



GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES

Compiled Research Briefs & Summaries White Paper Fall 2011

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“Queering the Educational Color Line: Experiences of Black Gay Collegians on Campuses of HBCUs”

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*“We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.”*
-Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896)

“The Black homosexual is hard pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers; even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions. This is what the race has depended on in being able to erase homosexuality from our recorded history. The ‘chosen’ history. But the sacred constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home.”
-Essex Hemphill “Loyalty” (1992)

Introduction

While many studies have examined concepts of academic achievement (Allen, 1992; Hrabowski III, Maton, & Grief 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terezini, 2004) and persistence (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Donovan, 1984; Harper & Davis, 2006; Strayhorn, 2005) relating to African Americans in college, very little of this work has focused on Black gay males. Researchers have recently begun to shed light on “invisible” marginalized subgroups on college campuses (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita 2008); yet this focus has been primarily on the undergraduate experiences of Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) with little to no explicit attention to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Our focus on HBCUs is substantiated in several ways. First, previous researchers have identified that African American students attending HBCUs are less likely than their same-race peers at PWIs to face the racial hostility that research has shown as detrimental to their academic achievement (Allen, 1992). Similarly, though results are mixed, substantial evidence supports the notion that labor market outcomes--such as job satisfaction and occupational status--are greater for Black HBCU graduates, compared to those who attend PWIs. Likewise, HBCUs provide a unique cultural site for developing social/cultural capital networks, which contribute to one's academic achievement (Brown & Davis, 2001; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Still, it has been documented that queer students of color attending HBCUs may encounter institutional homophobia (Patton, 2011), although its less clear whether Black gay men attending different HBCUs experience the same forms of homophobia across geographic locations.

Indeed, uncovering the experiences of Black gay male collegians at HBCUs is important in developing a comprehensive knowledge of Black male collegians. Also, learning how Black gay male collegians negotiate multiple identities at HBCUs can provide useful knowledge for practitioners who work with such students. The absence of information in the scholarly literature about this subpopulation of Black males has contributed to a lack of both contextual and theoretical understanding of the challenges such men face as well as insufficient data on the support that enable their success. The current research is designed to fill in this gap, drawing upon data from a multi-campus qualitative research study.

This qualitative study was designed to gain in-depth information about how Black gay male collegians at HBCUs negotiate their multiple social identities in ways that enable them to succeed (i.e., academic achievement, retention) in college. Specifically, the current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Black gay male collegians describe the nature and climate of their experiences on campus, particularly across geographical locations?
2. How do these perceptions of campus climate contribute to successful navigation through college?
3. What social/cultural capital networks do Black gay male collegians develop that assist in academic achievement?

Methods

To successfully address the gap within the literature, this study is centered upon an epistemological approach that is anchored in the constructivist tradition to generate knowledge, understanding and meaning through human interactions (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) as well as inquiry into understanding multiple identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Data collection will not begin until Fall 2011, therefore, we briefly outline our plan for collection. Data will be collected via a series of focus groups at multiple HBCUs. Focus groups are particularly useful for providing detailed insights into a target audience's perceptions and motivations (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). Focus groups have been utilized as an appropriate means for generating knowledge among Black male college students (Watkins, Green, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007) and even Black gay male collegians (Strayhorn & Mullins, 2011), thereby providing an opportunity for open discussion and dialogue among participants. Focus groups, in the present study, will take place on campuses, lasting approximately 90-120 minutes on average. All focus groups will be digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional. Analysis will be completed in two phases. Specifically open-coding will be utilized to identify any initial codes, which will be collapsed, where possible, into broader categories and then these categories will be collapsed into larger themes (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita, 2008). Participants also will complete a demographic background questionnaire that will be administered by a trained focus group facilitator, ensuring that complete confidentiality is kept after completion of the signed consent for participation.

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“Toward an Integrated Self: Making Meaning of the Multiple Identities of Gay Men in College”

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Introduction

Over the past decade, scholars have looked to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995), a concept stemming from Critical Race Theory, as a means to explore the multiple social identities of college students. Intersectionality provides insight on the knowledge constructed at the intersection of one's multiple identities, at the individual, group and systemic levels (Crenshaw, 2007). Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007)'s Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity have served as one conceptual model framing how college students come to make meaning of their holistic sense of self. This movement towards looking at one's holistic development addresses a prevalent critique of traditional student development theory: that those foundational theories were developed using participants who reflected college campuses at the time: White, upper- or middle-class, heterosexual (or likely closeted) men (Davis & Laker, 2004; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010).

Additionally, arguments have been made that these theories represent the college male perspective; however, scholars on men and masculinities in higher education argue that these theories have largely ignored the role of one's gender in one's cognitive, psychosocial, or social identity development (Edwards, 2007; Harper & Harris, 2010; Harris, 2006; Laker & Davis, 2011). To further compound the lack of research in this area, there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of gay men making meaning of their gender and sexual orientation in addition to other social identities such as race and ethnicity. As a result, a significant gap in the literature exists on understanding how gay men in college make meaning of their multiple identities.

This qualitative study aims to understand how traditionally-aged gay men in college come to make meaning of the intersections of their multiple identities, specifically their gender and sexuality. This research will assist higher education professionals in understanding how gay men in college come to understand one's self as well as understand the impact, either positively or negatively, of specific services, programs, and experiences on one's meaning-making process.

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. How do gay men make meaning of their masculinity and sexuality during their college years?
2. In what ways do gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity intersect for gay men in college?
3. What are the critical influences during college on their meaning-making process?

Methods

To address the outlined research questions, a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005, 2006) research design will be used. Constructivist grounded theory places an emphasis on the phenomenon being studied through the gathering and analysis of data through the relationships and experiences between the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, data analysis will include interview data from 15 to 20 gay men, aged 18 to 23, who are currently attending or have recently attended three universities in a metropolitan area of Southern California, journal responses from participants kept between the first and last interviews, the researcher's analytic memos and field journals as well as focus group data with participants regarding the initial theory. The theory emerging from this particular study will address how this particular set of gay men come to make meaning of their holistic sense of self and provide insight on those programs and services offered within higher education institutions that either help or hinder this developmental process.

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“The Impact of the Black Church and College on the Identity Development of Black Gay Male Collegians”

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Introduction

The healthy development of Black men is important to the success and future existence of the Black community (Icard, 1986; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1995). This is especially true when discussing the Black family and the role of Black men in the propagation of the race (Icard, 1986). With the constant request for Black men to conform to gender roles and norms, remaining a part of the larger Black community can be a stressful process for Black gay men. For example, Loiacano (1989) found that Black gay men used the Black community as a reference group and feared their own acceptance of their gay identity could alienate them from that community. Additionally, Crawford et al. (2002) found “attachment to cultural heritage and identity as an African American are the most important factors to the emotional health of [African American gay and bisexual men]” (p. 186-187). Since the Black family and community are institutions that endure in large part because they rest on a spiritual foundation present in the Black Church (Battle, 2006), Black gay men must work to integrate themselves into an atmosphere that can be less than welcoming (Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008; Woodyard, Peterson, & Stokes, 2000). When young Black men are working to establish their individual identities, their participation in the church can create conflict as they attempt to create some semblance of an integrated sense of self. Monteiro and Fuqua (1995) found that “the development of a healthy sense of self demands that the individual develop and integrate his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within the context of his community and his spiritual values,” (p. 166). For Black gay men this would call for the successful acknowledgment and integration of thoughts, feelings and/or behaviors that would be contrary to the ideology espoused by the cornerstone of the Black community, the Black Church (Battle, 2006; Crawford et al., 2002; Icard 1986). With this consideration in mind, difficulty in the identity development for Black gay men who are involved in the Black Church is predicted.

The Black Church is often referred to as a place of racial uplift and reaffirmation of the worth of Black men and women (Battle, 2006; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990); however, its peculiar relationship with Black gay men warrants some investigation. This study provides a descriptive analysis of the participation in and interaction with the Black Church by Black gay male undergraduates. Of equal importance, this study focuses on how they make meaning of the messages received by their participation in the Church. Finally, this study provides insight into the Black gay male’s identity development (as a result of the Black Church) on his collegiate experience. This study examines three key questions:

1. “How do Black gay men describe their participation in and interaction with the Black Church?”
2. “How do Black gay men make meaning of the messages they receive from the Black Church?”
3. “How does the way Black gay men experience the Black Church affect how they experience college?”

Primarily, this study provides further insight into the experiences of a sub-population of Black male collegians. As Black males’ participation in higher education has been noted to be on a downward swing (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009) and research has established a need to further investigate the experiences of students to allow and promote better retention and persistence of this particular population (Harper, 2006; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood & DeVita, 2008), this study provides a potential avenue for student affairs practitioners to further engage the Black gay male subset of Black male collegians. Additionally, this study seeks to explore Black gay males’ experiences in college with consideration of their experiences in the Black Church.

Findings

Upon careful examination of the Black gay male collegians' experience with the Black Church, it was found that Black gay males experienced an *imposed conflicted identity* as a result of the anti-homosexual messages received via the Black Church. However, with the introduction of increased analytical conversations with peers in their collegiate contexts, these men found that they developed a new *solidified identity*, which they used to renegotiate their Black Church participation. Specifically, the Black gay men in this study used college as a period of self-exploration that enabled them to decide how they would re-engage the Black Church, if at all. Participants in this study chose one of three options: leave the Black Church completely, return to the Black Church with disclosure of their new solidified identity (as a Black gay male) or return to the Black Church without disclosure of their new solidified identity. A model to articulate this development through diagram was also created.

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“Exploring the Intersectionality of AAPI and LGBT Identities of College Students”

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The topic of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students is under theorized and requires further exploration. The body of literature discussing AAPI LGBT students, particularly the point at which their ethnic and sexual identities meet, is scarce, and outdated; there are no current, empirical studies addressing the multiple identities of AAPI LGBT student experiences. Studies that focus on AAPI LGBT people do not address college students, and only begin to tap into the point of intersection of identities and how AAPI LGBT students experience the intersection. For example, a quantitative study of AAPI and LGBT identity development (Chan, 1989) found that AAPI lesbians and gay men experienced challenges coping with the conflict and intersection of identities. The participants worried about the possibility of rejection and stigmatization by the AAPI community, the unspoken taboo of homosexuality and gender nonconformity in the AAPI community, and being racially discriminated in the larger lesbian and gay community (Chan, 1989; Yeh & Huang, 1996; Lee & Liu, 2001; Kodama et al., 2002; Akiyama, 2008).

Consequently, the conflict at the point of intersection between sexual identity and ethnic identity may put AAPI LGBT students in a vulnerable position where they feel ostracized by their families, cultural communities, and colleges (Yeh & Huang, 1996). In her study, Chan (1989) found that AAPI gay men and lesbians felt a sense of disconnect with both AAPI and LGBT communities, which contributed to a negative sense of self. When students adopt a negative sense of self, they are less likely to integrate into the university environment and have a positive experience in college, which may cause them to eventually drop out of the university (Tinto, 1993; Ortiz & Santos, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial for educators to understand how AAPI LGBT students experience the intersection of their identities, so as to facilitate a positive learning experience for these students. (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Astin, 1984, 1991; Phinney, 1995; Hurtado, 2007; Ortiz & Santos, 2009).

Limits to studies exploring how AAPI identity and sexuality intersect necessitates the piecing together of studies that separately explore AAPI ethnic identity and familial relations, and studies that explore LGBT identity. Although not ideal, piecing together literature is one of the few ways educators can begin learning about AAPI LGBT students. The theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993) offers a framework with which to understand the experiences of AAPI LGBT college students through exploring the various areas of AAPI, LGBT, and multiple identities research.

The purpose of this paper is to explore existing research to answer the following guiding questions:

1. What literature exists in AAPI ethnic identity and LGBT sexual identity research, and how do these areas of research discuss the relationship between the AAPI and LGBT identities of college students?
2. How does existing multiple identities research contribute to the understanding of the intersection of AAPI ethnic and sexual identity?
3. How does the theory of intersectionality impact understanding of AAPI LGBT college student identity and experience?

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“Understanding Asian/American Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Experience from a Poststructural Perspective”

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*This research will be published in the October issue of the Journal of Homosexuality.
Below is the research summary.*

This study looked at the college experiences of nine Asian/American gay, lesbian, bisexual students and, specifically, the impact of concealing or revealing their sexual orientation on their emerging sense of self. The researcher explored the following research questions (1) What is the decision making process that leads Asian/American GLB students to disclose their sexual orientation? And (2) How does the experience of disclosing their sexual identity affect their sense of self (i.e., construction of identity)?

Previous research on the identity formation process has largely utilized a psychosocial, life-span development approach, largely based on the theories of Erik Erikson (1968). In this study, the researcher utilized a Foucauldian, poststructural theoretical perspective, and particularly Michel Foucault’s theories about the subject and agency, discourse, power, and knowledge (Foucault, 1970, 1977a, 1977b, 1978). In summary, the researcher found that the students navigated a series of environments, each with their own set of discursive expectations/norms. These environments included home life, religion, country of origin (for international students), higher education (including classroom, residence halls, and student organizations), and social networking sites. Their decisions about revealing their sexual orientation were based on relationships formed within these environments. Their relationships within these environments were founded on these discursive norms and built upon a Foucauldian power dynamic. Their decisions about revealing their sexual orientation were largely dependent on which environment (and relationships) was most salient at a particular moment.

These decisions, in turn, helped many of the students grasp their emerging agency within the dominant discourse. A Foucauldian concept, agency can be defined as “existing within the hegemonic, normative discourse but do not defining oneself by it” (Bevir, 1999). By virtue of their Asian/American GLB identity, the students already fell outside of White and heterosexual discursive norms.

In deciding to reveal their sexual orientation, the students attempted to further define themselves outside of discursive norms and, in turn, learned how to “be” an Asian/American GLB individual within that environment. Ultimately, these decisions regarding disclosure or concealment were a discursive practice that allowed the students to shape and reshape their subjectivity and to further assert their agency.

To conclude, the findings in this study suggest that the dominant discourse within higher education needs to change in order to allow for a greater understanding of the experiences of Asian/American GLB people. Such a shift would create a more welcoming campus climate and allow these students to establish relationships in which they would feel comfortable revealing their sexual orientation. Understanding coming out processes of Asian/American GLB students brings to light the challenges of being both Asian/American and GLB in today’s society. Higher education is in a position to help address these challenges by creating more positive campus climates and enhances students’ educational experiences. With this study, the researcher hopes that others will better understand the experiences of Asian/American GLB youth and see ways in which they can positively impact their lives.

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“Benchmarking the Southeast: A Look at LGBT Programs and Support”

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*This benchmarking study was completed in fall 2010.
Below is a summary of the findings.*

A benchmarking study of 11 Southeastern institutions provides support for the assertion that Southern institutions are becoming more LGBTQ inclusive in their programs and services—but such an inclusiveness gap is wide. Ten public institutions and one private institution composed the “snapshot” study. Respondents were asked to provide information on student organizations, faculty/staff/graduate student organizations, ally programs, and, if applicable, LGBTQ resource centers.

While one common factor—student organizations—united institutions, disparities in serving the LGBTQ population were noticeable. Each of the 11 institutions maintained at least one student-run LGBTQ organization, with one institution offering six student organizations. Oversight of such organizations, however, varied with: support personnel in Student Affairs, faculty sponsors, and a collaborative board of individuals representing campus services such as University Housing and International Programs. Funding for each, however, remained fairly unclear with institutions reporting a mixture of student government funds and dues financing. As anticipated, each institution found their student organizations at different levels of development and overall outreach on campus.

Ally programs also constituted a common staple of LGBTQ inclusiveness efforts at the 11 Southeastern institutions. With names such as Safe Zone Allies, Safe Space, and Friends, all 11 universities cited programs that provide the LGBTQ and ally community with a trained campus representative prepared to offer support, guidance, and resources. The means through which programs were supported, however, varied. While some, more developed programs featured a regular line item in their budgets for ally programs, at least three noted that no financing was provided while others found funding inconsistent or minimal at best.

Most programs were completely volunteer-based, with at least two receiving some staff support through graduate assistantships. Each of the institutions reported as maintaining LGBTQ resource centers noted that professional staff were the primary support for the ally development opportunities with some student involvement as well. Other factors also varied. For example, ally training opportunities ranged from once every two weeks to once a month. While many institutions did not report the length of their ally training opportunities, average time rested between two to three and a half hours. More developed programs also noted offering different ally sessions for faculty/staff and students as well as distinct ally trainings to separately discuss sexual orientation and gender identity.

Only one remaining similarity surfaced in the review—the lack of focus on LGBTQ professional organizations. Most institutions did not report maintaining such a professional organization for LGBTQ and ally faculty, staff, and graduate students. Of those responding with a group, many were uncertain as to the status of the organizations and found that they were either fairly inactive or experienced considerable ebb and flow. One institution, however, reported that their LGBTQ professionals group was highly involved in developing campus programming and overseeing the ally program. Such an organization also helped administer an annual scholarship program.

While currently active at only six of the 11 schools, advisory groups were at least moderately prevalent at the Southeastern institutions analyzed. Many of the advisory groups maintained oversight of programming, particularly in the way of developing allies. One institution even noted the existence of a student-run executive committee charged with programming and oversight of a location on campus for the LGBTQ community. Another reported two advisory committees—one for faculty, staff, and alumni and another for the presidents of the various LGBTQ-focused student organizations.

The diversity of opportunities and campus-wide impact was most notable in the contrast between those institutions with and without LGBTQ resource centers. Two public and one private institution reported fully functioning LGBTQ resource centers. While one Center stood on its own under the institution's Dean of Students, the other two reported some connection (either currently or previously) with the campus's multicultural programming office. Staffing varied from an office with four administrative staff (a director, associate director, program coordinator, and graduate assistant) and eight student workers to one full time staff and a collection of student ambassadors. The institutions with resource centers offered a host of opportunities including LGBTQ welcome events, Lavender Graduation, National Coming Out Day and the Transgender Day of Remembrance, speakers and "Brown Bag" lunch series, and designated spaces offering resources and a supportive climate.

Each program began in diverse ways. While one began as the result of a university commission on the LGBTQ community, another commenced as a portion of the Religious Life office. Though funding estimates for the centers were not immediately available for the study, it is clear that full-time staff and committed resources made support for the LGBTQ community clearer and more sustainable. Indeed, injecting such full time support took campus outreach and impact to a new level.

From such a study it is clear that the diversity of LGBTQ-focused opportunities at Southeastern institutions are just as diverse as the individuals that make up the LGBTQ communities.

*NASPA Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues Knowledge Community
Fall 2011*