

# An exploration of social identity and mental health in Black gay men



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## Background

- In the course of their lifetime, individuals acquire and integrate different identities into their overall social identity.
- Given the historical and current experiences of minorities in America and within their communities, integration of sexual identity may be difficult, especially for older Black gay men.
- Experts suggest that the successful integration of one's sexual identity into one's overall social identity has implications for mental health and wellbeing.

## Research Objective

- To explore the impact of racial and sexual identity on mental health of older Black gay men.

## Method

### Sample (N=169)

The sample analyzed here was drawn from the Social Justice Sexuality (SJS) Project, one of the largest ever national surveys of minority lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders. The sample for the study was generated through a variety of strategies, including:

- venue-based sampling at strategic events,
- snowball sampling,
- respondent-driven sampling, and
- the internet.

\*Please see Table 1 for further information on the sample demographic.

### Measures

The SJS survey was a self-administered questionnaire with 105 items across 5 themes: family formations and dynamics; civic engagement; spirituality and religion; sexual, racial, and ethnic identity; and mental and overall health. The data collection period ran from January to December 2010.

### Analyses

Descriptive; Bivariate correlations; Hierarchical regression.

## Results

Table 1. Demographic and social characteristics (N=169)

| Variable                                     | M±SD/%   |
|--|----------|
| Age (M in years)                             | 56.4±6.4 |
| Education <sup>a</sup>                       | 89%      |
| Relationship Status <sup>b</sup>             | 54%      |
| Out to family <sup>c</sup>                   | 47%      |
| Urban resident <sup>d</sup>                  | 79%      |
| Sexual orientation is important <sup>e</sup> | 44%      |
| Current living condition <sup>f</sup>        | 29%      |
| Perceived overall health <sup>g</sup>        | 49%      |

a: % with at least 12 years of education; b: % that reported being single; c: % that reported being "out" to all family members; d: % that are not rural residents; e: % reported their sexual orientation as an extremely important aspect of their identity; f: % that reported living alone; g: % that rated their health to be good at most.

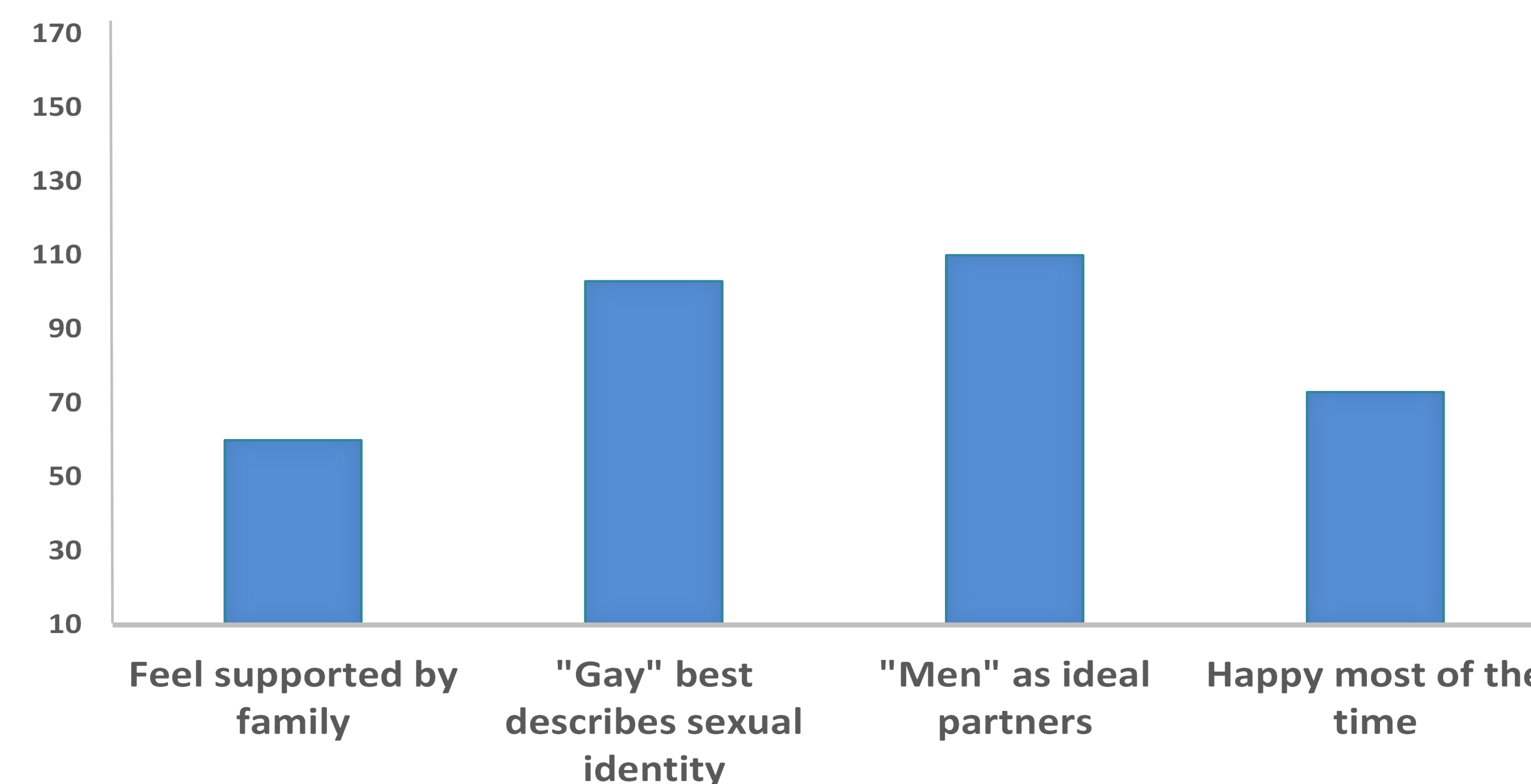


Figure 1: The number of men that endorsed each statement

Table 2. Association between mental health & study variables

| Variable   | r     |
|--|-------|
| Age  | -.01  |
| Income   | .01   |
| Sexual orientation as part of identity                             | -.02  |
| Sexual identity more important than racial identity                | -.12* |
| Sexual identity equal to racial identity                           | .20*  |
| Connection to LGBT <sup>a</sup> community                          | .16*  |
| "Outness" to family, friends, etc                                  | .04   |
| Involvement with activities for LGBT <sup>a</sup> POC <sup>b</sup> | .17*  |

\*p < .05; \*\*p ≤ .01, a = Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual, Transgender; b = People of color

## Results (cont.)

Table 3. Predictors of mental health in older Black gay men

| Independent Variable              | Model   |          |                   |
|-----------------------------------|---------|----------|-------------------|
|                                   | Model I | Model II | Model III         |
| <b>Demographic</b>                |         |          |                   |
| Age                               | -.05    | -.09     | -.15 <sup>!</sup> |
| Income                            | .01     | .01      | .05               |
| R <sup>2</sup>                    | .00     |          |                   |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>           | -.01    |          |                   |
| R <sup>2</sup> change             | --      |          |                   |
| P value                           | NS      |          |                   |
| <b>Social</b>                     |         |          |                   |
| Sexual identity > racial identity |         | .07      | .15               |
| Sexual identity = racial identity |         | .35**    | .36**             |
| R <sup>2</sup>                    |         | .09      |                   |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>           |         | .05      |                   |
| R <sup>2</sup> change             |         | .09      |                   |
| P value                           |         | 0.033    |                   |
| <b>Psychosocial</b>               |         |          |                   |
| Connect to LGBT community         |         |          | .21*              |
| "outness"                         |         |          | -.07              |
| Involvement with LGBT POC         |         |          | .19 <sup>!</sup>  |
| R <sup>2</sup>                    |         |          | .17               |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>           |         |          | .11               |
| R <sup>2</sup> change             |         |          | .08               |
| P value                           |         |          | 0.005             |

\*p < .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; !p < .09

## Discussion

- Results indicate that giving more weight to sexual identity over racial identity is associated with poor mental health outcomes, while a balance in integrating sexual and racial identity is associated with better mental health outcomes.
- Additionally, the data shows that belongingness and social support from other sexual minorities are related to improved mental health.
- Encouraging proper integration of different aspects of one's identity and promoting contact with other sexual minorities and sexual minorities of color could improve overall mental health, especially in later life.
- These findings can inform the creation of more tailored mental health programs for older Black gay men. Also, it can guide efforts to promote mental health in the younger generation of Black minorities using a life course perspective.