



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 4

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

Part one explored the influences of identity, masculinity and femininity and sexual objectification and mystique. Listen to [Part one](#).

Part two explored racism, gender identity and sexual roles. Listen to [Part two](#).

Part three explored pop culture and media. Listen to [Part three](#).

Part four explores self-value and power and privilege and discusses 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: You talk about the puritanical approach that America takes to sex and sexuality. Then we add in the aspect of sexual identity, different, gay, it's different, Black is different; it sounds like a perfect storm. I would imagine if we add in youth as another component it becomes even greater. Is that what's happening?

Terrance Moore: Well let's transition a little bit into the realm of religion if we really, truly want to talk about the perfect storm. How often as Black males do we, and I suspect Patrick probably as well, how often did we at an early age sit in a church and hear, I can remember on multiple occasions hearing a sermon that essentially said what I know to be as truth, truth meaning my sexuality, is fundamentally flawed and it is the antithesis of how you should live your life. Talking about, as Patrick mentioned, the psychological impacts of that, that is unbelievable for someone of a young age to have to hear. You put on top of that leaving the church on a Sunday afternoon and maybe at home at dinner and hearing maybe a father, maybe an uncle, maybe an aunt, maybe a cousin, kind of in a benign sense, if you will, kind of utter some kind of anti-homophobic epitaph. How many times have we heard that in our own households? Those are the types of things that Black gay men, I think, deal with and, I would like to say, anecdotally, I may be using my own self as a case study, more so I think than other populations. I think that there's something to be said about how we can live our lives or not live our lives constructively when those are the only messages constantly thrown at us on a day-to-day basis. And also, knowing that we have an option here: we can continue to listen to this, as punishing as it is, as damning as it is, or we can separate ourselves from that. Where does that leave us if we separate ourselves? What's the incentive if we separate ourselves? You have nothing. The family unit is what you are conditioned early on to believe as being the most important thing in your life. If you don't have that where does that leave you? Well, it leaves you placing yourself in a locked closet for as long as you can remain in that closet. And I think that that is a very, very scary thing. Now on the flipside, what does religion offer us? Because I'm so often concerned that we spend a lot of time talking about what religion doesn't offer you. I think what religion does offer you or promote a sense of self. And it allows you in a society that, from its kind of basic standpoint, can look at you and see your Blackness as inferiority. But in a Black church, religion offers you an opportunity to be a leader, to be, you know, an usher. You can be gay and in the choir and nobody's going to talk about it. You can be on...Easter Sunday you can stand up in front of your church and give an Easter poem and make a great...and wear the greatest, the nicest suit that your Mother bought you. You know, religion and the Black church gives you an opportunity to present to society, at least your Black society, what you can't do everyday in kind of the larger society.

Dave Kern: Based on your previous comment, is that a false sense of self value or is it legitimately true?

Terrance Moore: I think it's cognitive, cognitive dissonance. I like to say this, this kind of weird thing that occurs where you're getting beat up, it's like an abusive relationship, if you will. You know, you're getting what you need but you're getting punched in the head at the same time. And it's so bizarre. And some of us come out of the experience getting what they need, also being beat up, but being able to move forward, but some of us are just only getting beat up and not getting what we need out of it. And that actually probably places us at a disadvantage and places us at the kind of precipice of disease acquisition more so than anything else. So, it depends on the person.

Dave Kern: Using the theme of cognitive dissonance, which makes a lot of sense, and getting back to, Patrick, your point that Black gay male identity does exist, what does this cognitive dissonance do to one's self value and one's agency as a Black gay man?

Patrick Wilson: That's a very good question and, again, I like that you framed it in terms of agency, because, I think, that's one of the core issues. I think, after doing research and speaking with Black gay men through work with NASTAD across the country, that self concept is at the core of so much of what we are talking about today. And, the revised estimates and we see these numbers among Black MSM, I think we need to talk about self concept. And I believe that you can get to a place where I can say, I am Black and I'm quite proud and I'm gay and I'm quite proud of both identities. So you've got so much going on that I do think when you get to that integrated self concept, when you get beyond the dissonance, the cognitive dissonance, and into a place where you actually are saying, you know what I'm taking this part of me, I'm taking this part me, I'm taking this part of me, I'm putting these pieces together and I'm becoming a whole being, and I'm not divvying myself up. Sure, like I said when we began this conversation, there are certain places and times I feel more Black and certain times and places I feel more gay, certain times I feel more like a man and sometimes I feel more like a woman. I'll be real about it. But, overall, I'm a Black gay male and I have a very strong sense of that identity. But I do think that that required, just personally, rejecting a lot and reformulating a lot. Terrance used, I think it was Terrance who said, we need to make a distinction between transformation and transcendence. And I don't know if we can always transform the things, in our own lifetime honestly, because some of these structures are bigger than us, but I do think we can transcend and find a way to become spiritual beings. I don't

think that you have to reject religion to be a Black gay male. I don't think you have to reject your family. I don't think you have to reject some topics we haven't talked about like hip-hop culture or having straight male friends <laughing> for example, as many do feel because that's what they've been conditioned and socialized to believe. But, these threats to the self concept are so real. They're so pervasive. And they do damage the self concept in ways I don't think we, even at this day and age, understand. And we wouldn't because, honestly, we haven't done enough work, we haven't talked to enough Black gay men. But, Terrance and I in the work that we've done and the work that NASTAD has supported, in looking at what's going on within the community of Black gay men, black men who have sex with men, same gender loving men, have become to realize or have come to realize that many of these men have a very low sense of self. They feel that they don't, they're not valuable members of their community. They don't feel valued within a gay community, the mainstream gay community, or White gay community. They don't feel like they are valued in their church communities, yet I think they get so much out of that and that's a necessity in many men's, many Black people's lives. Church is home. Church is family. And it's a very difficult thing to take yourself out of that context and just say, 'I'm done. I'm not dealing with that church anymore because they said that being gay is bad.' I think, no, what happens is we can't disconnect ourselves from our families. We have to continue to take those messages and, whether or not we believe that we're integrating them, if you continually hear you're immoral, the behaviors your engaging in are sinful, you are a disrespect to our family, you have destroyed the family legacy. When you think of that in a historical context, there's nothing worse for a Black person to have ruined a legacy of their family. And, I again, I'm emphasizing thinking of this as in a historical context where Blacks have felt disenfranchised and marginalized for a long time and are beginning, many, to emerge from that context and into a place of feeling like we're making it, we're moving forward.

Dave Kern: So looking back in fifty years, will we see a legacy from the Black gay male community?

Patrick Wilson: You are asking some great questions, Dave. I don't know. What frightens me? What frightens me is the legacy will be a community that has been destroyed by, not just HIV, but violence, by incarcerations, by lack of access. I think that you will see a group of Black gay men, just as there are now—Terrance and I belong to many of their networks—who are progressing, who are fighting, we might say, fighting the good fight. But, that's a small, small proportion of this. It's not even a Dubois talented tenth. I mean, I don't know it might be a talented...

Terrance Moore: <laughing> Two.

Patrick Wilson: ...half a percent, honestly, and that does frighten me. So, in terms of the legacy, I think that there's a lot, don't get me wrong, the Black gay community has the potential to, and has actually, transformed culture. Madonna wouldn't have a career if it wasn't for Black gay men. Tyra Banks wouldn't have a career if it wasn't for Black gay men. We would never know that. We don't get told that. We don't celebrate the accomplishments of Black gay men from the civil rights movement to the work that Phil Wilson does today and the work of countless others who remain unnamed because they're not on CNN, and they're not in the media but that are working tirelessly. And that does affect me in a way that I—it makes me optimistic but still fearful for what the ultimate legacy is. Right now, the legacy is we are vectors of HIV transmission.

Dave Kern: So Patrick what power and what privilege do Black gay men hold?

Patrick Wilson: Like my gut reaction is none, honestly. But I don't think that that is true. I have to just think about it. But power and privilege in the U.S. society is held by White heterosexual men, first and foremost. And our paradigm through which we judge everything is within that paradigm. So when I think of power and privilege for Black gay men I think that that in some ways is part of the problem. The only privilege and power that we get is from our masculine dominance. That fits into the conventional and widespread paradigm through which, again, we operate out of. So, an effeminate Black gay man, I don't know where his power and privilege lies outside of his ability to harness whatever is within himself to say, 'I'm not letting this bring me down' and that's where resiliency comes into place. That's when understanding how you get people like Terrance and myself, who, again, were afforded many things that our peers were not, but who are able to say, 'You know what, I'm Black, I'm gay, it makes no difference what I can and cannot do in this society. I can continue to be what I want. I can be President of the United States.' And that is an image that is getting stronger and stronger with, obviously, the election of a Black president, but it's also something that, I just, to create power, and I don't really think we need to create privilege, honestly. Life is a privilege that we all have, and it shouldn't be dictated that some get happiness in life and others do not. Power is also something that, I think, that we all have the ability to harness, and much of that comes from within, a lot of it, probably most of it, comes from outside of us because there are people in power that, in many ways, control and have a lot of say over the conditions in which we live our lives. But, you know, we talk about this concept of 'empowerment' a great deal, and I think it's a very nebulous one and one that's often ill-defined, but it's

also one of those things that's crucial. Because when you're talking about power and privilege, I do think that for Black gay men it is about becoming empowered. Becoming empowered to respect yourself, to respect who you are, to respect others who are like you and not like you, and a lot of that comes through affirmation from other individuals in your network, in your family, in your church, in your community. And, it does come back to affirmation of these images in broader society. So, you know, I would like to see Kobe and Miss J on the cover of *Source* magazine. I would like to see those types of images in the most hard core of Black media markets. That's going to empower younger people to say, whether they're fem or butch, whether they are a top or bottom, to be like, 'You know what 'F' this. Like I'm gay. I'm okay with that. It's who I am.' I'm not saying that that's going to solve every problem. Surely, they have to work through, just as many gay and lesbian individuals and bisexuals and transgenders, certainly, individuals have to work through their families, again their communities, their life situations, but just a little ounce of—you know we say an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of—what is it? The cure? Well, I think here in, you know, Barack Obama as President is more than an ounce of something. But, it's one image that can have the capacity to, I think, change the direction of Black youth, I hope, in years to come. I don't even think we know how. He probably will be out of office in eight years <laughing> by the time this happens. But because we have these positive images, youth, which really are the future, the folks that we got to be looking at, not the most, per say, but we got to be looking at them, have more opportunities. They know that they don't just have to be Kobe or 50 Cent. They can be whoever they want to be, and I think that that is the key to promoting a positive self concept. ,

Dave Kern: Okay one final question: you've raised a lot of issues today important to the lives of Black gay men and I want to talk about how these concepts and issues that you did talk about directly and indirectly influence the health and wellness of Black gay men, including HIV and AIDS, but, certainly, not limited to HIV.

Terrance Moore: You know, one of the things that I think is so important to talk about that's often missed, as providers, as people working in the field, we often go towards the easy answer. We think, 'If we could only give more HIV tests to Black gay males more Black gay males will go get an HIV test and peace and tranquility will be restored.' Like there's this ridiculous assumption that this one thing or two things or three things are, you know, kind of, the symphony of magic bullets. And, it's just preposterous. We have to be thinking about the granular issues, and we need to go back to these issues of self concept. These are real things and, yes, they're nebulous and, yes, they're difficult to put your hands on and fingers on and dissect, but

these are the most important things in the lives of—I'm not going to just say Black gay males—but Black people in general. There is so much oppression, still. Yes, we have a Black President. Yes, that's fantastic. But, as demonstrated by the reaction of Black people in this election, that should show folks something. That should show that, wow, people are holding a lot of things inside, and they've been dealing with a lot of things and have not had an opportunity to have some full catharsis. And, we have to have, not just your kind of individual level interventions that are going to deal with one person, but we need to be looking at these kinds of massive overhauls of our structural systems. And, I think until we can start to look at how the judicial system impacts, you know, the health and wellness of communities, racial and ethnic minority communities, in general, and how the environment—we had one of our members from California give this amazing presentation about a certain county in California and green space and how that impacted people's health and how the placement of grocery stores—and, so, these are all kind of larger structural issues that we really, really need to be thinking of. And when you place into a Black gay male's pockets a little bit more money, a good job, some stability, an apartment, maybe he fixes his relationship with his family or maybe he's moved to New York, Miami or whatever, you'll get to see some differences and how they respond to their health. And, I think, these are things worth looking at. It's also worth looking at oppression. And it's also worth looking at, not just class, but how if you have all that ripped from you will you still be able to survive and will you still be able to be productive and will you still be able to have a great sense of self and concept?

Patrick Wilson: I just want to emphasize, it so often boils down to self concept, as we've noted, and I think it's important to think of not just the sexual health of Black gay men but the psychological health of Black gay men. Mental health is another stigmatized issue in society but, in particular in the Black community. But, it's extraordinarily important, I think, to addressing the health and needs of Black gay men. Because it's these big issues that we've talked about, to me, that create an almost impossible scenario for young, Black, inner city, impoverished, Black gay men to develop a positive identity as, not just a Black individual—and if they don't call themselves gay, I don't care, but a man who has sex with other men, a same gender loving man, a two-spirited man, a bisexual man—but is proudly such. That, I think, needs to happen in order for us to these major health affects. I can't agree more Terrance. We can push HIV testing. We can push small group interventions. We can push community level interventions that are focused on bringing men into different settings so that they'll get tested or they'll begin to use condoms more, but we have to tackle the bigger issues for this to happen. And, that's what we've neglected to do for the last almost 30 years now in which this epidemic has been raging on and really

destroying parts of our community. We have to tackle poverty. We have to tackle joblessness. We have to tackle education. These are all things that people, they never make those connections. So, we're trying to connect the dots here. I think in connecting the dots you've got to go to some of the social and structural issues that don't, and you mentioned this, they may not directly affect HIV, so yeah me getting an 'F' in algebra because my teacher never invested much time in me, or to begin with believed that I could learn math, may not directly link to me not using a condom when I go have sex at the club, but there's surely a relationship there, because I, again, may feel like, 'Well I'm not going to make it at all within this context. I don't have much to contribute. My Mom doesn't know I'm gay. She'll freak out as soon as she finds out. My friends are going to freak out. I'm going to go to the bathhouse and find me some love 'cause I'm not getting it anywhere else.' And, love, for some, is about having sex, and it's not always about thinking, 'Okay, let me use a condom right now.' And, this is where I think you do need to go back to some of these bigger issues, and I think Terrance brought them up and I think we've been talking about them today. These are the ways that I think that we really connect the dots to prevention.



This podcast is part of NASTAD's 2009 series, *Connecting the Dots*. We hope you enjoyed this podcast and encourage you to visit NASTAD's [blog](#) to offer us your comments, questions or ideas and our [website](#) to explore other NASTAD tools and documents. We also invite you to visit NASTAD on [YouTube](#), Facebook and LinkedIn (search key word: *NASTAD*).

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.