Using Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality to Explore a Black Lesbian's Life in College: An Analysis of Skye's Narrative

Christa J Porter, Kent State University
Candace E Maddox, University of Georgia
Using Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality to Explore a Black Lesbian’s Life in College: An Analysis of Skye’s Narrative

Christa J. Porter, Candace E. Maddox

Abstract—This qualitative study is centered on the individual experiences and narrative of a Black undergraduate lesbian student enrolled at an institution in the Southeastern region of the United States. This study sought to address the role of intersectionality in one’s identity development and the application of critical race theory as an analytic frame in narrative research. The theoretical underpinnings of the study are informed by the concepts presented in sexual and racial identity formation, intersectionality, and the employment of critical race theory. The full narrative of one participant is uncovered in findings of this study. There are direct implications for student affairs practice and higher education’s approach to sustaining a healthy campus cultural climate in addition to serving the needs of and supporting Black lesbian college women.

Key Terms—Black, Lesbian, Woman, Higher Education, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, Narrative Analysis

Adjustment to a predominantly White college environment for students of color consists of many transitions. In addition to managing their academic workload, students of color must develop and make meaning of their personal identities in relation to the various social interactions and environments in which they find themselves. Moreover, Pope’s (2000) study of Black, Asian, and Latino traditional aged college students revealed that students of color showed psychosocial maturation related closely to their racial identity formation. Specifically, racial identity is a fundamental part of student development for Black students (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine & Broadnax, 1994). Black students must have a healthy perspective of their racial identity to find growth in their academic success and personal development (Cokley, 2001). In addition to racial identity development, students of color who identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, and/or transgender (LGBT) at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) must also navigate their sexual identities (Patton & Simmons, 2008). For women, this navigation process involves developing a lesbian identity status and becoming a lesbian offspring (D’Augelli, 1994a) or sharing their sexual identity with family members. Despite the processes one may experience, personal subjectivities and behaviors, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections influence one’s journey through identity development.
development. The nonlinear sexual identity development structure, in addition to the aforementioned variables present in D’Augelli’s (1994a) model have been confirmed by other empirical research studies (Evans & Herriott, 2004; Stevens, 2004) and thus are more helpful when considering the intersectionality of identities for LGBT students of color.

At the intersections of race and gender is where the emergence of this study resides. Particularly, Black, female, lesbian, traditionally aged college students have a story related to their collegiate experiences at a PWI. This study engages the lived experiences of one particular student’s narrative that explores the intersections of her identities in the form of a counter-narrative to the master narrative of Black lesbians at PWIs.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of a Black undergraduate lesbian student at a PWI in the southeastern region of the United States (US). Specifically, we were interested in how she narrated her experiences broadly, and her identity development specifically, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality as useful theoretical and analytic constructs. Before describing our methods, we review the literature in the next section.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
In order to explore the experiences of a Black undergraduate lesbian student at a PWI, we found it necessary to review the literature in three areas: (a) the experiences of Black women in college, (b) racial identity development, and (c) sexual identity development in Black lesbians. Accordingly, this literature review is organized around these areas.

Experiences of Black Women in College
Winkle-Wagner (2009) shared the voices of 28 Black undergraduate women at a predominantly White institution by articulating their struggle to define and maintain their racial and gender identities. Her study challenged the participants’ notions of self, the multiple layers through which Black women mentally considered before acting upon certain behaviors in public (e.g., a collegiate classroom). The constant process of negotiation as Black women often depended on the environment and with whom one was interacting. The participants shared feelings of isolation, culture shock, being a “good” woman, competing for Black men, being “too White” or “too Black,” and being the only one in the classroom, while also feeling invisible.

Banks’ (2009) study described the navigation processes related to social and academic success in higher education. Her sample included narratives of 19 Black undergraduate women from four different institutions (one community college and three universities). Banks (2009) argued that educational spaces were constructed around Whiteness, and students of color specifically had to negotiate how to create and articulate their own knowledge and identity. Banks (2009) claimed specialized work was needed to investigate the complex negotiation processes that Black undergraduate women experienced as members of these educational spaces. Because Black undergraduate women are so diverse in their identities, they often show up in the spaces very differently.

As a result of oppressive behavior, dominant views of what Black women should be and how they should act (Collins, 1986), and the inability to articulate one’s own notion of self through identity development (Winkle-Wagner, 2009), Black women remain silenced.

Black women enter college at different ages and at varying stages in their development. The diversity of experiences may include socioeconomic background and status, spirituality and/or systems of belief, visible or invisible disabilities, and sexual orientation (Rosales & Person, 2003). Boyd-Franklin
Christa J. Porter and Candace E. Maddox

(1989) and Hamilton (1996) acknowledged roles Black undergraduate women may play within their families and/or communities and the impact their responsibilities have on their educational attainment. The socialization processes (e.g., interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic, social, and cultural) Black women endure manifest in college in positive and negative ways and often depend on their identity development and interactions. “The way Black undergraduate women wear evidence of their membership in these socially constructed spaces, in connection with society’s understanding of these spaces, is a root of the oppression Black women face and work to overcome” (Banks, 2009, p. 11).

This study incorporates the counter-narrative of a member of the aforementioned community as way of honoring her situated knowledge and its relation to the discourse of Black lesbian women.

**Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity development is offered as a disciplinary focused theory used in the field of student affairs to, in particular, give depth to the development of Black students (Marks, Settles, Cooke, Morgan, & Sellers, 2004). While racial identity development has its roots in the research perspectives of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966, 2002) describing development as a process of self-efficacy, ego identity, and psychological commitment that all adults experience throughout their lifespan, for the purpose of this study, racial identity development was discussed with regard to how one makes meaning. While stage modeling of identity development has informed our knowledge base of Black identity maturation, developmental theorists have discussed the importance of identity development across the life span and its implications for understanding how Black people make meaning of being Black (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Phinney, 1989). It has also been theorized that ethnic identity changes over the course of one’s life with particular attention to the notion that identity exploration begins during childhood and concludes in adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 2002). Most notably, Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) have provided insight into the concept of racial identity development across a life span. Their approach explores the impetus for the process, adolescence, of identity exploration where one can have a less well-developed sense of one’s self. Later in a life span, adults form an identity and presumably have a clearer and more complex sense of self. Moreover, their research found that adults are more likely to report an exploration of and commitment to a sense of ethnic identity (Cross & Fhagen-Smith). It is important to recognize that as people mature, they experience changes in social and identity roles which, through their development, can lead to more complex ethnic identities over time (Cross & Fhagen-Smith). Further exploration of Black identity development and its intersections with gender and sexual orientation provides a richer understanding of the experiences of particular students within the Black community that may otherwise be overlooked in the larger discourse of Black identity development.

**Sexual Identity Development in Black Lesbians**

Examining the processes of sexual identity development is necessary to the overall development of this counter-narrative. D’Augelli (1994a) established an identity development model based on the belief that identity is a social construction shaped by circumstances and environment; both of which are changeable during the course of an individual’s life span. D’Augelli (1994a) assumed that attitudes, feelings, and behavior can change over time and sexual identity may be fluid or solidified at various points in a person’s experiences.

The following six interactive processes make up D’Augelli’s (1994a) model: exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, be-
coming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, and entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. D’Augelli (1994a) provided a necessary framework that described various processes by which an individual may experience. However, for Black lesbian college students, the intersection of sexual identity, race, and gender, calls for greater attention and exploration. Patton and Simmons (2008) examined the experiences of Black lesbian women in college. Findings of their study revealed how women made meaning of their identities in connection with expectations and influences from those around them. Greene and Boyd-Franklin (1996) argued that Black lesbian women experience triple consciousness due to the simultaneous oppressions and relationships between their identities (i.e. race, sexual orientation, and gender).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the importance of race and social identities to the experiences of Black lesbian college students, we found it necessary to draw upon two frames: CRT and intersectionality. This section is organized around these foci.

Critical Race Theory

CRT grew out of critical legal studies in the late 1970s. It initially served to highlight the negative implications of racial discrimination inherent in historical developments and implementations in case law (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Since its inception, this theoretical framework has served to emancipate underrepresented ethnic groups from the oppressive development and implementation of the law in the American justice system (Crenshaw et al.). CRT promotes an impending need for researchers and decision makers to recognize the systemic racial prejudices that exist within social, political, economic, and educational structures through the voices of the oppressed party. CRT challenges policies and laws to create more accessibility for the party within the aforementioned structures (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Goldberg, 1993; Omni & Winant, 1994). Moreover, CRT expands traditional notions of scholarship by advocating for less objectivity as defined and promoted by the normative culture in research (Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, 2013). In essence, CRT “goes beyond the experience of Whites as the normative standard and instead grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive historical context that places an emphasis on the experiences of people of color” (Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, p. 607).

In tandem, the concepts of power, oppression, and knowledge support the notion of counterstorytelling within the CRT framework. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) noted that “the use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups” (p. 27). Moreover, Collins (1990) discussed the significance of highlighting specifically Black women’s subjugated knowledge for the purpose of developing an epistemological approach that does not reflect a ‘way of knowing’ projected through a White American perspective. Her proposal for this uniquely applied epistemological approach is completely informed through an intersubjective critical race theory viewpoint (Collins). In other words, in order to capture fully this new theory of knowledge that is situated within a particular culture, a multidimensional perspective should be garnered. One’s situated knowledge is the basis for his/her counter-narrative.

CRT provides a lens for which to view experiences in relation to the master narrative of American society. This study serves as a counter-narrative to the master narrative of a Black lesbian’s experiences at a PWI. The notion of counter-narrative exists “in relation to master narratives, but they are not necessarily dichotomous entities” (Andrews, 2004, p. 2). One’s counter-narrative is inherently
situated in the lived experiences of one’s individual story “of resistance, rather implicit or explicit,” to the master narrative (2004, p. 1). In essence, within the framework of critical race theory exists a counter-narrative that is informed by multiple positioning (Andrews, 2004).

This study discussed the concepts of subject and knowledge as they related to CRT. The concept of the subject in CRT offers an introduction to the notion of intersubjectivity on multiple levels of consciousness. Intersubjectivity refers to the multiple subjects within this framework. The original subject was the injustice within the law, yet the intersubjective nature of this theory allows for multiple subjects including but not limited to, systems, curriculum, polices, and intracultural relations (Griffin, 2010). This intersubjective knowledge can be defined as counterstorytelling. For example, within the Black community a focus for a critical theorist offers a dynamic perspective on experiential knowledge of the Black community from multiple dimensions. This approach within the paradigm of emancipatory work can provide a newly visited understanding of the intragroup oppressions that may plague a particular community (Griffin). Ultimately, CRT presents a necessary critique of the humanist paradigm. While any concept can be explored with this theory, the concurrence of subject and knowledge allow CRT to provide the critical strategy of counterstorytelling that challenges the structures dictated by the dominant culture.

Intersectionality

Most developmental models of identity have only addressed one dimension of identity, such as race and sexual orientation (Jones & McEwen 2000). Research and theoretical models have addressed differences in one’s development based on values, norms, behaviors, social conditions (D’Augelli, 1994a) and definitions (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, 1998); however, have stopped short of examining the intersecting identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000), such as those in Black lesbian women. Crenshaw (1991) argued that because of Black women’s intersectional identity as both women and of color, Black women are marginalized within both identities. Reynolds and Pope (1991) tackled the discussion of multiple identities by the exploring multiple oppressions one may endure. The significance of their research lies within the notion that only considering one dimension of identity presents a narrow view when examining one’s development (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) depicted the relationships among college students’ socially constructed identities. They recognized that each dimension of identity cannot be fully understood without taking into account an individual’s additional identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, & Savage, 2002). Building on the work of Reynolds and Pope (1991) and Jones (1997), the MMDI described the unique construction of identity and contextual influences on the salience of multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Crenshaw’s (1991) focus on intersectionality illustrated the “need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245). Specifically, depending on the context of a particular situation and environment, a Black lesbian woman may elect or be forced to ‘show up’ differently than she would in another setting. Although her identities intersect, environments and institutions play vital roles in her ability to present her authentic self as opposed to pieces of her identity. Thus examining the intersection of ones’ multiple identities is key to understanding the interlocking systems of oppression and marginalization that Black lesbian women face on college campuses.

POSITIONALITY OF RESEARCHERS

We approach this study from a collectivist position. It is imperative that qualitative researchers recognize and label their own
subjectivity to reduce the amount of researcher bias within the research design (Maxwell, 2005; Peshkin, 1988). Our subjectivity is shaped through our personal and professional exposure related to the research topic. Throughout our careers, we have engaged in the stories of Black students attending PWIs. As researchers, it is important for us to connect our reactions and subjectivities to our voices. We show up in our research as two Black women whom have navigated our collegiate experiences through cultural climates at PWIs. We also have served in student affairs administrative roles at PWIs, while attending to the multiple identity development of students. Our perspectives are informed by our past experiences and observations.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) explained the past struggles of our ancestors, while addressing the present-day obstacles that we face as we negotiate our place in the American society. Du Bois’ (1903) message reigns true over our life experiences as Black women. Indeed, the double consciousness that Dubois speaks of can be used to characterize our collective experiences. Particularly, as Black women, our experiences, specifically related to our identity development evoke our multiple consciousness and awareness of the intersectionality of our own identities. There have been a variety of events, individuals, and messages that have helped shape our Black identity development and our philosophy on ethnic group relations in America. The condition of Black people must be viewed through multiple levels of consciousness that have “more democratic concepts of knowledge and leadership that highlight human fallibility and mutual accountability, notions of individuality and contested authority that stress dynamic traditions and ideals of self-realization within participatory communities” (West, 1999, p. 93). It is important to recognize that individuals’ identities are not defined by one instance. To gain an understanding of Skye’s multiple identity development, one needs to incorporate the full context of her experiences that have informed her perspectives on and self-concept of race, coupled with her additional identities. By addressing our subjectivity and how it can potentially influence research methods, we have made our biases transparent to the reader and, ultimately, reduced its influence on this research study (Maxwell, 2005).

METHODS

Design
This qualitative study illuminates the individual experiences and narrative of Skye, a Black undergraduate lesbian student enrolled at an institution in the Southeastern region of the United States. Conducting research using CRT and intersectionality as theoretical frames involves the use of alternative methods of research to the larger discourse on knowledge acquisition. In particular, CRT uses “narrative and storytelling as a means to challenge the existing social construction of race” (Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, 2013, p. 607). The term ‘narrative’ is often associated with many definitions and requires interpretation. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed narrative research as a strategy of inquiry through which the researcher requests an individual to share stories of her life. Mattingly (1998) stated,

“They do not merely describe what someone does in a world but what the world does to that someone. They allow us to infer something about what it feels like to be in that story world. Narratives also those events that happen unwilled, unpredicted, and often unwished for by the actors, even if those very actors set the events in motion in the first place…Narratives do not merely refer to past experiences but create experiences for their audiences. (p. 8)

Narratives are accounts of people's lives that develop over a single or multiple research interviews (Reissman, 2008). Narratives do not speak for themselves; they must
be interpreted. The family of methods used to interpret the interview transcriptions is referred to as narrative analysis (Reissman).

Skye was originally recruited to participate in a previous study of the identity development in Black undergraduate women, through a listserv hosted by the Office of Multicultural Affairs at her institution (Porter, 2013). The previous study solicited participants with the following three criteria: a) must identify as Black, b) must identify as a woman, and c) must academically hold sophomore through senior level status. Through her involvement in the previous study, she revealed her interest in additional opportunities to share her story and experiences as a Black lesbian student at the institution. Skye was the only participant who identified as a lesbian in the previous study (Porter, 2013).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

A semi-structured interview was used to ascertain Skye’s experiences. Questions were semi-structured to allow the primary researcher the ability to pose follow-up questions during the interview (Esterberg, 2002). The goal of narrative interviewing however, unlike other methods, is to generate detailed accounts as opposed to short statements (Reissman, 2008). As part of the original study, an additional interview took place in order for Skye to further elaborate on her experiences as a Black lesbian woman. The original interview focused primarily on the identity development of Black undergraduate women, while the second interview enabled Skye to discuss her coming out experience and support systems within the predominantly White institutional environment. Some of the question prompts from both interviews included the following: define and describe yourself as a Black woman; discuss where you learned to be a Black woman; discuss your identities and what they mean to you; tell me your story of when and how you came out; talk about your support system while in college; discuss the institutional environment and its effect on your experience and your identity; and tell me about the challenges of identifying as a Black lesbian at a predominantly White institution. Both the original interview and the second interview for this study lasted approximately 45 minutes each.

Thematic analysis was employed in order to focus in on the content of ‘what’ was being said during Skye’s interviews as opposed to the ‘how’ and ‘for what purpose’ (Reissman, 2008). The story was then kept ‘intact’ by “theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases,” (Reissman, 2008, p. 53). Thematic analysis allows for the researchers to bring “…together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone” (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Researchers then place aspects of the story together to form a collective picture of the participant’s overall experience. Essentially, Leininger noted that the "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together" (p. 60). Since there was only one story, a focused coding process was used to generate a general description of Skye’s experiences. Examining Skye’s narrative through the use of thematic analysis coupled with focused coding permitted a more accurate picture of her experiences and intersections of identity. Focused coding allowed for the primary researcher to gather chunks of data throughout Skye’s full story for analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and to confirm the themes with the categories. The 36 focused codes were then collapsed into nine categories. For instance, the following codes were compiled into the category affirmation from campus administrators and community: supportive environments, support system, support from faculty, straight allies, campus resources for LGBT students, hearing other people’s stories, healing process, and LGBT affirming church. The categories then led to the following three themes that embodied Skye’s expe-
An Exploration of a Black Lesbian’s Life in College

Experience as a Black lesbian woman at a PWI: developing a lesbian identity status (D’Augelli, 1994a), becoming a lesbian offspring (D’Augelli, 199a), and intersectionalities of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness and validity of a research study determine whether it is considered of high quality (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Validity refers to the accuracy of one’s interpretation of the data and is more often used in quantitative studies (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The trustworthiness of this qualitative study was enhanced by Skye’s participation in member checking. She agreed that the transcriptions, coding interpretation, and thematic analysis were representative and an accurate depiction of her experiences. The counter-narrative presented by the participant, Skye, serves as her individual account of navigating a PWI situated in her multiple identities. The findings presented in this study are not transferable to other situated knowledge and narratives of similar identities held by Skye.

FINDINGS

Introduction of Skye

Skye is a 22 year-old graduating senior with plans to attend medical school after graduation. Although she is an undergraduate student, she is also taking graduate level courses within her major. She identified herself as a Black lesbian woman, member of a National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) sorority, an honors student, liberal, very opinionated, and free spirited. She was adopted and raised by middle class, Christian parents, both of whom Skye considered older than typical parents with students in college. Her adopted father is a 65 year-old pastor and her adopted mother serves as his ‘first lady.’

The first time Skye came out openly about her sexuality was in high school to her two best friends – one of which she told on Yahoo Instant Messenger, and the other she told by placing a note in her friend’s pocket and not allowing her to read it until she went home. When Skye came to college, she was forced out by her parents. Her parents were adamant about checking her cell phone call log and retrieved all of her passwords to her email accounts and voicemail. Her parents made her return home that weekend from school and shared their frustrations by reminding her that being gay was an abomination, that they were going to place her in counseling, and remove her from school. After the incident with her parents, Skye returned to college and did not communicate with her parents for two months. She did not attend class nor did she want to eat; all Skye wanted to do was sleep. She found herself in a state of depression.

Skye’s Narrative

The following section includes certain portions of Skye’s actual interview transcriptions that we, as researchers, have excerpted and organized in such a way to present a cogent narrative of her experiences:

The first time I actually came out openly about my sexuality was in high school basically to my friends and it wasn’t really a big deal. I had the hardest time telling my two best friends; I don’t know why, not that anything would happen. So my male best friend, I told him on Yahoo Instant Messenger. My other best friend, I wrote her a note and put it in her pocket and told her, ‘don’t read it until you get home.’ After that, to my peers, I was just out and didn’t care. Same thing when I got to college. But that’s where I would say I was forced out by my parents. I had a girlfriend at the time and my dad would see the number on my cell phone log. He got all my passwords to my emails and he was reading all of them. My parents made me come home that weekend from [institution] and they were like, ‘who is this person’ and I wouldn’t say anything. My dad was getting really irritated and he was yelling at me and stormed
off; my mom said, ‘you need to tell him who it is.’ So finally it came out. My parents are ministers so I got the whole, ‘being gay is an abomination.’ They were really pissed off and they said, ‘if you don’t change this, we’re going to send you to counseling and we’re going to take you out of school.’

So I went back to school and we [my parents and I] didn’t talk for a few months. It was really hard for those two months. I was really depressed, I didn’t even go to class, and I didn’t want to eat. I just wanted to sleep all the time. And then on top of it being my first semester [in college] and just transitioning from high school; being in honors and having all of this pressure to do well. It was a lot to handle all at one time.

Both of my best friends ended up coming to [institution] with me. One of my friends came out to her parents and it was the opposite; it was really peaceful. She was really there for me and my two best friends were there for me; also my roommates across the hall. They would help me; when I needed to talk to my girlfriend they gave me a landline phone and allowed me to call her on their cell phones if they had text messages. Also my psychology professor; I felt really comfortable going to her and she kind of gave me an adult perspective. She showed me some of the resources on campus that I could go to, so me and my friend started going to the [meeting], held by the LGBT resource center and that really helped me get connected.

The experience [with my parents] happened September 15 and it took me from September until the end of November to the point where I would actually share my story and the experience of my parents. Just being there at [the meetings] and hearing other people’s stories made me feel a lot more comfortable and helped me deal with it a lot better. It was just a good healing process to be able to talk to people who understood what I was going through. I was about to have issues with my sexuality and my religion; it really bothered me, the things my parents were saying and so I started going to the [church] in [city where institution is located].

I never really talked to anyone there, but just being there, hearing the messages from the ministers, hearing that I can be a lesbian and still have a strong Christian faith, and seeing people who had that in their everyday lives was definitely reassuring.

The environment at [institution] was really supportive; I felt I could just be myself. I was not really involved in the Black community on campus until I became Greek. It’s not where I came in and I was not drawn to it really. I was really involved with housing; housing is just a very happy, gay friendly place. In housing we have higher ups that are openly gay and Black and women. Then just being in organizations where advisors who are openly gay shows you that you can succeed in what you want to do by just seeing those role models of people who are navigating their identities successfully even though they may not be exactly the same as you.

I definitely feel supported just being around other students at [institution]. Also in my graduate classes, my undergraduate classes, with my line sisters, or in the Office of Multicultural Affairs just because everyone is very different and they’re all doing different things. But it’s really inspiring to see because they are so different and all the opportunities that you have available to you by being a student. I would say I feel the least supported sometimes when I realize I’m the only one of my kind in the group and it’s just like you feel that spotlight effect like now I have to represent everybody and be perfect and I can’t mess up; don’t say anything stupid, make sure your hair is done, and make sure you say the right thing. I am also supported by my family of choice that I’ve created with my two male best friends. They came out to me through our college careers that they were bisexual and gay, so that helps that I had already been through it. My outlet is helping people deal with their issues because I’ve had to deal with all these identities and many of them from a young age.
My dad has really made a 180, which was really surprising for me. It took until this past summer, until I actually realized that he was supportive of me. So that was years. When he says stuff it kind of shocks me. I’m like ‘whoa, who is this talking to me.’ Recently, we were talking and somehow Chick-Fil-A came up. He was like ‘yeah, I don’t even eat there anymore.’ I was shocked and I wasn’t expecting him to say that. He grew up in Jim Crow segregation and hearing him talk about his grandmother and how she took care of her grandkids and cleaned White people’s houses; she was really dedicated to her family and was respected among all the different groups. Hearing that it just allowed me to see how you can handle yourself regardless of what you’re facing. Being raised by older parents, my experience is a lot different. I’m also adopted and the youngest of six kids and my siblings are older. I think the older part is just that my parents are more traditional so I had a lot of rules, then adding the whole sexuality part onto it…my parents never had the sex talk with me, so anything that’s just not in the little box just blows their minds.

My mom, she’s more traditional so we don’t really talk about it [sexuality]. Me and my mom, we’ve had issues my whole life, like being adopted. I actually came in contact with my birth family my freshman year. She thinks I’m trying to replace her. Me and my birth mother’s relationship is fine. I’m a lot more open with her about stuff. It’s definitely a more organic mother-daughter relationship just because I feel it’s something we both wanted for so long, and not having that eighteen years of actually growing up and having to raise and going through the teenage years and the pre-teen years just makes our relationship a lot easier to start off. Then understanding why she put me up for adoption. I have a lot of respect for her because of that.

I would define myself as a Black woman; I would say that I’m young, educated, very opinionated, liberal, free spirited and that I identify as a lesbian. I’m also a member of an NPHC sorority. Being a Black woman especially in the south is a sisterhood; you’re already a double minority because you’re Black and you’re a woman and so that already excludes you from those main groups and then being in an area where there is a history of not really respecting women or not really respecting African Americans is another pressure.

When I put them [all of my identities] altogether I feel like it makes me a much stronger person just because it’s a lot to handle when you add being a lesbian on top of the Black woman; you have more pressures on you and so because of that, I just think it’s made me more aware, more open minded, more accepting, and more forgiving. I know what it’s like to be a woman. I know what it’s like to be Black, know what it’s like to be gay and I understand why you feel the way you do in your group. I think it’s made me a stronger person but it’s definitely a challenge because you always have to think about, ‘well, ok if I didn’t get something is it because I’m a woman or was it because I’m Black, was it because I’m gay, because I’m Black and a woman or Black and gay. People don’t understand being Black, gay, woman and at a PWI in a sorority in the Christian world – all those things put together. It’s definitely a challenge and I don’t think people realize how much I have to think about it.

Challenges I face are definitely the social life aspect because it’s kind of like you have to choose which identities you’re going to embrace this weekend because in the [campus] community there’s not really a big Black lesbian community. There are a lot of Black males and there are a lot of White lesbians. If I do want be around the [local city] LGBT community I’m going to be probably the only Black person and then when I’m doing my activities because I’m Greek, so going to Greek parties and going strolling, it’s all sexually suggestive, no girls are going to dance
with me and I don’t want to dance with him, so I’m just kind of chilling. It’s like I just have to pick and choose who I’m going to embrace for the day.

To other Black lesbian women, I would say definitely use the resources on campus, just because they are there to help you. And if you’re having a difficult time, someone is there. That’s the only way you’re going to get through, using those resources. Because you’re best friends, they haven’t really come out, they don’t know what you really need, so go to the LGBT resource center, and if you’re Christian, go to [local church]; use what’s there because that’s what’s really going to be important for you to get through that. And also I would say, ‘be out,’ don’t be ‘I’m sort of out on the weekends;’ just do it. Because that’s the only way that you’re going to learn to be comfortable with yourself and college is a place where you can establish your identity and practice it.

DISCUSSION

Skye’s narrative consisted of her coming out process, relationship with her parents, support she received from various communities, and her ability to articulate the intersectionality of her identities. Her counter-narrative to the master narrative of the experiences of Black lesbians attending PWIs provides an additional perspective in which administrators and faculty can assist Black lesbian students. Skye felt supported within the predominantly White institutional environment and attributed her identity development to her overall campus involvement. The three themes gleaned from the nine categories compiled during the primary researcher’s analysis and coding process, are rooted in both the model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development (D’Augelli, 1994a) and the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Themes discussed in Skye’s narrative are developing a lesbian identity status (D’Augelli, 1994a), becoming a lesbian offspring (D’Augelli, 1994a), and the intersectionality of identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Developing a Lesbian Identity Status

LGBT students of color are often forced to select a primary identity or one of their multiple identities as highest importance (Wall & Washington, 1991). This forced selection process in predominantly White environments (e.g. classrooms, student organizations) not only invalidates the intersections of identities, but also additional group memberships in which a student of color may be a part. Skye made meaning of her identity as a Black lesbian woman during her late high school years and throughout college. She began her first year of college in a committed, intimate relationship and decided that no matter the circumstance, she was adamant about acknowledging who she was. Skye was not drawn to the Black student community on campus in the beginning of her collegiate experience; however she held a high racial salience (Cross, 1991). She was able to articulate who she was as a Black woman and the feelings and actions of those around her based upon those identities. It was not until later in her college career that she eventually found support of her multiple identities as a Black lesbian woman with her sorority sisters. Skye was determined to remain authentic with herself, her peers, and her parents, despite the lack of support she received within the Black community and by her parents.

Becoming a Lesbian Offspring

D’Augelli (1994a) noted that establishing a positive relationship with one’s parents may take time; thus while becoming an offspring, an individual must disclose one’s identity to one’s parents and define or redefine that particular relationship. Despite her parents’ initial resistance based upon their Christian faith and ideology, Skye surrounded herself with a crucial support system. In part, Skye’s experience confirms D’Augelli’s model. She had to redefine for herself what the relationship would be with her parents. Instead of being as close as they had been in
the past, Skye had to learn how to exist and ‘be’ without their emotional support for a certain length of time. Patton and Simmons (2008) discussed the how impact of family and external pressures ultimately influence a Black lesbian woman’s sense of self. Supportive networks and communities are crucial to the success and well-being of Black lesbian students. Skye’s campus and community support systems became her lifeline as they transitioned her from a depressive state while managing her experience with her parents. She maintained relationships with her best friends, became connected to campus resources and a local church, in addition to seeking out advice and guidance from a professor. She became more engaged on campus by serving as a resident assistant and joined an NPHC sorority in which she was eventually able to gain the support of her sorority sisters.

**Intersectionality of Identities**

Warner and Shields (2013) noted that intersectionality recognizes power relations and inherently includes multiple identities. Therefore, an identity can be negotiated in relation to the other. Essentially, “relying solely on fixed identities constrains analysis and limits the possibility of challenging dominant paradigms (Warner & Shields, p. 807). As Skye grew stronger in her identity, she found herself assisting others with their personal journeys. The progression of Skye’s growth and identity development is supported by her ability to articulate the intersection of being a Black lesbian woman at a PWI in the South. As a graduating senior and at age 22, Skye was able to understand how her experiences navigating her multiple identities served as an example to others coming into college after her. This study confirmed two themes revealed in Patton and Simmons’ (2008) study – coming in and triple consciousness. Skye discussed her knowledge of politics on campus and she explained how she internally negotiated various relationships. At times, she had to reflect on ‘which’ identity would be salient (e.g. in a job interview), while at other times she felt comfortable ‘showing up’ as her whole self among her circles of support and while serving in campus leadership roles. Patton and Simmons (2008) defined ‘coming in’ as “participants’ experiences with coming to terms with their internal comfort and understanding of their lesbian identity either in response to or in spite of external sources” (p. 204). As Skye grew older and progressed in her identity, she obtained a triple consciousness (Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Patton & Simmons, 2008) by successfully juggling the oppressions related to her racial, sexual orientation, and gender identities.

**Critical Race Theory**

As noted earlier, the concept of the subject in critical race theory provides an inlet into the exploration of intersubjectivity on multiple levels of consciousness. Intersubjectivity, in this context, relates to the multiple perspectives of subjects within this framework (Griffin, 2010). Additionally, as people speak of truth, their truth is completely informed by their experiences or knowledge. This framework promotes a situated understanding of how truth can be represented depending on the persons sharing the knowledge and power. Skye’s narrative of viewing her college experience at a PWI as having a positive influence on her identity development is a direct representation of subject and knowledge. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) explained that counter-narratives provide voice for underrepresented or marginalized groups to challenge the dominant normative discourse. Within the framework of CRT exists Skye’s counter-narrative, which is informed by multiple positioning (Andrews, 2004). She is respected as an exemplary student by White administrators, however in the same breath, at times she still needs to question which identity is ‘acceptable’ to present depending on the context of the interaction.
Her situated knowledge and experiences serve as a counter-narrative to the master narrative of Black lesbians within a PWI environment. Despite Skye’s challenging experiences with her parents, her Black sorority sisters, and being a Black lesbian on a predominantly White campus in the south, she found community and support from specifically non-Black administrators and peers.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The educational enterprise of today is facilitated through a commitment to collaborative partnerships for the purpose of advancing a holistic approach to the development and learning of students. For Black lesbian students and any cultural group in an educational environment, the transformative educational experiences that institutions seek to create can only be achieved through a campus-wide initiative and culture that fosters communication in and out of the classroom on race (Tatum, 2007). In her book *Can we talk about race?*, Tatum outlined the path that our educational system has taken over time, while noting the complexities associated with incorporating discussions of race into the classroom and in policy development. It is important to recognize that it is challenging for some students, administrators, and faculty members to discuss issues of race, sexual orientation, and the intersections of identity. However, college campuses cannot continue ignoring the issue or, more importantly, the outcomes that develop from this cultural norm. Tatum (1997; 2007) explained the challenges and ultimately the implications preventing Americans and, indirectly, students from having such educational and social conversations. This lack of discourse has directly affected the holistic identity development of persons of all ages.

**Parental Support**

Skye’s narrative provided insight to the influence her parents had on her coming out process. Although Skye had a supportive network including friends, a professor, campus resources, and a church community, the relationship with her parents had a lasting effect on her development throughout college. Campus administrators and faculty should be more intentional in providing supportive spaces and environments to students of color, because of how difficult it can be for the students to come out to family members (e.g. parents). Administrators and faculty should recognize the implications of parental support and its connection to social adjustment, intersections of identity development, and academic success for Black lesbian students in a PWI environment. Close attention to developing initiatives that support and advance the intersections of their identity development, while increasing their exposure to diverse social settings, will help Black lesbian students further explore conversations related to co-constructed realities. Once students are able to advance this intentionally informed self-concept, they can make greater meaning of their curricula and co-curricular experiences. These recommendations will help to improve student affairs practice.

**Multicultural Competency Development**

Currently, many institutional missions recognize the concept of pluralism and exposing students to a diverse educational experience in and out of the classroom (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2009). Colleges and universities can exhibit their dedication to diversity education in a variety of ways. Particularly, the work of student affairs professionals in the area of multicultural education can have a lasting effect on students’ collegiate experience. Student affairs divisions use programs and services that focus on the advancement of diversity education, and expose the campus community to pluralistic environments. Individually however, administrators and faculty members must facilitate dialogue around the intersections of student identities, the value in developing multicultural competencies, and welcoming spaces for students to authentically present
their holistic selves.

Based on the literature, more research is needed to assess the impact of diversity, inclusion, and equity standards on educational outcomes (Cokley, 2001; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Taub & McEwen, 1992). Obtaining a better understanding of this linkage will help the profession gauge whether or not its programs and services are actually fostering inclusiveness, diversity, and equity throughout the student population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) and support for the intersections and multiple dimensions of student identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Ultimately, the employment of this paradigm will positively influence the effectiveness of student affairs programming and services with a focus on student development and learning through participation in pluralistic environments.

REFERENCES


An Exploration of a Black Lesbian’s Life in College


