



Connection the Dots: A Podcast series by the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD)

Podcast #1: Black Gay Men's Sexuality, Part 1

The first installment of NASTAD's 2009 podcast series, *Connecting the Dots*, will focus on Black gay men's sexuality. Because of the complexity of this topic, our first installment will be divided into four parts:

Part one will explore the influences of identity, masculinity and femininity and sexual objectification and mystique.

Part two will explore racism, gender identity and sexual roles.

Part three will explore pop culture and media.

Part four will explore self-value and power and privilege and will discuss how all issues covered in this installment work directly and indirectly to influence the health and wellness of black gay men.

Patrick Wilson and **Terrance Moore** lead this conversation. Patrick is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Medical Sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. His research focuses on ethnic, minority men who have sex with men, sexuality and HIV prevention. Terrance is an Associate Director at NASTAD who leads NASTAD's work around ethnic and racial health disparities, which includes a focus on African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians. The moderator for this conversation is **Dave Kern**, NASTAD's Director of Strategic Initiatives.

NASTAD's Podcast series, ***Connecting the Dots***, explores the complexities that shape our understanding of the HIV/AIDS, STD and viral hepatitis epidemics in the United States. The podcasts in this series examine topics through multiple lenses, including the behavioral, social, political and structural contexts in which behaviors occur, in which programs and services are delivered and in which policies are made. Through structured interviews with experts, each podcast in the *Connecting the Dots* series will help listeners identify and better understand the key influences that converge around a particular topic. The interviews will help build connections between these influences to create a clearer and more meaningful picture of the world we work in. By connecting the dots between issues, both profound and superficial, we gain new insights and ideas, renew our commitment to asking difficult questions and seek to better address the complex realities we face.

Dave Kern: Thank you both for joining me today. Let's start with some questions about identity. Patrick, what does it mean to be a Black man in American today?

Patrick Wilson: I think that's a really hard question to answer but an important one to ask. And I think that the answer to that question will be different according to socioeconomic status, education and what we commonly understand as class. I think that for lower SES or lower socioeconomic status men the issues may be different than they are for men who are more highly educated and have more access to opportunities but I do think there are some commonalities. Some that has to do with what many people sensationalize as the, uh, I don't want to say extinction but there not being enough Black men in the U.S. We know that Black men are incarcerated at a greater rate than other men of other races. We also know that Black men die younger than men of other races, and we also know that men, Black men, are subject to a variety of health issues that disproportionately affect this group compared to other men. And all of these factors do differ by socioeconomic status.

Dave: Terrance, to complicate things, how does gay identity fit into your description of Black men in America today?

Terrance Moore: I think gay identity surely complicates things on many fronts. I think the fact of the matter is "gay" is a term that we must remember was not necessarily something that Black people in general came up with. It's something that was handed to us, something for us to consider as something we could to become engaged in, gay society or culture, if you will, and I think that gay identity has been something that's been very difficult for us as Black men to really assume sometimes. I think that there are a myriad of things that allow us to be gay, of course, but I think there's also this kind of piece around what are you first when an individual sees you. When I walk into a room, and, using an "I" statement, I'm Black before I'm gay. And I think that that is something that a large majority of Black men deal with on a day-to-day basis. And so when we have conversations about issues of marriage and Proposition 8 and how that impacts us I think it's important in conversations, even like that one, to recall that it's not necessarily always a luxury for us to have greater conversations about access when your still dealing with kind of the historical issues that have always plagued our identity and how we see ourselves in this society.

Dave: Patrick is there such a thing as Black gay male identity? And if so, what does that look like?

Patrick: I do think that there is such a thing as Black gay male identity. It's an identity that I hold, to speak personally, but I do think that it's a challenge for a lot of Black men who have sex with men, which we of course use a great deal now within the field of public health and HIV prevention, and there's a reason for that, because of the issues of integrating Black and gay identities for many Black men who have sex with men. And I think that it's important that we understand identity development when we think about how you establish a Black gay male or masculine identity. Children, Black children, I should say, are socialized from birth essentially to be Black. Uh, parents teach their children the importance of being Black. Parents do this in an effort to protect their children from the stigma and the racism they may experience starting from a very early age. So they prime their children to place Black identity as very important. Uh, sexual identity development normally takes place, uh, in early adolescence, and when your talking about Black men they, at that time, have typically established a pretty strong Black identity. Uh, now when you think about integrating a gay identity into the collection of identities, surely not one person is just Black or gay or male but yet these are some of the more prominent identities that uh I think we contend with, all people contend with on a day-to-day basis, their identities. But when your talking about Black men who have desires towards other men who engage in sexual behaviors with other men, I believe that integrating those identities, Black and gay, can be quite a challenge. And it's in many ways context dependent in my eyes. I don't think that it is always possible in every situation to be a Black gay male. Again, speaking personally, there are context where I feel much more Black and then there are context that I feel much more gay and I almost maybe for a minute even forget that I'm Black. There are very fewer contexts in which, uh, there are very few contexts, I should say, in which I forget that I'm Black. There are more contexts, I would say, that I may forget that I am gay at the moment because again of this primacy and the salience of identities. So I do think that there's such a thing, to answer your question, there's such a thing as a Black gay male identity. But I do believe that it's a challenge for many Black men who have sex with men to achieve that and Black gay men who have achieved that many times have to struggle internally and externally to achieve that sense of a cohesive Black gay male sense of self.

Dave: I'd like you to listen to following quote. It comes from NASTAD's [Black Gay Men's Issue Brief #3](#), and, then, Terrance, I'd like to get your thoughts.

There is such a sense of shame and guilt with being gay, especially for Black people. I think that comes because Black children, Black little boys, particularly, never get to be little boys. You're always little man from the time you can walk. If you fall down you can't cry. You have to learn how to do man things. How you can be a murderer, a rapist, anything, but do not be a sissy. We can justify anything else you do but just don't be that.

Terrance: I think that's an excellent quote, and I certainly think that it is a metaphor for all things that I consider to be true in terms of being Black and a male and identifying as being gay in a society that so often scrutinizes Black gay males for being, not necessarily who society thinks, and when I say society, Black society thinks that it's acceptable to be. I think in terms of kind of some specifics of that quote that I find to be very interesting: I think it's absolutely true that as little boys we're told that we can't play with dolls. We have to have G.I. Joe or, in my case, He-man. We're told that, you know, when you fall off your bike, when your learning how to ride your bike, when those training wheels are taken off, when you fall and you scratch your knee or your leg your taught just get up, brush the dirt off your leg and keep on. And I think that this is a reality that in my eyes and in my view is very different from being a White gay male. In that, I think it goes back to what we were talking about previously, the fact of the matter is you're taught from a very early age to be Black most often than you are to be taught anything else about yourself in terms of sexuality. And when that comes into play, part of being Black is having a sense of resiliency. And resiliency, in terms of it being Black and gay, you are not resilient if you are gay because that brings into play a myriad of questions around gender and gender identity and being, essentially, being a crier, if you will, or being, uh, being vulnerable, if you will, around your sense of self. And so I think that you're taught very early on that displaying vulnerability is unacceptable.

Dave: Let's talk more about the roles of masculinity and femininity in the lives of Black gay men. Patrick how do these reinforce or resist Black gay male identity?

Patrick: I would agree that we live in a very misogynistic culture in the U.S., as a whole, but certainly within the Black community, but we

also live in a very anti-femininity culture when it comes to men. And so misogyny is hatred of women, if you take that for just the definition, but within the Black, particularly the Black gay male community there's a hatred of femininity, and there is a disconnect with the idea that gender is not one or the other...that most people have masculine, and, if it's a man, probably the primary component to their gender identity, but that feminine gender identity can also fit into the identity of a man. Uh, but effeminate behavior is stigmatized, strongly stigmatized, by Black men. Much of that has to do with historical context. It has to do with proving one's manliness and one's manhood. And, I think it's a constant struggle and challenge for Black gay men, particularly for younger ones, and I find in my own work that there are, and I don't like to categorize too much or create these classes, but there are these two groups, and they're groups particularly if you think of, you know, of the best example may be the House and Ball culture, where femininity is almost celebrated. It's a beautiful thing. But then you have another side in which femininity among gay men, Black gay men, is hated. If you look on any online profile you will frequently see phrases like "no fems." What does that mean? I don't know that you actually see that more on Black gay men's profiles online versus White gay man's profiles online, certainly you see them in both, but I do think that there is a disproportionate number of Black men that have sex with men, Black gay men, who in many ways despise femininity who think of it as a vulnerability, who think of it as a threat to Black men and Black manhood, and this is Black gay men I'm speaking of. And that becomes internalized. That becomes a way of looking at the world and looking at others and a way of further stigmatizing homosexuality in general. So, it actually worries me when we think of roles of masculinity and femininity in the lives of Black gay men, in that I think we focus so much on masculinity, as we would in a male dominated society, but we don't allow for any expressions of femininity which are more than having a limp wrist or walking with a swagger of sorts, but that also means things like compassion, a lack of fear of emotion. These concepts and ideas that are useful for progressing not just society but health in general. And that, I think, becomes a threat to Black gay men.

Dave: Let's talk about sexual objectification of Black gay men for a moment. Terrance how do our conceptions of gender roles reinforce this, both in the masculine and in the feminine sense?

Terrance: I think that one of the things that we have come to recognize in our society is that there is this certain type of stereotype that many of us know to be antidotal around a Black gay man. You

may not be able to secure a job or take care of your children, but you know one thing that you are stellar in and advanced in is your ability to be able to please an individual in the bedroom. And so there's this kind of pervasive objectification if you will of Black men in general. Shrink that down to Black gay men and I think the issues that you see are really kind of manifold and very interesting in terms of, and I'll give you my kind of antidotal, take it or leave it perception, dating White gay men and what that means. I think there's a certain amount of intimidation of White gay men by Black gay men in terms of, you know, again let's expand it back to what you can achieve in a life course in terms of education, in terms of the job you can secure, how much money you can make, etc. and let's look at it in terms of just pure sexuality and what you can and cannot do, the things that maybe another White gay man can not do for another White gay man. And what does that mean and how significant is that? Well, it's very significant in terms of the bedroom and sexuality and satisfying or providing sexual fulfillment. And that's all it is. It's not about equal partnership. It's really around those kind of discrete issues of pleasure and that is a very dangerous thing when we can't get outside of our box of pleasure to recognize that people are thinkers, people are cerebral, if you will, and can provide beyond just the historical, sexual underpinnings things that we've often carried from generation to generation.

Dave: So, Terrance talks about the mystique of the Black man with respect to sexuality, particularly around masculinity. Patrick, back to your point about the feminine and femininity within the Black gay male culture: how does that play into objectification of Black men as feminine objects?

Patrick: It's a difficult question to answer because I think the myth around the Black male as the masculine aggressor is so pervasive that it's almost as if the feminine man becomes not even a part of the equation, if you will. I think feminine Black gay men become less desired by, not only men of other races, but other Black gay men. It speaks a great deal toward primacy of the masculine identity. So we spoke earlier of primacy of Black identity and the way that, or I spoke about children and how their socialized, but across the board when you are born with a penis, you are socialized in a very, very deep way, not just by your parents, but by society, by history, by the images we are confronted with on a daily basis and advertisements and media, that masculinity and being a man is important. And, to then take away the idea of being feminine or having feminine qualities makes you less of a person. I think the way that that affects Black gay men is that it puts

them in a greater position of vulnerability, to be honest. Vulnerability for mental health outcomes that would be considered poor as well as sexual health outcomes because those men are doing a lot more to find that intimacy that, I think, is really what drives us to have sex, to be honest. Sex is about pleasure, as Terrance noted, and I think in many ways we have made it become more about pleasure than what it is honestly about which is intimacy and connection to others. And I think when a man, a Black gay male, particularly, is an effeminate man his ability to find intimacy can be basically reduced.

Terrance: I think it's interesting to actually look at this question in terms of sexual positions. And, this is an area that we often deem so provocative that we often don't have cogent conversations about what that actually means in our society, and particularly what it means among gay men. And, in terms of sexual positions we all know there are three: you're either a top, a bottom or a versatile. When we talk about sexual positioning and what that means in terms of identity and what that means for masculinity and femininity for Black gay men, it's very interesting.

Patrick: Can I add to just that because I just want to back it up with some empirical data that I've collected and that also that colleagues of mine have. We're starting to look at this because it is very important, as we all know as HIV prevention advocates, researchers, practitioners, that sexual positioning actually has a big role in how HIV gets transmitted. And, it's also interesting, as Terrance pointed out, to look at it from the masculine/feminine perspective. Across cultures, but particularly among Blacks and Latinos, when you're the bottom, you're effeminate; when you're a top, you're masculine. But the expectation that I found from men I've spoken with and worked with, and these are mostly men who are hooking up on the Internet, which we know has become one of the most prominent venues through which men who have sex with men meet each other and have sex. Their not interested in Black bottoms. Their interested in Black tops. We actually have as Black gay men and many believe that the only way to be gay, in an acceptable way, is if you're never penetrated. You have to be the aggressor. In Latino cultures, as many of us know, homosexuality exists but, if you're the top, your not considered gay. That's just expressing sexuality and getting it where you can get it, to be honest. But once you take that role of the woman, and once again it speaks to these gender roles, once you're the receptive partner the value really decreases I would say exponentially. Your value to the partner. And when we're talking about intimacy, where's the intimacy there? I don't think that there is.

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This podcast is part of NASTAD's 2009 series, connecting the dots. We hope you enjoyed this podcast and invite you to explore other NASTAD tools and documents by visiting us on the web at www.nastad.org.

NASTAD, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD), represents the nation's chief state health agency staff who have programmatic responsibility for administering HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis programs funded by state and federal governments. NASTAD is dedicated to reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis infection in the U.S. and its territories.