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The Color of Self-Love: Exposing Racism in Black Female Masturbation Research

Masturbation as a sexual practice has a long history of condemnation for both men and women. However, because there is an extreme lack of primary material with regard to female masturbation historically, the majority of the accounts that do exist for women are from a male perspective; with masturbation in women often perceived as a cause of illness, leading to “disease of mind and body” (Laqueur 229). Sigmund Freud brought this idea forward, associating masturbation in women as ‘deviant,’ and stating that “...masturbation was further removed from the nature of women than men...” (255). Present day conceptions and attitudes towards women’s masturbation have been largely influenced by this male perspective. Furthermore, Philippe Brenot argues that women’s masturbation can be regarded as a significant threat to social stability because as a sexual practice it implies that women do not need men for sexual pleasure. This female self-sufficiency can be perceived as a form of independence, suggesting that women have the capacity to act as equals to men (Brenot 36).

This historical information related to female masturbation pertains mainly to middle and upper class White women, excluding women from various other regions, cultures, classes, or races. A study of the trends in published research on African Americans in selected APA journals from 1970-1989 found a decline in the representation of African-American research within the six journals examined (Graham 631). However, a more recent study of the inclusion of ethnicity in sexuality research (1971-1995), indicates that the proportion of articles in which the ethnicity of the participants was reported generally increased over time, as well as the ethnic diversity of the samples (Wiederman 341). Notably, among the sexuality studies which included ethnicity as a variable, the exact same percentage (57.3 percent) included Whites as Blacks,

while only 24.4 percent and 22.0 percent included Latinos and Asians respectively (Wiederman 340). In addition, more than half of these studies employed a race comparative versus race homogenous approach in their study design (Wiederman 340).

This idea that research on ethnicity and sexuality has increased, while other social science research on ethnicity has potentially decreased, suggests that there may be something unique about the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality specifically which has sparked the interest of researchers. Patricia Hill Collins supports this concept with her assertion that “sexuality can be seen as a site of intersectionality, a specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge” (11). Joane Nagel also entertains this notion through her employment of the term “ethnosexual intersections,” which she uses in order to discuss the ways in which ethnicity and sexuality inscribe themselves on each other (118). Based on this understanding that sexuality may occupy a unique site for studying intersectionality, the main focus of this paper is to explore the ways in which the design, implementation, and analysis of research on Black women and masturbation in the United States may reinforce historically racist and sexist ideologies. The four studies specifically included in this analysis are as follows: “Personality Correlates of Sexual Behavior in Black Women” (Fisher, 1980), “Kinsey Revisited, Part II: Comparisons of the Sexual Socialization and Sexual Behavior of Black Women Over 33 Years” (Wyatt, Peters, & Guthrie, 1988), “Masturbation and Sexual Health: An Exploratory Study of Low Income African American Women” (Robinson, Bockting, & Harrell, 2002), and “The Use of Self-Pleasure: Masturbation and Body Image among African American and European American Women” (Shulman & Horne, 2003). Scrutinizing this research through a feminist lens, I ultimately suggest that these studies reinforce white supremacy through the invocation of a Black/White paradigm, reinforce historically racist and sexist notions of Blackness and sexuality,

as well as situate the studying of the sexual practice of female masturbation within a social problems framework in order to exploit the concept of sexual deviance and construct racism and sexism.

BLACK/WHITE PARADIGM

In my initial investigation of social science research on ethnicity and female masturbation, I discovered that Blacks were virtually the only racial group other than Whites which have been studied. Consequently, I argue that these studies reinforce white supremacy through the invocation of a Black/White paradigm in three primary ways. First, by utilizing a race comparative rather than a race homogenous approach, many of the studies provide a contrast between the two racial groups, establishing White as the “norm” and Black as the “other.” According to Linda Alcoff, setting Blacks apart from other racial groups in this way can accomplish the opposite of “normalizing [the] African American identity,” (239). This also reinforces Collins’ concept that “for racism, the point of deviance is created by a *normalized White heterosexuality* that depends on a *deviant Black heterosexuality* to give it meaning” (97). Secondly, these studies marginalize other racial and/or socioeconomic groups by ignoring them as worthy subjects of study. Alcoff discusses how “continuing to theorize race in the United States as operating exclusively through the black/white paradigm is actually disadvantageous for all people of color...” (249). Third, the samples utilized for comparison in some of these studies can be problematic based on significant size differences between the Black and White groups. For example, Fisher compared a sample of 285 White women to a sample of only 35 Black women in his study, implying a belief that there is much more limited heterogeneity and diversity of attitudes and behaviors within the Black population in comparison with the White population (29). This operates in accordance with Alcoff’s argument that creating such a bipolar

schema which reduces these individuals to being evaluated based on skin color, as well as disregarding potential cultural, regional, or national differences within the Black racial group, is an indication of anti-Black racism (236).

HISTORICAL NOTIONS OF BLACKNESS AND SEXUALITY

A second major problem with this research is that it has a tendency to reinforce historically racist and sexist notions of Blackness and sexuality. This stems from these studies reinforcing historical conceptions of Blacks as objects of scientific inquiry and victims of a hegemonic power structure. The targeting of Black women as objects of study has generally been justified based on fears related to their supposed “rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality, miscegenation, and independent black female desire” (Collins 71). In this case it is important to consider how the standpoints of these White, often male, researchers can “introduce systematic bias into processes of measurement, sampling, and design of analyses” (Sprague 83).

The primary investigators for three out of the four studies examined in this analysis were White. The one study with a Black primary investigator (Wyatt, Peters, & Guthrie) utilized a race homogenous approach, a multistage stratified probability sampling technique, interviewers of the same gender and race as the participants, and did not relate masturbation to sexual risk; in contrast with the other studies which tended to utilize a race comparative approach, convenience sampling, White and/or male interviewers, and relate masturbation with sexual risk (292). These differences suggest that an increased sensitivity and awareness of both the target population and variables being examined can largely influence the overall structure of these types of studies. Furthermore, these findings emphasize the importance of understanding Black sexuality in the context of structures of power (Collins 288).

The role that power plays in the conducting of this research on Black women and sexuality can be explored further by examining the way in which these studies tend to highlight negative stereotypes of Black women as hypersexual and/or possessing a dangerous sexuality. For example, some of the studies tend to utilize non-random convenience samples which they recruit in such locations as Planned Parenthood waiting rooms or HIV prevention/intervention programs, resulting in samples which consist of primarily “low income, at-risk African American women” (Shulman 265, Robinson, Bockting, & Harrell 89). These studies further stigmatize this population of Black women by attempting to establish relationships between their masturbation habits and variables related to sexual risk. For example, Robinson, Bockting, and Harrell’s study hypothesizes the relationship between masturbation and HIV risk for Black women only. Relating Black women with variables like these strengthens stereotypes about Blacks as possessing an “uncivilized, wild sexuality” or an “excessive or unrestrained heterosexual desire,” consequently serving to enhance distinctions between Black and White female sexuality, with “African women...seen as wanton perversions of sexuality, not paragons of piety and purity” like European women (Collins 27, 97; Schiebinger 159). According to Collins, this stamping of Black women with the stigma of promiscuity, and consequently sexual deviancy, clearly operates to construct racism (97).

SOCIAL PROBLEMS FRAMEWORK AND SEXUAL DEVIANCY

The way that this research situates the studying of the sexual practice of female masturbation within a social problems framework exploits the concept of sexual deviancy to construct racism and sexism. Associating already stigmatized individuals with a stigmatized sexual behavior such as masturbation in this way may feed into an already existing fear of Black female sexuality. For example, Collins talks about how pregnancy among “poor working class

black women” has often been construed as evidence that they lack the capacity to control their sexual lives (104). This type of argument could be used to justify the implementation of policies and programs which aim at policing the reproduction of poor minority women.

Another emergent theme within this pool of research is the presence of visible attempts to deflect this ‘deviance’ of masturbation onto Black women, while consequently protecting the hegemonic construct of White women as good and pure. Historical conceptions and present-day stereotypes of Black women as masculine, morally loose, and sex ‘freaks’ have positioned Black women as easy scapegoats for the blame of sexual deviance that may be associated with female masturbation. One example of this can be found in Fisher’s study where he emphasizes the result that masturbation frequency was found to be positively correlated with “how neglecting their mother was perceived to be” for White women only, suggesting that masturbation in White women is solely the result of poor parenting (33). In addition, in order to rationalize findings that more White women reported masturbating than Black women, some of the studies also suggest that their results must be inaccurate. Shulman and Horne, for example, attempt to cast doubt on the accuracy of their result that more White women than Black women masturbate based on a presumed lack of ‘honesty’ of Black respondents on the masturbation measure. Undoubtedly, they never question the ‘honesty’ of the White respondents.

CONCLUSION

Based on this assessment of the design, implementation, and analysis of social science research on Black women and masturbation from a feminist perspective, it becomes obvious that many axes of oppression appear to converge at this point where an already marginalized racial group is situated within the context of research on a historically ‘taboo’ sexual activity. The discourse of ‘deviance’ that emerges from this analysis speaks to the important role which power

plays in the creating and regulating of both ethnic and sexual boundaries (Nagel 11). This can be seen in that way that many of these studies reinforce negative race and gender stereotypes portrayed historically and in the media in order to establish Black female sexuality as ‘deviant other’ in contrast with the ‘norm’ of White female sexuality. This, in addition to the assumption that no diversity of sexual attitudes or experiences exists between individual Black women, potentially serves to contribute to the shaping of public debates and policies related to poor minority women and sexuality. In this way it becomes clear how, according to Collins, “sexual regulation [can] occur through repression, both by eliminating sexual alternatives and by shaping the public debates that do exist” (36).

Collins also contends that the “...*inclusion* of images of Black sexuality...can replicate the power relations of racism today just as effectively as the *exclusion* of Black images did prior to the 1960’s (43). In this case, rather than reducing anti-Black racism and sexism by including Black women as important subjects of scientific research, ‘inclusion’ actually translates to the situating of Black women as objects. These studies only seek to learn about Black female sexuality to the extent that it can be manipulated to support hegemonic societal norms. The way that these studies tend to invoke stereotypes and emphasize distinctions between racial groups actually serves to strengthen, rather than resist, prevalent racist and sexist ideologies.

Whether or not the majority of these studies consciously associate black women with a historically ‘taboo’ sexual activity like masturbation in order to amplify already existing popular constructions of them as ‘deviant’ and/or ‘other,’ this repercussion is evident. The negative implications of these studies for Blacks as a racial group, women as a gender group, and most of all, Black women as a unique group who exist where these multiple oppressions intersect,

suggest the need for a feminist approach to masturbation research in order to better understand the factors that influence the sexual attitudes and behaviors of all women.

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