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Racial Identity and Relationship Satisfaction in African American Gay Men

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Little is known about the experiences of African American gay men. This study concentrated on one aspect of African American gay men's experience by examining the association between racial identity and relationship satisfaction. The Racial Identity Attitude Scale was used to measure racial identity, and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to assess relationship satisfaction. Statistical analyses suggest that in this sample, there was no significant correlation between racial identity and relationship satisfaction. A discussion of the study's findings and family counselor implications are presented.

Little is known about the experiences of African American gay males regarding same-sex relationship satisfaction. This lack of information is primarily due to the relative invisibility, marginalization, and stigmatization of being both gay and African American in our society. A majority of researchers who have studied relationship satisfaction have typically relied on gathering data on heterosexual White couples (Kurdek, 1995). Past research focusing on gay relationships (Berger, 1990; Dailey, 1979; Peplau, 1981) has not been representative of the African American gay male experience. In addition, Kurdek (1995) has pointed out that most of the samples used to understand gay relationships have been relatively young, White, and well-educated couples. Brown (1995) explained that "data regarding lesbians and gay men of color remain sparse for reasons having to do with the complex interactions of racism with homophobia and heterosexism" (p. 276). Due to the scarcity of information regarding this population, there is a great deal the marriage and family counseling profession can learn about the coupled relationships of Black gay men.

The purpose of this study was to examine African American gay men's relationship satisfaction and to discuss their implications for counseling. *Relationship satisfaction* is

defined here as a subjective condition in which a person experiences a certain degree of attainment of a goal or desire in an intimate relationship (Burr, 1970). This research was intended to provide a first step toward identifying factors contributing to satisfaction in same-sex relationships from the perspectives of African American gay males, including racial identity. As Peterson (1992) stated, this type of knowledge would be a valuable contribution to reducing the stigma attributed to individuals who are in a same-sex couple. In addition, because at present there is no validation for using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) or the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS) for Black gay males, this study serves as a first in establishing such norms. The literature review that follows addresses research representing a cross-section of issues in this study pertaining to gay identity, marital satisfaction, same-sex couple relationships, and African American gay couples.

Gay Identity

Gay identity development has been described in the literature (Cass, 1996; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Loiacano, 1993; Troiden, 1993). Generally, these authors have described a linear stage progression. Loiacano (1993) proposed that these stages proceed in the following order: (a) a general sense of feeling different, (b) awareness of same-sex feelings, (c) a point of crisis where one recognizes that his or her feelings can be labeled gay, and (d) eventual acceptance and integration of gay identity.

In America, it is assumed that children are born heterosexual (Loiacano, 1993). For individuals who are gay, there is a developmental progression from assumed heterosexuality to positively affirmed homosexuality. Loiacano (1993) defined gay identity development as the process through which an individual progresses from his or her assumption of hetero-

sexuality to an open, affirmed state of homosexuality. In addition, Loiacano took the position that "a positive gay identity among Black Americans is likely to be interrelated with the individual's stage of Black identity development" (p. 373). In this article, it is asserted that a well-integrated racial identity is positively associated with one's ability to be satisfied in his or her marital or couple relationship because an integrated racial identity is associated with psychological well-being (Pyant & Yanico, 1991). Furthermore, the level of gay identity development influences one's ability to be satisfied in a committed relationship, and the positive integration of all of his or her identities enhances psychological maturity, which theoretically enhances relationship satisfaction. These findings relate to this study in that participants scoring high in racial identity RIAS should positively correlate with scores in relationship satisfaction DAS.

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction has been shown to be associated with general well-being and overall life happiness (Bowman, 1990; Renne, 1970). Myers (2000) cited National Opinion Research Center statistics from 1972 and 1996 that indicated married people report being more satisfied with life than divorced or unmarried persons. They are also at less risk for depression. For developmental theorists, the achievement of marriage or a long-term committed relationship is viewed as an essential milestone in adult maturity (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Levinson, 1978). For the purposes of this article, the term *couple relationship* was used in lieu of *marriage* or *marital relationship* because it is more inclusive. This section concentrates on a variety of aspects related to couple satisfaction.

Spanier and Cole (1976) indicated that dyadic adjustment can be viewed in two ways: (a) as a process or (b) as a qualitative evaluation of a state (or snapshot), where couple satisfaction can be understood as one aspect of dyadic adjustment. They leaned, however, toward seeing dyadic adjustment as a process consisting "of those events, circumstances and interactions which move a couple back and forth along this continuum . . . which can be evaluated in terms of proximity to good or poor adjustment" (p. 17). Dyadic adjustment, then, is an ever-changing process that may be evaluated at any point in time on a dimension from *well adjusted* to *maladjusted* (Spanier, 1976). This process can be evaluated by measuring the degree of (a) troublesome dyadic differences, (b) interpersonal tensions and personal anxiety, (c) dyadic satisfaction, (d) dyadic cohesion, and (e) consensus on matters of importance to dyadic functioning. The DAS is designed to evaluate the experiences (including relationship satisfaction) of individuals in either married or nonmarried dyads (Spanier, 1976).

Burr (1970) studied the degree of satisfaction in six distinct areas of couple relationships. The areas selected were (a) the way finances are handled, (b) the couple's social activi-

ties, (c) the way the spouse performs his or her household tasks, (d) companionship in the marriage, (e) sexual interaction, and (f) relationships with children. The study was limited in sample size ($N = 116$), but its findings suggested that the most abrupt variations of satisfaction seemed to occur around relationships with the children, finances, and companionship, and it questioned the notion from previous studies that relationship satisfaction decreases over the life cycle.

In addition, Bowman (1990) found the positive approach, defined as the couple's attempt to improve the emotional quality of the relationship, to be positively associated with marital happiness; whereas avoidance, introspective self-blame, self-interest, and open conflict were associated with marital unhappiness. Gray-Little (1982) described power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes and demonstrated the idea that power balance can be an important predictor of couple relationship quality.

In studying the dynamics or strengths of heterosexual relationships, Bem (1974) hypothesized that the androgynous sex-role type is the most psychologically healthy because it consists of both masculine and feminine characteristics and is the most behaviorally flexible across situations. Burger and Jacobson (1979) suggested that femininity is positively correlated with couple satisfaction and problem solving. They asserted that such feminine characteristics as socialization, emotional sensitivity, and development of ethical standards are the kinds of qualities that are important to family life and interpersonal interaction. Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found that couples who can tolerate a full range of expression (including anger and disagreement) without becoming too defensive may enjoy richer relationship quality over the long term. Problem-solving interaction is statistically significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). Overall, couples who gave attention to the emotional quality of their relationship, maintained a power balance, were skilled at problem solving, utilized feminine characteristics such as emotional sensitivity and ethical standards, and were able to tolerate a range of emotion without becoming defensive enjoyed a deeper sense of relationship satisfaction.

In contrast, Renne (1970) studied correlates of dissatisfaction in marriage. Her findings suggested several factors that seemed applicable to a study of Black same-sex couples' relationship satisfaction. First, Blacks and those with low income or little education were more apt to be maritally dissatisfied than were White people or those with adequate income and education. Second, couples currently raising children were more likely to be dissatisfied with their marriages than couples who never had children or whose children had left home. Third, a spouse who suffers from a chronic illness was more likely to be dissatisfied in his or her marriage.

The concepts of marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction are important to this study in understanding those factors that may potentially make or break a relationship. To this end, an

interesting question arising from this research is whether one partner of same-sex couples is perceived as having the requisite feminine traits that Bem (1974) believed to be an important factor in successful relationships.

Same-Sex Couple Relationships

Renne (1970) described a couple relationship as partners who are a source of emotional support, companionship, sexual gratification, and economic support or assistance for each other as well as share roles as parent, friend, colleague, and kinsman. Brown (1995) argued that homophobia and heterosexism are two forms of cultural oppression that affect same-sex relationships. In addition, Brown suggested gender-role socialization has an impact on the quality of the gay male relationship. That is, men learn how to be territorial, controlling, sexually initiating, and aggressive; but they are often underdeveloped in skills that are essential for relationship maintenance such as being empathic, nurturing, and able to express tender emotions. Due to this underdevelopment, gay men's socialization increases their difficulty in establishing intimacy.

Peplau's (1981) investigation of same-sex couple satisfaction offered several findings. First, when compared to heterosexual couples, gay couples were less likely to follow the traditional marriage model (e.g., sex roles) or to commit to sexual exclusivity in the relationship. Second, dyadic attachment and autonomy were viewed as essential for all intimate relationships. According to Peplau, "All partners in close relationships must somehow deal with how much intimacy and independence are desirable and how the two are to be reconciled" (p. 33). Third, Peplau found that heterosexual and same-sex couples are "so similar" (p. 38) in the satisfaction they derive from their relationship and in how they confront such issues as commitment, intimacy, and personal freedom. However, Dailey (1979) cautioned against broad generalizations yet also found there to be little difference in gay, lesbian, or heterosexual couple's ability to be in a caring and satisfying relationship.

Jones and Bates (1978) also studied gay couples in an early attempt to understand satisfaction or successfulness in gay couple relationships. They found that highly successful couples reported greater appreciation of the partner and the couple as a unit, less conflict, and more feelings that could contribute to stability (i.e., future plans). The study supported the notion that "it is reasonable to describe the successfulness of gay relationships in ways that are similar to those used to describe straight relationships" (p. 223).

Although gay couple relationships are generally viewed as short-lived by American society at large, many gay men have

In light of these findings, relationship satisfaction in the African American gay men of the present sample is similar to that in other couple dyads.

indicated that they would like to share their life with a partner (Saghir & Robins, 1973). Gay men who are in coupled relationships have reported being less worried about public intolerance of their sexual behavior; had higher self-esteem; and were less lonely, guilty, or depressed than gay men who were single (Weinberg & Williams, 1974). Peplau (1981) stipulated that the "values and experiences of homosexual couples are similar to those of heterosexuals . . . most people strongly desire a close and loving relationship with one special person . . . intimate relationships can . . . provide love and satisfaction" (p. 28).

Although the above section describes factors related to same-sex couples, it does not address the views of minority gay couples. As Peplau (1981) was able to ascertain

for same-sex couples in general, do minority gay couples (in this study of African Americans) also score similarly to heterosexual couples in dyadic adjustment? By reviewing the literature on same-sex couples and African American gay couples, key findings in each of these areas either can affirm or refute the findings from this study.

African American Gay Couples

Using the data of other researchers (Bell & Weinberg, 1978), Peterson (1992) discussed how Black gay couples structured their relationships. He found that most of the couples did not follow the traditional sex-role responsibilities that characterize the structure of straight couples. He suggested that age and social status are salient structural factors. Although his data did not support it, Peterson hypothesized that age and social class differences affect the balance of power in the relationship. Sexual monogamy or sexual openness is seen as another aspect of structure in the Black gay couple. Peterson found that there is minimal evidence to suggest that some Black gay partners value sexual openness and do not interpret sexual openness to mean infidelity. Sexual openness may be viewed as one or both partners' being sexually active outside of the relationship without the sense that their commitment to each other has been jeopardized. Peterson cautioned that age, social status, and level of sexual openness may be structural aspects of the gay Black couple but that there is a need for more research. Peterson also studied what contributed to the maintenance and durability of the Black male couple. He pointed out that legal, religious, economic, and social barriers make it more challenging for the gay couple to stay together. Social support from the gay community, family, or friends is viewed as essential to help the couple buffer stress when problems occur. Garnets and Kimmel (1993) believed that having a support system is positively associated with adaptive coping strategies, lowered levels of

stress, psychological adjustment, and emotional intimacy in relationships. According to Peterson, another aspect of relationship maintenance involves an investment in the relationship, which makes it more difficult to dissolve the relationship before conflict can be resolved. For example, sharing property, joint finances, other material possessions, mutual values, and trust are some tangible and intangible investments in the relationship that inhibit swift marital dissolution.

Based on the combined findings noted above, the following research questions form the basis of this study:

1. Is there a positive relationship between Black racial identity, as measured by the RIAS, and relationship satisfaction, as measured by the DAS?
2. Is there a relationship between satisfaction, as measured by the DAS, and demographic variables such as age, annual income, length of the relationship, and education level?
3. How does Black racial identity (as measured by the RIAS) correlate with an individual's age, income, length of relationship, and education level?

METHOD

Sample Selection

Over a period of 2 years, the authors collaborated with gay men (referred to as survey distributors) who were concerned about gay relationships and who expressed interest in the research topic and offered to assist in identifying participants for the study. These men were from varied backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Surveys were mailed to each survey distributor with a written letter summarizing guidelines for the study and data collection procedures. The survey distributor was the key person in data collection. Survey distributors were identified in nine states and the District of Columbia, with all major regions in the United States represented. The survey distributor's primary responsibilities were identifying persons in his social network who met the sample description, giving surveys to willing partners to complete, collecting the surveys in sealed envelopes, and mailing the sealed envelopes to the authors. Each distributor was reimbursed for postage expenses. The selection criteria for the study required each participant to be in a same-sex relationship during the time of the survey (no specific number of months was required).

The participants in this study consisted of 67 African American gay men between the ages of 18 and 60 (mean age = 36) who were in a same-sex relationship during the time of the survey. Collectively, the participants reported being in their relationships an average of 4.5 years. Sixty-seven percent of the participants reported living with their partner, and 49% were completely out. *Completely out* is defined as individuals' publicly embracing their gay identity in all settings. The participants were well educated (50% had a college degree or better) and middle class (25% had incomes of \$40,000 or more; 33% had incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000). Although the participants were from the East, South, Mid-

west, and Western regions of the United States, almost half of the participants were from Southern California (29%) and Washington, D.C. (19%).

Instrumentation

The DAS, developed by Spanier (1976), is a well-validated self-report instrument for measuring global satisfaction with a relationship, where *relationship* connotes a subjective condition in which an individual experienced a degree of attainment of a goal in an intimate relationship. It is based on Locke and Wallace's (1959) Marital Adjustment Scale and is appropriate for married and unmarried couples (Burger & Jacobson, 1979). The DAS is a 32-item survey that is structured in a Likert format ranging from a 2- to 6-point scale depending on the question. Criterion-related validity was established at the .001 level with a sample of 218 married persons and another of 94 divorced persons. Each item correlated significantly with the external criterion of marital status. A statistically significant difference in scores occurred both for the mean total scale scores and each item separately (Spanier, 1976). When compared to the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale, the correlation coefficients ($p < .001$) between the two scales were found to be $r = .86$ among married respondents and $r = .88$ among divorced respondents (Spanier, 1976). Total scale reliability, using Cronbach's alpha, was found to be .96. Subscale reliabilities ranged from .73 to .94. Individual subscale coefficients were as follows: Dyadic Consensus, .90; Dyadic Satisfaction, .94; Dyadic Cohesion, .86; and Affectional Expression, .73 (Spanier, 1976). This study represents a first in obtaining norms for the DAS with Black gay couples.

The RIAS short form was used to measure level of racial identity. There is also a longer form of the RIAS; however, Helms and Parham (1990) reported that there is no statistically significant difference between the reliability coefficients of the two forms. The RIAS is a self-report inventory and is the most utilized and researched Black racial identity instrument available (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993). Parham and Helms (1981) developed the scale and performed the original item analyses and reliability studies. The current version of the RIAS has been developed from diverse samples of 250 university students (Helms & Parham, 1990). Ponterotto and Peterson (1993) characterized the RIAS as having "moderate construct- and convergent- validity" (p. 141). Cronbach's alpha was used to determine reliability for the RIAS (short form) and is reported for each stage (Helms & Parham, 1990): preencounter, .69; encounter, .50; immersion/emersion, .67; and internalization, .79. "The RIAS has been found to have fair-to-good internal consistency" (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993, p. 141). In addition, Thomas & Speight (1999) used the RIAS in a study with nonuniversity adults and reported the following subscale internal consistency alphas: preencounter, .49; encounter, .51; immersion/emersion, .50; and internalization, .64.

Finally, a one-page questionnaire was created to obtain demographic data on the individuals who participated in the study. The survey included questions regarding each individual's race, age, gender, "out" status, annual income, and education level. "Out" status was determined by how a person described himself based on the following categories: (a) completely out, (b) out to family only, (c) out to friends only, (d) out everywhere but work, (e) not out at all (these categories are not based on any particular gay identity model). The questionnaire also asked each participant how long he had been in a couple relationship, if he and his partner lived together, and his zip code (for the purpose of geographical comparisons).

Procedure

This research project was primarily a correlational study to ascertain if a relationship existed between a person's perceived level of racial identity and relationship satisfaction. Before analyzing the research questions, there was a need to evaluate the reliability and validity of each research instrument because none of them had previously been used with the African American gay population.

Cronbach's alpha was used to determine internal consistency for both the DAS and the RIAS in this study. The DAS alphas were as follows: consensus = .88, affectional expression = .78, cohesion = .65, satisfaction = .89, and DAS overall = .88. The DAS alpha scores were consistent with the alphas Spanier (1976) reported, which are as follows: consensus = .90, affectional expression = .73, cohesion = .86, satisfaction = .94, and DAS overall = .96. In addition, the RIAS were as follows: preencounter = .45, encounter = .54, immersion/emersion = .65, internalization = .56, and overall RIAS = .63. The RIAS alphas were fairly consistent with scores reported by Helms and Parham (1990), which were preencounter = .69, encounter = .50, immersion/emersion = .67, and internalization = .79.

Concurrent validity was established for the DAS by performing Pearson correlation analyses of the DAS and the Kansas Marital Scale (KMS); both instruments were administered in this study. When correlated with the KMS, the results indicated that the DAS global and the DAS dyadic satisfaction subscale coefficients were .54 and .68, respectively. These correlational analyses were significant at the .05 level. Each instrument seem to measure relationship satisfaction in a theoretically consistent way.

There were no statistical analysis performed regarding the RIAS as valid measures for this study. Instead, the authors relied on existing knowledge to assert that the RIAS is a valid measure for this population. Investigators have supported the notion that the RIAS is a valid instrument (Helms & Parham, 1990; McCowan & Alston, 1998; Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993). For a comprehensive review of validity as it relates to the RIAS, the reader is directed to the work of Ponterotto and Wise (1987).

Pearson correlations were used to determine the relationship between the variables described in the following clusters: (a) racial identity and relationship satisfaction; (b) relationship satisfaction and such demographic variables as age, income, how long the participant had been in a couple relationship, and education; and (c) RIAS and demographic variables age, income, length of relationship, and education. All data analyses were tested for significance at the .05 level.

Two hundred surveys were sent to survey distributors for dissemination to willing research participants in their social networks. Seventy-two surveys were returned (36%), and 5 of these were eliminated (6%) because the participants failed to follow instructions correctly, for an overall return rate of 30%.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results to the three research questions posed. Research Question 1 asked whether there was a positive relationship between the RIAS and DAS. The relationship proved to be an inverse, nonsignificant one ($r = -.259$) that approached significance. Research Question 2 asked if there was a relationship between the DAS and variables including age, education, income, and length of relationship. This relationship proved nonsignificant at all levels. Finally, Research Question 3 asked how racial identity correlated with variables including age, education, income, and length of relationship. These correlations, too, were found to be nonsignificant.

Prior to this study, the DAS and RIAS had not been used in studies of African American gay men. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of these instruments for an African American gay male sample. The DAS (.88) and DAS satisfaction subscale (.89) were highly reliable when measuring relationship satisfaction in this sample. The RIAS (.63) was found to have fair reliability in this sample, similar to finding with other populations (see Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

Table 2 presents mean comparisons between the DAS mean in the current sample and other DAS sample means reported in the literature. The mean scores presented are those of the dyadic satisfaction subscale and the total DAS mean.

The DAS can be used as a global measure of relationship satisfaction by calculating the total scale score that comprises the subscale scores. The DAS scores range from 0 to 150. The mean is 114.8 (DeBord & Romans, 1996). Higher scores suggest better relationship adjustment, whereas a raw score of 100 or less is indicative of poorer dyadic adjustment (Spanier, 1989). The DAS mean scores, in this study, suggest that dyadic satisfaction and general dyadic adjustment appear to be comparable in homosexual and heterosexual individuals, according to how the DAS is interpreted (see above). Kurdek's (1992) results from a homosexual sample are similar to Spanier's (1976) findings using a married sample. Dailey's (1979) study reported married couples as having the

TABLE 1
Comparison of Correlation Scores With the
Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), the Racial
Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS), and Demographics

Variable	DAS		RIAS	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
RIAS	-.259	.052	1.000	—
Age	-.058	.664	.124	.337
Education	-.008	.951	.216	.089
Annual income	.000	.999	.217	.087
Time partners have known each other	.000	.998	.204	.109

highest dyadic adjustment score at 116.7 (a full 7 points above the current sample mean), whereas Kurdek (1992) reported the highest dyadic satisfaction score at 40.6 in the homosexual couple sample (roughly 2 points above the current sample).

DISCUSSION

Overall, this study's findings indicated there to be no statistically significant relationship between racial identity (RIAS) and relationship satisfaction (DAS). There were also no statistically significant correlations found between the RIAS or DAS when separately related to demographic variables of age, education, length of relationship, and income. According to this study, racial identity is unrelated to relationship satisfaction among African American gay males.

The apparent lack of connection between racial identity and relationship satisfaction was unanticipated. Identity, including racial identity, and close intimate affiliation are two aspects of a wide spectrum of psychosocial variables that contribute to well-being and healthy human development (Cross, 1971; Erikson, 1968). An underlying assumption of this study was that having a strong positive identity with one's racial group would be one indicator of healthy human development, which in turn should contribute to relationship satisfaction. Smith (1989) postulated that "an individual whose racial identity is anchored in his or her membership group stands a greater chance of being psychologically healthy" (p. 286). Garnets and Kimmel (1993) described identity as a gradual process of integrating one's diverse sense of self into a relatively firm belief in the continuity of oneself over time and across aspects of one's life. It seemed reasonable to suggest that positive racial identity signifies healthy functioning that empowers an individual to be able to develop a long-term and satisfying gay relationship.

In contrast, racial identity may be unrelated to relationship satisfaction, at least in African American gay males, perhaps

because the focuses of the two phenomena are different. Racial identity formation develops out of a focus on an individual's reaction to social/environmental pressures and circumstances (Parham, 1989), whereas relationship satisfaction seems to focus more on the subjective nature of an individual's attainment of goals within the context of an intimate relationship (Burr, 1970). Kurdek (1995) found that such factors as equal power, decision making, and few alternatives to the relationship were linked to relationship satisfaction. In the samples he studied, gay, lesbian, and heterosexual individuals who experienced a sense of equal power and control in their relationships, placed value on decision making and attachment, and had few alternatives to the relationship reported having a more satisfying relationship.

Similar to the results of our study, Kurdek's (1995) study of relationship satisfaction in White gay couples found that demographics such as age, education, and income were unrelated to relationship satisfaction. This finding is consistent with what Burr (1970) delineated as six distinct factors associated with relationship satisfaction. These factors included how finances are handled, couple's social activities, performance of household tasks, companionship in the marriage, sexual interaction, and relationship with children. The factors described pertain more to issues that are negotiated in the context of an intimate relationship and have less to do with other demographics. These findings contradicted Renne's (1970) study of heterosexual couples, which suggested that being African American, having lower income, and being less educated were associated with less relationship satisfaction.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has several limitations worth noting as to its generalization to other groups as well as to the findings reported here. First, participants were not randomly selected but were instead recruited via a convenience snowballing effect (one person recommends others), which likely affected the sizable number of well-educated, higher income participants. This skewed the diversity of participants regarding the demographic variables of education and income. Related to the sample also was the low response rate of 30%, which is probably associated with fear of social stigmatization.

Another limitation of the study—though it was also a motivation—was that there were no previous studies that had established norms for using the DAS on Black gay males. In spite of this, it was interesting to compare DAS findings from other populations with our findings; the comparison showed overall similar scores in relationship satisfaction between married heterosexual couples and Black gay couples.

A final limitation of the study—though in some ways, again, it was an asset—was that there were no norms for using the RIAS with Black gay males. Racial identity does not

TABLE 2
Comparisons Between Current Studies, Bernard's (1998) Study, and Spanier's (1989)
Examples of Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) Means From Selected Studies

Study	Sample	Dyadic Satisfaction	Total DAS
Current study	67 Black gay men	38.8	109.6
Bernard (1998)	38 Black couples		
	Husbands		105.8
	Wives		102.9
Burger and Jacobson (1979)	60 married and cohabiting: males		109.6
	60 married and cohabiting: females		110.1
Dailey (1979)	28 married couples	39.9	116.7
	24 cohabiting couples	39.8	115.5
	20 homosexuals	37.4	109.5
Kurdek (1992)	197 homosexual couples	40.6	114.8
Spanier (1976)	218 married couples	40.5	114.8
	94 divorced couples	22.2	70.7

appear to impact relationship satisfaction; therefore, among this sample, coming out about one's sexual preference appeared to be separate from identifying with one's race.

The underlying question of this study was whether African American gay males who possess a high level of racial identity will also be highly satisfied in their long-term same-sex relationships (defined here as at least 4.5 years). The findings of this study indicate that there is no relationship between the two. Racial identity and relationship satisfaction appear to be two human processes that are statistically unrelated, at least for the African American gay males in this sample. Everyday events, circumstances, and interactions, such as quality of communication, division of household labor, handling finances, and sexual relations, have previously been found to be indicators of relationship satisfaction (Spanier, 1976). Individuals in this sample, regardless of their level of racial identity, demonstrated levels of relationship satisfaction that were similar to reported satisfaction levels in married, cohabiting, lesbian, and gay couples (Dailey, 1979; Kurdek, 1995; Spanier, 1976).

In light of these findings, relationship satisfaction in the African American gay men of the present sample is similar to that in other couple dyads. Peplau (1981) suggested that heterosexual and same-sex couples are "so similar" (p. 38) or alike in the satisfaction they derive from their relationship and in how they confront such issues as commitment, intimacy, and personal freedom. Dailey (1979) found that there was no detectable difference in the ability to be in caring and satisfying relationships between members of the gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples she surveyed. Jones and Bates (1978) reported that "it is reasonable to describe the successfulness of gay relationships in ways that are similar to those used to describe straight relationships" (p. 223). Similarly, these findings challenge the notion that some people hold about gay

relationships being unsatisfying and inferior to heterosexual relationships and, therefore, unnatural (Dailey, 1979).

Clearly, African American gay men's attitudes in this study, similar to those of gay men in general, indicate that these men view their committed same-sex relationship as valid and satisfying. Unfortunately, due to societal miseducation, conceptualizing same-sex relationships as valid and satisfying is still a struggle for some counselors. Mental health professionals who are working with African American gay men in counseling are encouraged to be aware of personal bias or prejudice that may interfere with the ability to be effective with this population. Moreover, it is ethically imperative for the struggling counselor to take action (e.g. education, consultation, supervision, and/or referral) to decrease the risk of harm to this client population (Pope, 1992, 1995a).

Another implication of this study is that the counselor has a fiduciary responsibility to promote emotional well-being in the community. One example of promoting well-being for African American gay men is to acknowledge the legitimacy of their coupled relationships and challenge the misguided and stereotypic assumptions that breed oppression against sexual minorities. The demographic data suggest that some participants struggle with cultural oppression regarding public disclosure of their sexual orientation. Although great care was taken to protect each participant's anonymity, 8% of the sample participants did not disclose their sexual orientation in the allocated space on the survey. Brown (1995) discussed the idea that homophobia and heterosexism, both external and internal, are forms of oppression that gay individuals face no matter how privileged and insulated they are from overt oppression. Due to the pervasiveness of homophobia, in particular internalized homophobia experienced by most gay men, the data may imply that some sample participants experience a degree of fear or shame concerning their gay identity,

as evidenced by their failure to disclose their sexual orientation. The fact that some respondents declined to disclose their sexual orientation in an anonymous situation speaks to the deep-rooted nature of internalized homophobia and fear of consequences of public exposure.

Furthermore, this fear of exposure is indicated by the fact that nearly half of the participants (49%) indicated that they were not out completely, that is, in all aspects of their lives including public life. Because a majority of the participants have chosen a select group of individuals to whom they reveal their sexual orientation, it is clear that there are factors that limit the degree of comfort they have with exposing their gay identity to the public. Indeed, 3% of the respondents indicated they were not out at all.

Here again, counselors have the opportunity to be promoters of well-being by being change agents in our communities where African American gay issues are of concern. Change agents are involved in the client communities they serve and may utilize multicultural principles as a method of balancing diverse ideologies and practices within a community for the welfare of all. Many authors have discussed the process of becoming multiculturally competent (e.g., Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992). At a minimum, borrowing from multicultural theory, a change agent is aware of his or her own history and how that impacts the counselor, client, and community. The counselor is willing to understand and value the Black gay client's history, community, and worldview and is willing to work as a member or partner within the community, seeking to bring about change the community defines as beneficial. It is essential that counselors as well as other mental health professionals become visible change agents and improve credibility with the African American gay community by working to decrease cultural oppression that creates barriers to Black gays' healthy development.

Although being a change agent in the community is necessary, becoming competent in providing effective counseling services to Black gay men is equally important. Thorn and Sarata (1998) suggested that understanding African American history, understanding how sociopolitical dynamics impact Black men, being sensitive to the counselor's own worldview and its impact, building a trusting therapeutic relationship, and understanding the Black male client's relationship with his family and community are prerequisites to developing effective therapeutic interventions with African American males. This is true for Black gay men as well. Counselors should spend time addressing these elements before attempting to "fix" the client. Although there is no consensus on what counseling method is best for African Americans or Black gays, some theorists have suggested that an eclectic approach that integrates techniques from client-centered, behavioral, existential, and rational-emotive therapies, to name a few, are helpful in establishing a therapeutic relationship and in improving counseling effectiveness (Franklin, Carter, & Grace, 1993; McDavis, 1978).

Caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings of this study. Nonrandom convenience sampling was the method used to identify willing participants. In addition, this study focused solely on how being an African American gay man relates to relationship satisfaction. This study would be stronger if the number of respondents was higher. Finally, the study was conducted by surveying individuals, not both partners in a coupled relationship.

Studies that incorporate a qualitative research design are recommended in the future as a means of generating more complete information about this population's experiences. Understanding participants' beliefs, values, feelings, and behaviors can be better accomplished through the use of case studies or observational studies.

Finally, although no cultural identity measure was used to measure gay identity, this might be important in future studies. For bicultural individuals or individuals who have strong identification with more than one culture, the issue is which identity is more important in which specific circumstance (Pope, 1995b). The blending of cultural issues from the African American and gay cultures in this population provides an excellent opportunity to look at these important identity issues in greater depth.

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