

From Periphery To Centre: An  
Exploratory Study of One Black  
Lesbian's Intersecting Identities  
and Experiences of  
Discrimination in the Workplace

# Overview of Study

- In my original research project, I interviewed ten lesbian workers of colour (eight were Black identified women, one identified as bi-racial-Japanese and White, and one identified as a person of interracial mixed heritage-Indigenous and African from South America).
- Our interviews focused on their lived experiences and understanding of discrimination as it manifested in their respective workplaces, and the strategies they used to navigate their workplace.
- A shift in the research led to one interview being selected for an in-depth narrative analysis.

# Crystal

- A self-identified Black Butch lesbian in her 30s residing in the Greater Toronto Area.
- A health care professional in a predominately White, heterosexual, social service agency.
- She is the only non-White worker, in a work unit consisting of White gay and lesbian colleagues. This unit provides services exclusively to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered communities.

## **Type of discrimination: Racism in Crystal's Workplace**

- **Negative labelling—her colleagues often referred to her as “an angry Black woman,” thereby making her ‘unacceptable,’ and positioning her negatively as an outsider.**
- **Everyday racism--Crystal recalled a casual conversation between her and a White gay male colleague:**

**I remember this one co-worker, he was talking about his friends and something about his social life, and he was saying that his friend was a chocolate queen [a gay man with a strong attraction to Black men based on the hyper-erotic stereotype of Black men as exotic and dangerous], and I just thought, “Why do you think it’s okay to say that to me?” I know it’s because he thinks, “But we’re both queers so I can talk to you like this.” The fact that [my] race is too much for him to handle, so he pretends it’s not there. But it’s stuff like that that for me, really separates us, because we can be talking, having this great conversation, and something like that happens. It’s like, great, okay this is how we’re different—the fact that [he] thinks it’s okay to do that and does not get how that would be offensive to me.**

## Type of discrimination: Racism in Crystal's Workplace (cont'd)

- Crystal recalled that her frustration and disappointment grew deeper:  
When I've complained [to the manager], she's said things like, "Well, you can educate us. This is a perfect opportunity for you to develop your leadership skills, and do some education for us."

I said, "You know, I don't think you would say that to someone who's experiencing homophobia—that they need to go out and educate straight people. In fact, I know you wouldn't say that because I've heard you say that's not okay. So how is this different?"

I think what's happened is that I've become the person who is seen as having a 'chip on their shoulder,' which is very convenient—"Oh that Black lesbian with 'a chip on her shoulder!'" So they don't have to look at *their* stuff because *I've* got 'a chip on my shoulder.'

I get slammed in the face just when I've let my guard down. It's like, [I'm] doing okay, [and I] really enjoy being part of this team of queer people, [then] something gets said, or something happens, and I'm slapped in the face with, "Oh right, this is what makes me an outsider here."

# Crystal's Profound Insight into the Emotional Power of Racism in the Workplace

- Sometimes I leave work and I feel like, “It’s just little cuts,” but they’re all bleeding. So, cumulatively, it’s this huge blood loss, and it’s exhausting. I think that’s one of the hardest things because I already have to be out in the world and be on my guard for, “What’s that guy on the subway going to say?” I feel like I’m always waiting for the blow, and there are times when I get to work and I think, “Wow, I got to work okay,” and I let my guard down. Then I get sucker-punched.

So it’s that exhaustion of always being on your guard and wanting to find a place where I don’t actually have to be on my guard all the time. I don’t know if that place exists. I don’t know if there are places where people of colour aren’t on their guard.

I feel I use more energy to be in the world than White people do. I don’t think that White people understand that, or appreciate how exhausting that is.

## Type of discrimination:

### Lesbian Identity, Homophobia, and Homo-Normativity

- There were struggles over what defined a 'woman' or a 'lesbian.' For example, Crystal's White lesbian manager's homo-normative perceptions that lesbians who want to be birth mothers are not 'real' lesbians:

[Her manager is] very against the whole thing [lesbian birth mothers]...her view of a 'real' lesbian is that you don't have kids. There's some old world ways of thinking about 'what is a lesbian?'

There are ways of being queer that are acceptable and ways that are not, and for some reason, in my workplace, wanting to be a parent...[is a] way that [is] not acceptable.

- Crystal found that her workplace was a poisoned environment because her White gay male colleagues made regular comments about her legs not being shaved, or they would state that she looked like a teenage boy.

## **Type of discrimination: 'Professionalism' and the Intersectionality of Race, Sexuality, Gender, and Class in Crystal's Workplace**

- Crystal stated:  
There's certainly a lot of struggle in terms of my gender identity. I identify as someone who is 'butch,' so I get challenged a bit on how I dress. ... There's always little comments.

In particular, she recalled comments being made by her lesbian and gay colleagues about the shorts and shirts she wears during the summer months:

In the summer, when I have on my long shorts and long shirt, I know that they are seeing this whole *thug* thing, and they don't like that. That's when people have the most struggle with me—when I'm dressed like that – because all of a sudden, I'm ethnic. I'm *Black* Black. It's a 'different' kind of Black, and they don't know how to deal with that.

It's interesting because I am much more comfortable with my clients and my clients are much more comfortable with me. But, I am always aware that there's this judgment that's happening [from my colleagues and manager], which then impacts how I work with the clients. I mean it is hard to be in this place [where my colleagues feel], "Well, we can deal with you because you're kinda White, but as soon as you step out of that kinda White place, then we are going to have a reaction [and] challenge you."

# Crystal's Strategies to Navigate her Workplace

- **Distancing or separating herself from the uninviting work environment of her immediate work unit.**

Crystal commented:

I think what I've done is really detach myself from my workplace.... because it is too exhausting and because the way I do my work is not respected...I don't feel like I get a lot of support around me. I complain a lot [exhausted laughter]. I complain a lot to my partner. It was getting to the point where on Sunday nights I would be miserable and I'd be in tears or I'd be sick 'cause I just couldn't handle being there. In the fall [of 2003] I got pneumonia. I was really sick for a while, and I think that was my body just saying, "You need to be away from here [her workplace] for a while."

[In addition] I have actually tried to use the things that my union has allowed me, like my vacation time, my sick days. I make sure that I take them whether I am sick or not. I take about a day a month. I make sure I use all my vacation. I used to go in at 8 o'clock [in the morning but] now, [I have the attitude of] this is what I get paid for, [so] this is when I'm there. I'm trying to really keep my work as work. It's not who I am, it's where I work.

# Crystal's Strategies to Navigate her Workplace (cont'd)

- **Decentralizing work as the focal point of her everyday life.**

Crystal commented:

I try and close my door [at lunch]. I used to do work over lunch and I don't do that [anymore]. I take a book or something. I used to go in on weekends to finish up paper work. I don't do that any more. When I'm at work, I very much stay to myself. I just don't engage any more. If I have a few minutes down time, then it's for me. I just think that I can't allow this workplace to kill me. I just need to create some space for myself.

Crystal has implemented personal lifestyle changes:

I play basketball. I maybe play soccer. I joined a gym. I've gotten very involved doing a lot of renovation in [my] house. I'm trying to get into a place that is more meditative. I've really tried to eat better, sleep better, all those things that I tell my clients. That's what I'm trying to do.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

- Her narrative and the academic literature I integrated into this study reflect the need for more in-depth research that utilizes an intersectional lens.
- Recommendations:
  - A) I would strongly recommend a large scale qualitative study (perhaps a comparative analysis between lesbian workers of colour in two different geo-political spaces) that used an intersectional lens as its base to structure the research.
  - B) Given the shift in labour market participation by women as a whole, and lesbian workers of colour as a sub-group in Canada in “non-traditional” work such as the trades—a study examining lesbian workers of colour experiences with discrimination in their workplaces in this context would provide insights into nuanced ways discrimination manifests itself in these types of workplaces, and the strategies these workers use to navigate their workplaces.

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