"Writing Our Own Rule Book": Exploring the Intersectionality of Gay College Men

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STERLING, VIRGINIA
"WRITING OUR OWN RULE BOOK"

Exploring the Intersectionality of Gay College Men

Daniel Tillapaugh

I’ve always tried to live by the creed that, you know, the sum of the parts don’t make up for the grand total. So because I’m gay, . . . my business card doesn’t say Jonathan, gay man. Jonathan, male. Jonathan, upper-class. It’s not going to do anything like that. . . . Each builds up to a total. And the total could be completely different than what that little part means to me. (Jonathan)

I guess if I were to do a day-to-day routine, if I was feeling masculine, it’s just me being basically quieter, wearing certain clothing, and having less gesture. . . . acting “hetero” as my [fraternity] brothers would call it. But I feel just as masculine if I’m wearing jewelry, if I’m carrying a handbag, so that’s why I’m kind of like, “I juggle the concept.” Yeah, it’s hard. I can’t really define [masculinity] for myself. (Victor)

O

ver the past four decades, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgen-
der (LGBT) rights movement in the United States has resulted in increased visibility for LGBT people. As universities serve as microcosms for the larger sociopolitical climate of the nation, increased attention has been paid to the development of LGBT college students (Berila, 2011; Bilodeau, 2007; Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Dilley, 2010; Fassinger, 1998; Rhoads, 1997). However, many identity development models have focused solely on segmented aspects of one’s social identities and have not explored one’s multiple identities. For example, gay men as a population possess certain privileges due to their gender, yet face oppression and discrimination due to their sexual orientation. If one adds in the dimensions of race, religion, socioeconomic class, and other categories of social identities for gay men, there is increased complexity of one’s holistic sense of self, given that some identities may maintain a dominant status (e.g., White, upper class, Christian), while others may be subordinated (e.g., Mexican American, working class, Jewish).

Scholars, such as R. W. Connell (2005), Michael Kimmel (2008), and Beth Berila (2011), highlight that the aggregation of “men” as a collective reinforces heteronormative and patriarchal views on men and masculinity. For gay and other nonheterosexual men, this is troublesome as their lived experiences become invisible and pushed to the margins; therefore, systems of oppression continue to privilege heterosexual men and subordinate nonheterosexual men. These complex matters affect individuals on an array of levels, from the personal (e.g., fear of others’ perceptions due to one’s sexual identity) to the systemic (e.g., state and federal policies restricting the rights of LGBT individuals due to their sexual and/or gender identity). With LGBT students becoming more visible on campuses, gay men in college, such as Victor and Jonathan whose quotes opened this chapter, provide an excellent opportunity to understand the negotiation and development of multiple identities, including issues of inclusion or exclusion and sense of self (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazier, 2010). In this chapter, I present the stories of three gay college men—Jonathan, Mason, and Victor—to illuminate how they make meaning of their social identities through the lens of intersectionality.

Intersectionality, a concept forwarded by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2009), a critical race theory legal scholar, offers a multidimensional view of understanding the knowledge constructed at the intersection of one’s identities, such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. As Tatum (2003) reminds us, “The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 18). Victor’s understanding of who he is as a gay man is informed by his own biracial identity as a Greek Mexican man from a middle-class family observing Greek Orthodox religious views, whereas Jonathan’s identity is influenced substantially by being from a wealthy, White, Catholic, and politically conservative family. While their sexual orientation and gender identity may be the same, Victor’s and Jonathan’s stories are vastly different from one another. Each of the men’s lived experiences and realities have shaped his overall sense of self significantly. In essence, their stories matter and give perspectives that are important to understanding the role of intersectionality among gay men in college.

As previously mentioned, I present Jonathan’s, Mason’s, and Victor’s own words and stories to highlight how each has made meaning of his multiple identities using an intersectional lens. Critical race theory scholars have used these stories, also known as counter-stories, extensively in their research. These counter-stories are “method[s] of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138). These counter-stories serve as a reframing of the “master narrative”
(Montecinos, 1995) in which unacknowledged White privilege and racism often pervades the stories constructed about individuals from marginalized communities. Solórzano and Yosso (2009) maintain that the use of counter-stories has at least the following functions:

(a) They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems, (c) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (p. 142)

Counter-stories serve to disrupt the majoritarian stories passed down from generation to generation through the perpetuation of “master narratives.”

One must acknowledge that counter-stories were used to bring the rich dimensions of one’s racial identity to the forefront. However, from an intersectional perspective, exploring the multidimensionality of one’s social identities through the use of counter-stories also provides insight into how one comes to understand that fundamental question, “Who am I?” As discussed previously, the complexities of the intersectionality of gay men and their multiple identities within the college environment are fraught with challenges as well as opportunities. Yet, often, researchers and scholars focus on one dimension of identity, such as gay identity development (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1998). As a result, these theories and models do not adequately explain how one’s other dimensions of social identity influence one’s gay identity. By using counter-stories, there is great potential for correcting this monovocal view.

“Identity Is Development”: Their Stories

I came to know Mason, Jonathan, and Victor well as participants in a research study I conducted in southern California (Tillapaugh, 2012). Each of the men experienced both the highs and lows of coming to terms with his sexuality, especially as his sexual orientation had consequences that rippled into other aspects of his identities. However, during a conversation with Mason around understanding who he was as a gay man, he responded, “Identity is development.” A simple, rudimentary answer, but it struck me as extremely authentic and honest. In this section, I let Mason, Jonathan, and Victor introduce themselves to you.

Mason

Mason, a 21-year-old Filipino, is a senior studying international security and conflict resolution. Born into a military family living on a U.S. Navy base in the Philippines, he was raised in Japan and San Juan Miguel, California.1 Active in the Naval ROTC program, he had been selected platoon sergeant and mentor program coordinator. However, Mason does not completely fit the stereotype of being in the Navy, with his slim physical build, quiet demeanor, and self-description as “effeminate.” Mason shared that being within the culture of the Navy as a closeted gay man is a challenge. He said that the Navy is “just a very macho sort of environment, and when you’re put in those types of environments, things that are deemed feminine are not accepted or they’re just viewed, they kind of outcast you.” While out to some ROTC peers, Mason has been hesitant to do so due to homophobic comments he has heard from some of them. His perception of others within the ROTC is that “they see me as less of a person because of my perceived sexual orientation.”

At the same time, Mason served as a resident assistant (RA) on campus for two years, a role he cherished because he could be open about his sexual identity with his peers, his supervisor, and even with his residents. As an RA, Mason was required to take an academic course that dealt with power and privilege. This course was transformative for him in understanding his own privilege, and he said that in his course he learned that “gender is a social construction, and I’m trying to get myself past those stupid terms of masculinity and femininity. But I know those are important social distinctions that many people in our society still hold on to.” Mason experiences a significant amount of compartmentalization of his identities based on the context in which he is a part, particularly due to his ROTC experiences.

Jonathan

Born into a wealthy, conservative, Catholic, White family in northern California, Jonathan, 22, is a fifth-year political science and public law major. An athlete all of his life, he was a star baseball player growing up. However, an accident while on vacation two weeks before the start of his sophomore year left him medically ineligible to play. This was devastating for Jonathan. He states, “It would have been one thing for them to say, ‘You’re not good enough to play anymore,’ but that it was . . . ‘Your body didn’t heal right.
So sorry, you're done... that was very difficult for me in terms of my identity." Jonathan's background in athletics plays a central role in how he looks at himself as a man. He describes himself as being very masculine due to his interests and his physical stature and mannerisms. However, he faced many challenges when coming out due to his sense of masculinity as well as other sociopolitical factors, especially being raised in a wealthy, Catholic, politically conservative family. After his father learned about Jonathan's sexuality, they did not speak for six months. As a result, Jonathan became clinically depressed and attempted suicide twice during college. He continues to see a therapist to assist in his feelings around his identity as well as the dynamics between him and his family. Jonathan has become involved in several student leadership positions. One of the most meaningful experiences for him was serving as the co-facilitator of the men's group sponsored by his university's LGBT Resource Center. This position helped Jonathan continue his own exploration of what it meant to be gay and a man in his world.

Victor

Identifying as half Greek and half Mexican, Victor, 22, grew up in northern San Juan Miguel County. For his first two years of college, he attended a community college in his hometown and lived at home with his family. Growing up in a conservative area of San Juan Miguel County, Victor never felt as though he fit in, especially given his early awareness of his sexual orientation. After transferring to a university in San Juan Miguel, Victor was a history major and LGBT studies minor. As an undergraduate, he was an active student leader on campus, participating on the Pride Action Committee, serving as membership chair of the Lambda Archives in San Juan Miguel, and volunteering at San Juan Miguel's LGBT community center.

One of the most significant leadership roles Victor held has been president of Delta Lambda Phi, a progressive fraternity for gay, bisexual, and straight men. In that role, he oversees the recruitment, selection, and retention of fraternity men for his chapter and has found that becoming a member was transformative in his feeling more secure in who he is as a gay man. While he feels as though his fraternity has allowed him to explore who he is authentically, he also acknowledges that, at times, some of his fraternity brothers continue to have certain expectations and socialized messages about what fraternity life should be. He states,

I've snapped at brothers for trying to, like, imply that we weren't masculine. Like, I had one saying, "Well, shouldn't we be doing things like sports, or if we want to portray manhood and masculinity, shouldn't we be doing this?" I'm like, "Well, if you want to go ahead and follow that scheme, you need to join another fraternity because in this fraternity we talk about brotherhood and masculinity within the context of our gay, bisexual, progressive identity."

Lately, Victor has become concerned that he has focused too narrowly on his sexual identity rather than other aspects of his identity or his other personal interests.

These initial introductions to Mason, Jonathan, and Victor allow you to hear their voices, learn about some of their salient identities, and begin to understand where these men come from. In the next section, I discuss the three categories of intersectionality introduced by Crenshaw (2009): structural, political, and representational. Within these sections, I present and define each of the three categories, and the men's counter-stories exemplify those definitions. At their heart, the stories provide insights into how these gay men make meaning of their multiple identities within the college environment and how intersectionality helps illuminate these men's journeys of understanding who they are at their core.

Intersectionality: Framing the Narratives

Focusing on the experiences of Black women, Crenshaw (2009) introduced intersectionality as a means to illuminate how aspects of one's social identities (e.g., race, gender) shape one's lived experiences at the personal, group, and systemic levels. Crenshaw believes that the issue with "identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (p. 213). By aggregating all women collectively, other aspects of identity are rendered invisible. Therefore, domination and privilege are maintained without any regard for subordinate or marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 2009). Crenshaw further this perspective by saying, "My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 214). Intersectionality offers an opportunity to closely examine knowledge constructed at the intersections of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2000). In the following sections, I present the three categories of intersectionality—structural, political, and representational (Crenshaw, 2009)—using the counter-stories of Jonathan, Mason, and Victor.

Structural Intersectionality

Structural intersectionality is the convergence of systems of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social identities through structures (Crenshaw,
Privilege is granted to certain groups whose members maintain power and dominance over others; this is implemented and maintained through structures such as policies, ideologies, and laws that play out from the societal level down to the individual level. Crenshaw (2009) points out that “intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (p. 216). Mason and Jonathan experienced some dissonance in their meaning making of their gay male identities in college when viewed from the lens of structural intersectionality.

Mason’s involvement in the Naval ROTC program during his college years and its effect on his identity of being a gay man is an example of how structural intersectionality affects individuals. For the first three years of his ROTC involvement, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was still in effect. For Mason, that meant that he would have to live a compartmentalized life. He was out to close friends but tended to avoid getting involved in LGBT organizations because he did not want his ROTC peers to find out that he was gay. As a result, he had very few gay friends and was not connected to the larger LGBT community within San Juan Miguel. The friends who did know Mason’s sexual orientation had difficulty understanding why Mason would choose to be involved in the ROTC program. He states,

Like, sometimes I’m kind of ashamed to tell them that because then they look at me funny, and they’re just like, “Well, you just don’t seem like you’d be in the Navy.” And they don’t just say that, but that’s . . . that’s what they’re thinking. And just, like, “You just don’t seem like you’d be in the Navy. You’re just not masculine. Why would you want to be a part of that?”

And I think, for me, it’s just that I feel like it. I feel like doing this.

In Mason’s story, his friends questioned not only his involvement due to his sexuality, but also his masculinity. Indeed, Mason’s physicality as a slender, petite man who saw himself as more feminine did present challenges for him, especially among his ROTC peers.

For Mason, the ROTC environment was challenging, especially as he was coming out. Being in a “very macho sort of environment,” Mason felt like an “outcast.” He experienced harassment from a fellow cadet his first year, and that was painful for him. Since the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Mason’s perspective on the masculine culture of the military has not changed. He continues to experience structural resistance within the organization as it pertains to his sexual orientation. He shares a story about a recent request to not wear his uniform on Tuesdays due to his internship for his campus’s Safe Zones program. He recalls,

I had to—I was very vague in my description. I was like, “Oh, it’s for my internship.” And then they asked, “What’s your internship? Why can’t you wear your uniform at your internship?” I was, “Because it’s a gay organization.” They were like, “Oh, well, yeah. Don’t wear your uniform then.” . . . So there’s still a sort of segregation even though de facto de jure, the law has been passed.

Mason’s involvement in the Naval ROTC program afforded him the opportunity to go to college, yet it came at the expense of being able to express himself openly as a gay man without: the threat of discrimination. His involvement in the military as a college student presented challenges for him in making meaning of his multiple identities. However, other structural entities, such as religious beliefs and doctrines, can also influence the development of one’s other identities, as Jonathan’s story shows next.

Jonathan’s coming out experience was complicated due to growing up in a family that was devoutly Catholic. Jonathan’s parents, especially his father, accepted Catholicism’s largely antigay ideology. As a result, the messages he received about what it meant to be gay were often negative. Jonathan recounts,

I mean, at 12 years old, I’m sure that you can only imagine that the only things about the gay community that I saw weren’t exactly—hal—family friendly. Let’s keep it that way. But, no, you know; honestly, a lot of it had to do with Catholic home, upper class, it just wasn’t even allowed in the household.

His feelings of being attracted to other men continued throughout his adolescence; yet, after coming out at 18, Jonathan’s understanding of what it meant to be gay was very skewed since most of the information he had received about being gay stemmed from viewing gay pornography. He states,

Even when I came out, even with my first boyfriend, I didn’t . . . I never vocalized it, but any time we were intimate, when we were done, there was that 2 to 10 minutes where I felt dirty and, like, I’d done something that I shouldn’t have. Not in that “Oh, my God, I’ve been naughty” in a good way. No, I felt dirty in a bad way, physically.

In fact, these feelings continued for a long period of time, leading to Jonathan’s diagnosis of clinical depression. A lack of support from some of his immediate family also contributed to this state of depression.

In particular, Jonathan’s father had a very difficult time accepting Jonathan’s sexuality when he finally disclosed that he was gay. A wealthy, Catholic
Republican, Jonathan’s father struggled with the news that his son was gay and did not speak to Jonathan for six months afterward. This period was very difficult for Jonathan. Often he would act out when around his father by taking on certain stereotypical mannerisms in his conversation or demeanor just to make his father uncomfortable or angry. As a result of his emerging sexuality, Jonathan strove to be the perfect son. He states,

I never got in trouble. I got perfect grades. I was the star athlete. Everything you could have wanted as a high school son, that was me. . . . That’s one of the reasons why I was so pissed off, because I was so hurt.

This hurt intensified his depression, which ultimately resulted in Jonathan attempting suicide. In Jonathan’s case, Catholic doctrine on homosexuality contributed in very significant ways to the struggles he had in coming out as gay, but so did his father’s reluctance to accept Jonathan’s gay identity. Structurally, these ideologies stemming from religion influenced his family’s dynamics, which, in turn, influenced who Jonathan is at his core, including his sexual orientation.

Political Intersectionality

Individuals situated in two or more subordinate groups may experience the tensions of two or more conflicting social agendas; this is how Crenshaw (2009) defines political intersectionality. Crenshaw states, “The need to split one’s political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront” (p. 217). However, Crenshaw’s aggregation of men of color or White women omits sexual minority identities. Therefore, men of color who are also gay-identified, for example, may encounter situations in which they must decide to put their political energies toward either their gay identity or their racial identity.

Crenshaw highlights the fact that often those in power (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals) play a pivotal role in setting the political agendas for society at large, but also for their respective populations. However, this perpetuates the systems of oppression that continue to reify those with privilege while concurrently furthering discrimination for those who are marginalized. Discussing the antiracist and feminist movements those in privilege lead, Crenshaw (2009) argues that those in power’s “specific raced and gendered experiences, although intersectional, often define as well as confine the interests of the entire group” (p. 217). For Mason and Victor, their lived realities as gay men of color have influenced how they make meaning of who they are as well as who they are becoming.

In conversation about the difference between White gay men and gay men of color, Mason says,

I think part of that phenomenon is [that] White identity is not as salient to them as their gay identity. So they have more time to put into that gay identity because they’re White, because I think part of privilege is being invisible and not having to acknowledge that part of yourself, because I think that when you’re oppressed or marginalized, that’s something that becomes important to you. . . . I think there are some cultural expectations within their race that force them to choose one or the other. I think men of color are expected to be more aggressive, more overtly masculine, and I think when you add sexuality and masculinity, that just complicates it.

Mason’s statement exemplifies Crenshaw’s point about those in positions of power not having to negotiate as many complexities or conflicting political agendas. From the political intersectionality standpoint, White gay men are given privilege due to their race that gay men of color are not. Additionally, the socialized messages and assumptions for White gay men are different from those for gay men of color.

Mason and Victor’s experiences as gay men of color are different from their White counterparts’. Often, that exhibits itself in different ways. Mason feels as though context becomes important in how his identities show up. He reflects on this, saying,

For some people, it’s easy for them to just be themselves in any environment. But for me, myself, it just depends on the type of environment that I’m in. . . . Sometimes in one type of situation, I’ll show one layer, and the other time, I’ll show another layer. And it’s those conflicts between the two identities or the multiple identities that make it difficult.

Mason continues,

I have been struggling with this because they’re both marginal identities, and when you talk about your identities, I feel like I have to choose one or the other. When I’m with my Filipino crew, I have to be less gay and not emphasize that as much. When I’m with my—I guess when I’m interacting in gay spaces, I have to play down my Filipino identity for the majority culture.

This feeling of having to “choose” one identity over another exemplifies Crenshaw’s concept of political intersectionality.

Likewise, Victor experiences some similar difficulties in understanding how his multiple identities converge in different, and sometimes conflicting,
ways. His gay identity has been a key focus for him during his college years, particularly in his extracurricular involvement, his academic studies as an LGBT minor, and his service to the greater San Juan Miguel community as an intern at two LGBT-affiliated nonprofit organizations. However, that affiliation has started to become troubling for him. He states,

I love being a gay man, and I do enjoy all those things. But I feel that, in a way, I don't want to be determining my life based upon who I sleep with. So it's important for me to embrace who I am sexually, but if I'm interested in other things, I should be able to do that. I know a lot of gay men who are like that. Yeah, they're gay, but they're doing all these things that are involved externally, and you know, I kind of like that balanced approach; whereas, for myself, I'm so entrenched in it right now that—not that my avenue's stuck, but I want to start being more balanced about it.

Victor's statement seems to indicate that though developmentally he may have been more engaged within the LGBT community for his own personal growth in the past, he may be entering some new stages of awareness of the interconnectedness of other identity politics. Ultimately, though, his statement also highlights the inherent tensions of choice between his gay identity and other social identities or interests.

**Representational Intersectionality**

Representational intersectionality is when two identities converge and concerns—while presented as representing both identities—ultimately privilege one over the other (Crenshaw, 2009). Analyses of representational intersectionality must address the following main issues: (a) the construction of majoritarian stories around race, gender, and other social identities; and (b) how critiques of those stories typically marginalize those with multiple oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 2009). Addressing the subordination of Black women, Crenshaw offers a critical statement about the importance of representational intersectionality when writing,

Aiming to bring together the different aspects of an otherwise divided sensibility, an intersectional analysis argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing, that Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both. (p. 236)

For Victor, Mason, and Jonathan, their lived identities as gay men, coupled with other social identities with which they identify, clearly have an impact on how they take up their space and voice in the world. Yet, larger structures, systems, and agents of socialization have shaped them.

For Jonathan, Mason, and Victor, the media has exerted a significant influence in their socialization, especially in terms of their gender and sexual orientation. Images from popular media were important in shaping the performance of what it meant to be a gay man, especially in the college environment. Victor addresses this idea:

That's really funny because I was thinking about this yesterday. I was like, "When did I become a gay man?" I was like, "I know that I was born with that sexual drive... but the actual stereotypes, I don't know." I would say I definitely learned from my peers. When I joined the fraternity especially, the terminology just started filtering in... It was definitely very much a learned behavior because there's no "how to be" book, so you learn from the people around you. The people I learned from were very informative. I'll put it that way.

Victor's statement highlights the differences in how gay men are socialized compared to their straight peers. Unlike straight men, young gay men largely do not have older adults (e.g., fathers, brothers) modeling for them how to navigate important milestones in one's life, such as dating, engaging in sexual behaviors, and cultivating relationships. In fact, Jonathan, Mason, and Victor indicated a lack of significant ongoing mentorship by gay male adults in their lives. In a world where individuals are bombarded by heteronormative images in the popular media, this lack of mentorship is particularly troubling.

From a representational intersectionality perspective, media images of gay men evoked a mix of opinions among the men. In conversation with one another, Jonathan and Mason discussed the significant representations of gay men in the media that resonated with them as young gay men. Specifically, they talked about the gay characters they viewed growing up, but also the larger systemic issues of the media and how they socialize individuals. Mason said,

The problem with *Will & Grace* is that the men were essential eunuchs. They didn't portray any sort of sexuality. It was just, "Oh, I'm in a relationship with him." But I want the details. *Queer as Folk* showed the details graphically. So we needed, the American public needed something more palatable to take in, and that was *Will & Grace*.

Jonathan replied,

But there you run into the issue of network TV versus cable pay—for TV. So if you look at the same *Queer as Folk* from the UK, it's just as graphic.
but their TV standards are much more lax. You can show boobs and a flaccid penis on TV. Here if you're going to do that, your network is going off the air.

The discussion between Mason and Jonathan exemplifies the challenges inherent in the images of the popular media regarding gay men. However, in both television shows, the main characters were also White, reinforcing certain notions about what it means to be gay. While Mason and Jonathan may not have consciously thought about those pieces, one can assume that, on a subconscious level, this may have been internalized in their own sense of self. Additionally, this juxtaposition of imagery also exhibits itself in how the men often uphold and continue to replicate certain facets of hegemonic masculinity.

From images of gay men in popular culture to socialized messages about homosexuality and masculinity, Jonathan, Mason, and Victor each experience the phenomenon of sorting through often disparate messages about what it means to be gay and what it means to be a man. As a result, they tended to recognize the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity with its roots in patriarchy, misogyny, and heteronormativity. However, the degree to which they subscribed to hegemonic masculinity often was directly related to their sense of internal masculinity and their physicality. On one hand, Mason and Victor's physical demeanor as gay men tended to be more feminine based on their own self-description. Both men also tended to be more aware of their male privilege and actively worked to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity.

On the other hand, Jonathan’s adherence to traditional ideals of masculinity followed very strict and normative gender roles. Through his physical presence, mannerisms, and personal interests, Jonathan fits within traditional male scripts. In fact, he obeyed these gender codes so well that he acknowledged he could pass as straight. At the same time, one could expect that Jonathan would meet these traditional gender scripts given his identities. As a White gay man from a wealthy family, Jonathan discussed his drive to meet the expectations of others, something that was instilled in him at a young age. Even now he understands that his race, religion, and social class continue to play a significant role in how he considers who he is at his core and how others view him. He states,

Sexual orientation, gender, culture, I think they have more to do with my makeup as a person . . . They define me more as a person, whereas race, religion, social class more define me as how, how one of the ways I see things. . . . They define me more, set up my values, how I see things more than they define me as a person.

Jonathan's statement reflects the importance of representational intersectionality. While he understands that his sexual orientation, gender, and culture make him who he is, he may ultimately be guided more by his race, religion, and social class, which largely are privileged identities. As a result, Jonathan's meaning making of his multiple identities may be shaped to continue relying hegemonic views, if that works to his own benefit, rather than viewing the interconnectedness of marginalized identities.

Implications for Practice

The stories of Jonathan, Mason, and Victor illuminate the importance of structural, political, and representational intersectionality in one's development within the context of higher education. Their lived experiences exemplify the realities of gay men attending colleges and universities and how they are attempting to make meaning of their multiple social identities. From their experiences, there is a set of implications for professional practice around intersectionality, which I address in this section.

Providing time and space for gay students to gather, whether in person or virtually, and discuss their own meaning making of who they are is critical. In an age when students are bombarded with socialized messages, they need to have opportunities to be critically reflective about their identities and what those identities might mean for them at the personal, group/community, and societal level. These spaces are similar to the concept of counter-spaces for students of color, which are defined as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 70). While scholars have largely discussed counter-spaces for students of color (Solórzano et al.: Tatum, 2003), it is clear that similar spaces for gay men (and their lesbian, bisexual, and transgender peers) would be helpful to continue addressing the unique experiences of these individuals.

Integrating intersectional perspectives within the academic curriculum would assist students in continuing their own journey of self-awareness through critical reflection and enable them to begin to interrogate and examine systems and structures that perpetuate power, privilege, and oppression. Mason’s and Victor’s academic involvement in an LGBT studies minor assisted them in gaining a deeper understanding of themselves as well as their role within the larger system. Student affairs professionals could also adapt intersectional perspectives for the curriculum they use in student leader training, whether for RAs or at multicultural student services retreats and programs. Both Mason and Jonathan benefited from programs on campus that were rooted in social justice. By taking an intersectional approach in
training, these men were exposed to issues, such as heteronormativity, social construction of gender, and hegemony, in ways that their academic curriculum may not have afforded.

If we are to take an intersectional perspective, educators need to become competent at examining and questioning the status quo. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the majoritarian stories that maintain societal hierarchies that continue to perpetuate privilege and oppression are deeply woven into the fabric of our society. However, we need to hold up these myths and stories and begin to ask the difficult questions about whom these stories empower and whom they might disadvantage. We need to educate our students to become critical consumers of media images and teach them how to engage with others in civil discourse about difficult topics. Both in the classroom and outside it, students need to be exposed to the diverse perspectives on the LGBT community beyond mainstream images that tend to veer toward those in power, such as Whites and those from the middle class or upper middle class. We need to talk with one another about issues with a variety of discordant thoughts, especially those from an intersectional lens on social identities. We also need to educate others as well as ourselves about mainstream and counter-movements within the LGBT community to explore the larger interconnections that exist among the large spectrum of individuals under the specter of the LGBT umbrella. In doing so, we move toward a holistic integration of intersectional perspectives within higher education.

Conclusion

Crenshaw (2009) concludes her article stating, “Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the difference among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (p. 246). An intersectional analysis of Jonathan’s, Mason’s, and Victor’s stories provides insights into how these men are influenced by systems and structures that affect them. Within the context of the collegiate environment, these men have explored their larger sense of self through curricular and cocurricular experiences and the relationships they have developed with family and friends. Thus, they have created their own rule books about what it means to be gay men. For each, the rule book is unique—based on the construction of knowledge of one’s self at the intersections of his race, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identities. At that intersection, Jonathan, Mason, and Victor continue to answer the fundamental question, “Who am I?” Intersectionality, from the structural, political, and representational perspective, continues to assist these men—and the higher education professionals working with students like them—in questioning the status quo and examining the systems of which they are a part.

Note

1. San Juan Miguel is the pseudonym for the large metropolitan city in southern California where these participants attended college.

References


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10

**SUBLATERN SUPERMEN**

Intersecting Masculinities and Disabilities in Popular Culture

Karen A. Myers, Jason A. Laker, and Claire Lerchen Minneman

*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.*

W. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.vii

Shakespeare's famous line did not represent a new idea even when he wrote it, but it holds an especially profound resonance today. Now, there are virtually unlimited stages, and their fourth walls have blurred, if not collapsed entirely. People are even more apt to be someone or something other than what they seem, whether intentionally or not, because there are more forms of communication with greater opportunities for agency over one's presentation.

In such a context, it seems especially strange that some notions about identity remain much as they were during the Bard of Avon's lifetime. For instance, gender remains perhaps the most fundamental organizing principle in societies around the world. Who or what "counts" as a "real" man or woman remains stubbornly in place, even as stigma and constraints relating to diversity of gender and sexuality may have eased in many cases and places. It is still true that physical strength, stoicism, wealth production, and overt influence are hallmarks of masculinity. Even photographs of men could be sorted into more or less "manly" categories because of the power and persistence of many ideas about gender that have magnified and proliferated—rather than diffused—in today's exploding media outlets. In this example, historical or geographic contexts might mitigate which cues inform the sorting order of such photos, but not whether such a social taxonomy exists to inform their placement on a "masculinity" continuum.
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