 1 asked participants whether or not they identified as male. Since Qualtrics recruited the participants, that ensured that all who were distributed the survey identified as male ( $N=68$ ).

Question 2. The second question in the survey was, "Please choose the Racial identity that best describes yourself." This question was utilized to specify the racial identity of the participants. Table 2 provides a summary.

**Table 2***Racial Self Identification*

Race	<i>N</i>	%
Black	32	47.07
Black African	8	11.76
Black Latino	24	35.29
West Indian Black/Caribbean	2	2.94
Multiracial with black	2	2.94
Non-Black	0	0.0

Because participants were recruited by Qualtrics, there was no chance of non-black participant entries.

Question 3. Question 3 was, "How do you identify your sexual orientation?" The overwhelming majority of participants identified as gay, while a smattering of participants identified as either down low, homosexual, bisexual, and a single participant identified as queer. No participants identified as a man who loves men or heterosexual. Of the 68 participants in this study, 67 responded to this query. See Table 3.

**Table 3***Sexuality Self Identification*

Sexuality	<i>N</i>	%
Bisexual	7	10.45
Down low	3	4.48
Gay	40	59.7
Homosexual	13	19.4
Man who loves men	0	0.0
Queer	1	1.19
Same Gender loving	3	4.48
Heterosexual	0	0.0

Question 4. The question stated, “Of the following, which ones know your sexuality?” Participants responded that their mothers knew of their sexuality in large numbers. "Father" and "male guardian" generated the fewest responses. Only 11 participants reported that they “don’t know/haven’t talked about it with them.” See Table 4

**Table 4***Sexuality Disclosure*

Person Disclosed to	<i>N</i>	%
Mother	45	66.18
Father	4	5.88
Female Guardian	5	7.35
Male Guardian	3	4.41
Don't know/Haven't talked about it with them	11	16.18

Question 5. Question 5 recreated the Experiences in Close relationships scale. The responses to this Likert scale were used to generate each participants' avoidance and anxiety score, resulting in an attachment style. See Table 5.

**Table 5***Experiences in Close Relationship Scale Responses*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.	200	18	11	11	8	68
I worry about being abandoned.	13	8	18	15	14	68
I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.	5	7	9	28	19	68
I worry a lot about my relationships.	8	15	10	18	16	67
Just when my partner starts to get close to me I find myself pulling away.	16	21	12	13	5	67
I worry that romantic partners wont care about	13	12	10	18	14	67

**Table 5 (continued)**

me as much as I care about them.						
I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.	19	17	14	10	7	67
I worry a fair amount about losing my partner.	11	9	19	16	12	67
I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.	22	17	14	12	2	68
I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him/her.	8	6	24	14	16	68
I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.	16	20	12	12	6	66
I often want to merge completely with romantic partners, and this	16	17	16	12	6	67

**Table 5 (continued)**

sometimes scares them

away.

I am nervous when	18	21	15	10	3	67
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partners get too close to

me.

I worry about being alone.	11	11	9	19	18	68
----------------------------	----	----	---	----	----	----

I feel comfortable sharing	7	6	9	26	19	67
----------------------------	---	---	---	----	----	----

my private thoughts and

feelings with my partner.

My desire to be very close	14	14	16	15	8	67
----------------------------	----	----	----	----	---	----

sometimes scares people

away.

I try to avoid getting too	16	17	17	9	7	66
----------------------------	----	----	----	---	---	----

close to my partner.

I need a lot of reassurance	8	13	15	14	18	68
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that I am loved by my

partner.

I find it relatively easy to	3	9	18	26	11	67
------------------------------	---	---	----	----	----	----

get close to my partner.

Sometimes I feel that I	15	18	15	8	11	67
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force my partners to show

**Table 5 (continued)**

more feeling, more

commitment.

I find it difficult to allow	11	12	15	14	16	68
------------------------------	----	----	----	----	----	----

myself to depend on

romantic partners.

I do not often worry about	11	13	2	11	12	67
----------------------------	----	----	---	----	----	----

being abandoned.

I prefer not to be too close	19	20	14	8	6	67
------------------------------	----	----	----	---	---	----

to romantic partners.

If I can't get my partner to	13	18	13	16	7	67
------------------------------	----	----	----	----	---	----

show interest in me, I get

upset or angry.

I tell my partner just about	4	8	15	25	0\15	67
------------------------------	---	---	----	----	------	----

everything.

I find that my partner(s)	11	15	21	13	6	66
---------------------------	----	----	----	----	---	----

don't want to get as close

as I would like.

I usually discuss my	4	6	13	27	18	68
----------------------	---	---	----	----	----	----

problems and concerns

with my partner.

**Table 5 (continued)**

When I'm not involved in a relationship, I feel somewhat anxious and insecure.	12	17	16	13	8	67
I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.	5	8	28	18	8	67
I get frustrated when my partner is not around as much as I would like.	7	20	16	18	6	67
I don't mind asking romantic partners for comfort, advice, or help.	4	8	9	25	22	68
I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.	5	17	18	20	7	67
It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.	4	6	11	27	20	68

**Table 5 (continued)**

When romantic partners disapprove of me, I feel really bad about myself.	11	16	18	13	8	66
I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.	2	6	20	22	18	68
I resent it when my partner spends time away from me.	9	22	17	13	6	67

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### **Chi-Square Test Results**

I manually imputed these results into the Close Experiences in Relationships Scale. Due to numerous instances of a failure to answer questions, two participants had their data removed from this study and was not used to generate a chi score. Participant scores resulted in every attachment style being produced multiple times. I ran a series of Chi-Square tests that are presented on the following pages. The first test included all of the attachment styles and the null hypothesis was supported. See Table 6. Thereafter, a series of tests were run to test for differences across each of the four attachment styles.

**Table 6***Observational Values and Chi-Square Results for All Attachment Styles*

Attachment Style	Disclosure	Non-Disclosure	Total	X <sup>2</sup>
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	
Secure	18	4	22	
Dismissing	4	3	7	
Preoccupied	26	2	28	
Fearful-Avoidant	6	3	9	
Total	54	12	66	6.55*

*Note.* P-value = 0.0878.

No association could be found between the attachment styles and disclosure and non-disclosure. To further examine the data, I calculated a chi-square analysis using one attachment style and disclosure and non-disclosure. The chi-square score is 6.55, which is in the 95% region of acceptance.

**Table 7***Relationship Between Secure Attachment Style and Non-Secure Style*

Attachment Style	Disclosure	Non-Disclosure	Total	X <sup>2</sup>
Secure	18	4	22	
Non-secure	36	8	44	
Total	54	12	66	0

Note. P-value = 1

The statistical model fits with observations. Since  $p\text{-value} > \alpha$ ,  $H_0$  is accepted. There is insufficient evidence to suggest an association between secure and non-secure attachment types. The chi-square score is 3.205, which is in the 95% region of acceptance. See Table 7.

**Table 8***Relationship Between Dismissing Attachment Style and Non-Dismissing Style*

Attachment Style	Disclosure	Non-Disclosure	Total	X <sup>2</sup>
Dismissing	4	3	7	
Non-secure	50	9	59	
Total	54	12	66	3.21

Note. P-value = 0.07341

The statistical model fits with observations. Since  $p\text{-value} > \alpha$ ,  $H_0$  is accepted. There is insufficient evidence to suggest an association between dismissing and non-dismissing

attachment types. The chi-square score is 3.205, which is in the 95% region of acceptance. See Table 8.

**Table 9**

*Relationship Between Fearful-Avoidant Attachment Style and Non-Fearful Avoidant Style*

Attachment Style	Disclosure	Non-Disclosure	Total	$\chi^2$
Fearful-avoidant	6	3	9	
Non-fearful-avoidant	48	9	57	
Total	54	12	66	1.69

*Note.* P-value = 0.2047

The statistical model fits with observations. Since p-value  $> \alpha$ ,  $H_0$  is accepted. There is insufficient evidence to suggest an association between fearful-avoidant and non-fearful-avoidant attachment types. The chi-square score is 1.6082, which is in the 95% region of acceptance. See Table 9.

**Table 10***Relationship Between Preoccupied Attachment Style and Non-Preoccupied Style*

Attachment Style	Disclosure	Non-Disclosure	Total	X <sup>2</sup>
Preoccupied	26	2	28	
Non-Preoccupied	28	10	38	
Total	54	12	66	3.98

*Note.* P-value = 0.04594

The statistical model does not conform with observations. Since  $p\text{-value} < \alpha$ ,  $H_0$  is rejected. There is insufficient evidence to suggest an association between a preoccupied attachment and preoccupied attachment types. The chi-square score is 3.9837, which is not in the 95% region of acceptance. See Table 10. Consequently, there was evidence of a significant statistical relationship between the Preoccupied and Non-Preoccupied Avoidant attachment styles.

A preoccupied attachment style may be associated with the disclosure of sexuality because the person with this attachment style may be eager for emotional closeness. The preoccupied attachment style is characterized by a strong need for validation and closeness. The disclosure of sexuality may be seen as a means of becoming closer to their parent.

## CHAPTER 5: Discussion

### Summary

The present study did not demonstrate an association between attachment styles and disclosure. Indeed, only a small portion of men who participated in this study reported not disclosing their sexuality to anyone. Subsequent chi-square scores were generated to examine the relationship between a single attachment type and the other attachment types. Only a preoccupied attachment style demonstrated an association.

Because individuals with a preoccupied attachment style frequently have a significant need for closeness and connection with others, it may be related to coming out of the closet (Brennan et al., 1998). In regards to relationships, they could feel insecure and anxious and might look to other people for approval and acceptance. This can drive them to hide their portions of themselves, including their sexual orientation, for fear of being rejected or judged. By being honest and open about their identity, individuals may think they will be more likely to obtain acceptance and support from others. This insecurity may be relieved by the admission of sexuality. Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style may be more likely to struggle with internalized homophobia and may see coming out as a way to confront and overcome these feelings.

Intimacy and trust often characterize relationships for those with a secure attachment styles (Brennan et al., 1998). Despite this, for people with a secure attachment style, dealing with the vulnerability and fear of rejection that is associated with the disclosure of a non-heterosexual orientation may present unique challenges. Those with a secure attachment style could find it more arduous to feel at ease disclosing their sexual orientation due to societal

discrimination and stigma against Black males who sleep with men (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). The anxiety of being rejected or judged by loved ones can be a major deterrent to coming out to those who have a secure attachment style. They may also have a strong desire to maintain the status quo in their relationships, which could make them hesitant to reveal their true selves. It is important to note that while a secure attachment style may make it easier to navigate certain aspects of life, it does not guarantee a smooth coming out process.

A dismissing attachment style did not demonstrate an association with disclosure. A dismissing attachment style is characterized by a lack of emotional closeness and independence in relationships (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Individuals with this attachment style tend to avoid intimacy and are not comfortable with relying on others for emotional support. This attachment style may not be associated with the disclosure of sexuality because disclosure entails emotional closeness or support from others. The disclosure of sexuality often involves sharing deeply personal information with others and seeking acceptance and understanding. It can be a difficult and emotional process, and individuals with a dismissing attachment style may not be comfortable with this level of vulnerability. People with a dismissing attachment style tend to avoid intimacy and tend not to have close relationships, so disclosure of sexuality may not be a priority for them. They also tend to avoid close relationships and rely heavily on themselves, so they may not feel the need to share their sexual orientation with others.

Individuals with a fearful-avoidant attachment style may not disclose their sexuality due to a fear of rejection and abandonment. This attachment style is characterized by a fear of intimacy and a simultaneous desire for it (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). The individual may have internalized beliefs that their sexual orientation or gender identity is not acceptable to others and

may fear rejection and abandonment from those they care about. Someone with a fearful-avoidant attachment style may also struggle with self-esteem and self-worth.

#### Limitations and Future Directions

One of the primary limitations of this research study was the limited number of participants. This study gathered data from 68 participants, of which 66 were used to conduct chi-square tests. When calculating a chi-square score, you typically want expected values of 5 or greater. To calculate a chi-square equation of the best quality, expected values should be at least one for all values and at least five for 80% of the values. This study was only able to generate chi-square scores using expected values of 5 or greater when comparing a preoccupied attachment style with a non-preoccupied attachment style. The only means to overcome this limitation is by increasing the number of participants. Future studies that utilize a greater number of participants would generate a more accurate chi-square score.

Participants were recruited using list serves and services provided by Qualtrics. The list serves of the primary investigator's counselor education department and the counseling center of North Carolina State University generated exactly zero responses. During negotiations with Qualtrics, the primary investigator was informed that the targeted population was difficult to recruit. Initially, a representative for Qualtrics stated that 65 participants were the most the organization was going to be able to secure. However, at some point between the pilot test and the final distribution, Qualtrics was able to secure an additional three participants. A larger number of participants would have enriched the quality of this study. Future researchers may want to provide participant incentives and utilize the list service of black student unions/organizations if possible. Being able to include more demographic information such as

age, education, and religious affiliation would allow for a more detailed understanding of each participant as well as the entire sample.

There are several ways future researchers may choose to build upon the current study. Given the small number of participants in the present study who had not disclosed, a mixed methods design incorporating qualitative and quantitative components could provide insight to how clients manage their coming out process. Narrative or progressive-regressive method centered on sexual identity disclosures to family members paired with attachment style data could yield fruitful results. Future researchers may wish explore disclosures over time across different family members. Examining whether or not parents were the first persons that participants disclosed to could also yield interesting results.

In this study, the overwhelming majority of participants disclosed to their mother or female guardian. D'Augelli and Hershberger's 1993 findings suggested that gay men were more likely to disclose to their mother. Future research could be focused whether or not attachment style has any association with the gender of the person to whom participants disclosed via a chi-square analysis. A qualitative study may provide participants the space to provide researchers with information about attitudes and experiences related to choosing to disclose to one parent over another.

## **Conclusion**

Further research is needed to examine how Black men who sleep with men grapple with the disclosure of their sexuality. The limited number of participants who have not disclosed their sexuality may suggest changing attitudes and norms within this population. Further research can help increase visibility and understanding of the unique experiences, challenges, and barriers

faced by Black men who sleep with men, including those related to their race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

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