Gay racism and white identity

Sociology, Identity

The term gay racism first appeared in a collection of poetry, essays, short stories, and photographs meant to explore the fraught relationship between race and sexuality in the United States (DeMarco, 1983). Since its original debut, the concept of gay racism has been expanded by a number of theorists and for the purposes of this essay, gay racism can be defined as " the enactment of racist practices among and between gay men, which can perhaps be most usefully conceived as situated racism" (Callander, Holt, & Newman, Gay Racism, 2018, p. 1). Like traditional forms of racism, gay racism can be enacted in both overt and covert ways, but is should be noted that gay racism tends to appear in more insidious forms. For example, in the context of dating and sexual relations between gay men, overt racism is often disguised and excused as a simple sexual or dating " preference" (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2015). In addition, gay racism also operates along the three levels of racism provided by Bowser. From an institutional enactment, gay racism manifests as the exclusion of people of color from gay advocacy groups, such as ACT UP often having dramatic societal and public health consequences (Fuss, 1991; Mookas, 1995; Edwards, 2000). Existing research on gay racism and its affect on individuals have identified how much of the racism encountered has been subtle and is often difficult to identify (Ayres, 1999; Chuang, 1999; McBride, 2005; Caluya, 2006; Han, 2007; Law, 2012). Some have even compared these insidious instances of racism within the gay community to what theorist Thomas Pettigrew identified as " modern racism", an enactment of racism that is subtle and differs from blatant racism, yet still maintains the primary function of discrimination based on prejudice (Pettigrew, 1989). This essay will primarily

examine the individual enactment of gay racism, with particular respect to its operation on Grindr. Related literature has examined the operation of gay racism in online spaces that serve as sites of romantic and sexual socialization (Fung, 1991; McBride, 2005; Han, 2006, 2007, 2008; Daroya, 2013). Overwhelmingly, all of these examinations of gay racism in a sexual context note a power dynamic that reinforces the dominance of whiteness as standard by which all gay men (including non-white) are measured. However, in order to avoid the reductive nature of binary oppositions acknowledged by Hall, this essay will apply an intersectional framework for a greater degree of assessment of the varying forms of oppression and exclusion those who experience gay racism face (Crenshaw, 1991). The salient power of whiteness can best be described as erotic capital, working in coordination with other attributes that either serve to increase or decrease one's value in online sexual marketplaces of desire. This concept of a sexual marketplace of desire will be examined further in the proceeding section.

Gay Racism: Online Spaces & Grindr

Despite being the most popular LBRTD app for gay men and men who have sex with men, Grindr has received little critical academic scrutiny. Some authors hold an optimistic view of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Dubrovskys & Kiesler, 1991; Kiesler & Sproull, 1992) and its potentially emancipatory ability to reconfigure human relationships (Vernon, 2010; Race, 2015). However, a more abundant and convincing amount of literature on gay racism in a sexual context has identified how sexual racism in online spaces like Grindr is common and enduring, perhaps due to the unrestrained effects that online spaces offer in terms of relative anonymity (Suler, 2004;

Callander et al., 2012). Some have suggested that online spaces facilitated by computer-mediated communication are crucial for identity development and well being amongst LGBT youth (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016). Certainly, CMC holds the potential to aid in the well being of LGBT persons as they are able to interact with others absent the strictures of space and time (Bond et al., 2009; Craig & McInroy, 2014). However, if this online interaction is marred by a racialized organization of desire that serves to oppress and exclude, it requires critical examination.

Effects of Gay Racism & Responses

Existing literature of the enactment of gay racism in spaces aimed at finding romantic or sexual partners has examined how some men had actively reframed their experiences in order to mitigate the negative impacts of racism; specifically, when some of the men encountered gay racism they responded by adjusting their own practices or thoughts, as opposed to challenging racism directly (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2015). This practice of altering one's own practices as a response to gay racism has been documented in other settings as well, including social spaces like gay bars and clubs (DeMarco, 1983; Boykin, 1996; Choi, Han, Paul, & Ayala, 2011). Some view these alterations by gay men of color that experience racism as accommodations of racism within the gay community and these findings indicate that different strategies exist for challenging racism, depending upon setting and the level of blatant racism faced. (Callander, Holt, & Newman, Gay Racism, 2018). Considering the various ways in which gay men attempt to navigate around gay racism, one might suggest that the

enactment of gay racism in a sexual context has real-world consequences for members of the gay community. After all, many studies have documented the effects of gay racism; citing increased anger, anxiety, sadness, stress, depression, and difficulties with intimacy (Zamboni & Crawford, 2007; Chae & Hirokazu, 2008; Han et al., 2014; Callander et al., 2015).

The Sexual Marketplace of Desire & Erotic Capital

To best examine the occurrence of gay racism in sexual context it is useful to apply a market analogy to examine the power of whiteness and the erotic capital that it affords within online spaces like Grindr. Tim McCaskell argues, " the gay community is a sexual marketplace" because " people aren't so likely to get frozen with one partner" (McCaskell, 1998, p. 46). Relatedly, a study on personal advertisements by gays and lesbians in newspapers advocates for the interpretation of these ads as " commodified and marketised discourses" (Thorne & Coupland, 1998, p. 234). What's more, these commodified discourses are constructed in a manner so as to increase perceived value within the marketplace (Thorne & Coupland, 1998). Put simply, " the self is commodified in personal ads to become desirable and consumed as a sexual object based on one's understanding of his/her value in the marketplace of desire" (Daroya, 2018, p. 70). Applying this concept to Grindr, we are better able to understand that the various profiles on Grindr actually exist as advertisements wherein individuals have commodified themselves and constructed their profiles so as to increase their erotic capital and attract sexual partners (the most valuable being those who are white). If this is the case and Grindr exists as an online sexual marketplace of

desire where its users all possess varying amounts erotic value (McBride, 2005), who is most valued and conversely undervalued and excluded?

Erotic Capital

By recognizing Grindr as an online marketplace of desire for gay men and men who have sex with men, we are able to better understand how the concept of erotic capital operates within the marketplace. Sociological applications of the term " capital" usually address the acquisition of resources within a given social sphere (Becker, 1975; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). For the purposes of this essay, erotic capital is defined as " the quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses, which elicit an erotic response in another" (Green, 2008, p. 29).