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Critical Influences on Sexual Minority College Males’ Meaning-Making of their Multiple Identities

Daniel Tillapaugh, University of Maine

This grounded theory study explored the critical influences on college sexual minority males’ meaning-making of their multiple identities. Twenty-six cisgender males attending colleges and universities within the United States and Canada were interviewed and provided journal responses to specific prompts. Four themes emerged, including: involvement in LGBT-affirming spaces, intimate relationships with other males, involvement in student leadership positions, and ongoing exposure to heterosexism and homophobia.

Higher education professionals have gained tremendous insights on the developmental processes of sexual minorities over the past four decades (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1998). The extant research has largely focused only on sexual orientation, foregoing any understanding of how individuals’ race, gender, socio-economic status, or other social identity has played a role in their identity development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Over the past few decades, significant attention has been paid to college males and their development, including their masculinities (Davis & Laker, 2004; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris, 2006). While the understanding of college males and their development is necessary and important, much of the literature has wrongly aggregated males to be understood through the heterosexual male experience, thereby marginalizing sexual minority voices and pushing gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer males to the margins (Berila, 2011). Higher education professionals may, as a result, lack a complete understanding of the sexual minority males with whom they work.

Stemming from the larger field of men’s studies research, higher education scholars have explored various dimensions of the lived experiences of college men (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harper & Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011). Much of this work has discussed the performativity of masculinity by college men, which Butler (1993) defined as “a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (p. 12). The performativity of masculinity occurs through the act of one’s gender expression as a man and is replicated through masculine gender roles and expectations that are socialized by family, peers, educational systems, religion, and media (Kimmel, 2008; Reeser, 2010).
Masculinity scholars have identified that the traditional performance of masculinity within the United States often upholds and reifies hegemonic masculinity, a type of masculinity where the ways in which males (i.e. those in power) establish cycles of domination over others vis-à-vis systemic structures and institutions (Donaldson, 1993). Within the context of higher education, hegemonic masculinity is often seen through college men's competitive and risk-taking behaviors (Allan & Madden, 2008; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris, 2006; Kimmel, 2008). The performance of hegemonic masculinity is often linked with homophobia and heterosexist behaviors due to men having a deep fear of being perceived to be feminine (Kimmel, 2008; Reeser, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity reinforces a privileging of heterosexuality and marginalizes those who do not uphold traditional male gender norms and expectations, such as sexual minority males (Butler, 1993; Kimmel, 2008).

Much of the foundational literature on sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1998) explored the evolution of an awareness of a sexual minority identity to an acceptance and synthesis of that identity. Cass (1979) posited a linear, stage-based model where individuals moved from a state of confusion around their sexual orientation to a growing exploration and acceptance of their identity to a final integration of their sexual identity among their other social identities. In his work, D'Augelli (1994) determined that sexual minorities shed their heterosexual identities and then negotiate other aspects to their sexual identity, including coming out to family and friends and becoming a member of the larger sexual and gender minority community. Fassinger (1998) situated the coming-out process at the individual level and the community level. In her model, Fassinger (1998) articulated how an individual's sexual identity development is interconnected yet distinct from his/her/hir identity within the larger sexual minority community. One of the major critiques of these developmental models is that they solely address one's sexual identity development without much regard for the socio-political context of one's race, socioeconomic class, religion, and gender. These developmental models reinforce a compartmentalized look into one's holistic self without much understanding of how one makes meaning of one's multiple identities or any insight to those critical influences that help individuals make meaning of their identities.

Meaning-making is defined as an on-going psychological process of making sense of perceptions and truths of our lived experiences and using that information in ways that reinforce and commit ourselves to self-actualization (Daloz Parks, 2011; Kegan, 1982). College serves as a critical meaning-making environment whereby students are able to reflect upon and process critical influences and events which lead them to become more self-authored and interdependent with those around them (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Self-authorship is understood to be “the capacity to internally define [one’s] own beliefs, identity, and relationships” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xvi). Baxter Magolda's (2001) work explored the ways in which young adults made meaning originally with external forces, such as one’s family, peers, and teachers, to an eventual reliance on one’s own inner voice. This process is marked by periods of cognitive dissonance and eventual resolution experienced by young adults as they negotiate their own sense of self (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Abes and Jones’ (2004) work on the meaning-making of lesbian college students found that:

As meaning-making grew more complex, the participants grew more capable of filtering contextual influences. This relationship between contextual influences, meaning-making capacity, and college students’ perceptions of their identity illuminates how multiple dimensions of identity are thought to interact and extends existing theories of sexual orientation identity development in a more integrated direction. (p. 624)
This finding is particularly relevant for the larger understanding of meaning-making on one’s identity development, particularly from an intersectional perspective of one’s multiple social identities. Abes and Jones’ (2004) work eventually led to the reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), which reframed meaning-making as an essential component to understanding one’s multiple social identities. There is, however, a gap in the literature on what particular critical influences in college affect students’ meaning-making of their multiple identities.

This qualitative study, which expands upon Tillapaugh’s (2012) original study, aims to understand how sexual minority males attending colleges and universities within the United States and Canada make meaning of the intersections of their multiple identities, specifically their gender and sexuality. This research will assist higher education professionals in understanding how sexual minority males in college come to conceive one’s self as well as explore the impact, either positively or negatively, of specific services, programs, and experiences on one’s meaning-making process. The following research question guides this study: What or who are the critical influences during college on their meaning-making process?

Methods

To address the outlined research questions, a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) research design was used. Constructivist grounded theory places an emphasis on the phenomenon being studied through the gathering and analysis of data through the relationships and experiences between the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis included interview data from 26 sexual minority-identified cisgender males, 19 to 24 years old, who attend or have recently attended colleges and universities in the United States or Canada, journal responses from participants kept between the first and last interviews, and the researcher’s analytical memos.

Recruitment for participants began in April 2013 via an e-mail solicitation on several list-servs and through social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Potential participants were directed to an online demographic survey designed to obtain relevant information from participants who fit the study criteria. These criteria outlined that individuals must (a) identify as cisgender males, or having congruence between one’s assigned birth sex [male] and gender identity and expression [being a man] (Schlit & Westbrook, 2009); (b) identify as gay, bisexual, fluid, or queer; (c) be either a junior, senior, or recent graduate from a college or university within the United States and/or Canada; (d) be between 18 and 24 years old; and (e) be “out” to either friends and/or family. The above criteria were set to narrow the focus of the study but also to have participants who could be reflective about at least two years of their college experience.

Approximately 63 individuals who completed the demographic survey met the study’s criteria, and 60 students were invited to participate. The other three individuals were not selected because students from their campus had previously been invited to participate. Of the 60, 35 completed the first stage of the study (the first interview). Participants were interviewed via Skype or by phone twice for approximately 60 to 90 minutes during Summer 2013 and Fall 2013. E-mails were sent in Fall 2013 inviting the participants to interview a second time. Of the 35 participants, 26 were interviewed a second time. In the first interview, the author asked participants about their coming out experiences, their experiences of being out in college, their thoughts about masculinity, and the critical events or moments for meaning-making of their multiple identities. In the second interview, the author asked questions about sexual behavior and relationships, relationships with their friends, and intersections of their race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religion. The
interviews were conducted until the point of saturation. Data from participants who did not complete both interviews were disregarded.

The author transcribed all interview data verbatim. Participants were e-mailed their transcripts and asked to review them for authentication. All of the participants verified the transcripts and minor edits were made to three of the participants’ transcripts. Participants also responded to 11 journal prompt questions between the first and second interviews; these responses were used to triangulate data obtained in the interviews and also served as an additional data collection procedure. An example journal prompt question included, “Have you ever felt empowered by your sexual identity during college? If so, can you please describe that experience(s) in detail?”

Initial, axial, and theoretical coding were used for data analysis (Saldaña, 2009). Initial coding was used in conjunction with grounded theory methodology as it provides insight into a particular phenomenon in attempting to honor the participants’ voice (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). The author then completed axial and theoretical coding by using Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) concept of constant comparative strategies to build a skeletal framework of the theory that emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009).

Findings

For the participants in this study, key patterns emerged around critical incidents or events of their college experience that served as movement points (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004) in their meaning-making of their multiple identities. Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) defined movement points as those influences that helped, hindered, or provided a temporary pause in one’s meaning-making. For the sexual minority males in this study, four such critical influences emerged as salient. These included (a) involvement in LGBT-affirming spaces, (b) intimate relationships with other males, (c) involvement in student leadership roles, and (d) ongoing exposure to heterosexism and heteronormativity. While these critical influences have played a role in the participants’ meaning-making of their multiple identities, these should be understood not as positive and/or negative judgments but instead just as factors in that process.

Involvement in LGBT-Affirming Spaces

For many of the men, engagement in LGBT-affirming spaces, including courses on sexuality or gender studies or LGBT student organizations, were salient parts of the participants’ meaning-making of their multiple identities. Participation in these types of spaces provided the men a stronger possibility for feeling more authentic in their holistic selves and increased their support networks. Christopher, one of the Canadian participants, suggested that his involvement as a women and gender studies major helped him think more critically about his sexuality, race, social class, and gender. He said, “I think it’s interesting the dynamic that happens there in terms of my voice actually having legitimacy there and actually being praised there, and me benefiting from that experience.” In his experience at a Catholic institution in the midwestern United States, Adam recalled taking a gender studies class his first year that he called “mindblowing.” The class helped him feel more secure in his gender questioning: “Why should I feel like I should have to conform to these gender [roles and expectations], if like there is no right or wrong to them, you know?” Similarly, Joshua, who was active within his campus’s LGBT student organization, outlined how that experience helped him make important connections with other sexual minority males who became his friends. To him, having friends that shared a sexual minority identity was “almost like a groove that holds all of the other qualities about ourselves together. It’s that one thing that even though everything else may be different, we have that one point of reference that always bring us
While having the experience of seeing salient parts of their identity discussed at the center of academic curriculum was important for some of the participants, so too was the involvement with the LGBT community on or off-campus.

For those sexual minority males involved in their campus LGBT organizations or enrolled in academic curriculum around gender and sexuality studies, there were significant benefits to them, including identifying a support network of other sexual minority males as well as often a more sociopolitical orientation in activist and/or advocacy endeavors. In Derek’s case, he found most of his closest friends through his involvement in LGBT student organizations at his Canadian university. He stated, “And then yeah, on the queer side, the queer student activities that I was involved with is how I met my friends.” Derek continued, indicating that his academic work in his sexual diversity studies major helped him understand “the sociopolitical side of exploring gender, like gender more as a concept,” and this work helped him in his political activism on gender and sexuality issues on and off campus. Christopher similarly felt as though his exposure to LGBT-affirming spaces helped him consider aspects of his identity in salient ways. He shared, “They have exposed me to the profound injustices and ignited the flame in myself and others to fight, dream, and hope for another world—a more just world.”

Virtual spaces that were affirming were also seen as important to some of the participants. Many of those who learned of the study through Reddit (14 of 26 participants) were engaged on the “r/gaybros” group, which is geared to sexual minority males and issues of masculinity. Others were connected to other sexual minority males through video games. Known as “gaymers,” several participants spoke of connecting with other sexual minority video-game players through special channels in the games they played together. Matthew acknowledged connecting with others via the Reddit group “r/gaymers” and that he served as a panelist for a video game podcast where he was trying to bring more discussions of LGBT interests of video games into the mix. Engagement in these arenas provided additional contacts to other LGBT-identified individuals, which were particularly important for those individuals in more rural locations. By having spaces—even virtual ones—that allowed for increased connections to sexual minorities, these participants shared that they felt an increased sense of self and belonging.

**Intimate Relationships with Other Males**

Engaging in sexual behavior with other men provided opportunities for meaning-making around the participants’ sense of sexuality and gender. The majority of the men had engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors at least once during college. Only 5 of the 26 were involved in a significant long-term relationship at the time of data collection. Most of the men explained that they were not interested in a long-term relationship and instead wanted to be single. Regardless of their history of sexual behavior, many of the participants often took a heteronormative view on sexual roles within same-sex intimate behaviors (e.g., being the “top” or the penetrator in anal sex as being more masculine and being the “bottom” or the one being penetrated in anal sex as being more effeminate). Some discussed these notions shifting over time based upon their own sexual behaviors and further critical reflection about what those initial beliefs meant. These thoughts were more commonly held by those in the United States versus those in Canada who typically had experienced more sex-positive philosophies in their educational institutions (e.g., high school and universities) around sexual well-being.

Coming to college served as a critical time for many participants in that they finally were able to connect with more sexual minorities on and off campus to increase their ability to connect around sexual behavior. Discussing one of the most significant experiences of his college
experience, Jordan commented, “I did have my first actual relationship with a male here this year where, like, I did have sex for the first time … everything went well. It was an overall very positive experience so that I will remember.” While some participants expressed their sexual experiences to be positive, others had different experiences. Wes discussed the experience of having his first sexual experience with someone who lived on his residence hall floor his first year of college who threatened to out him to others. This experience resulted in Wes going back into the closet. Greyson, a bisexual male attending a public university in the Mid-Atlantic, indicated an experience of acquaintance rape, which had significant implications for him in terms of trust and intimacy. Greyson remarked, “Because of that, I have had intimacy problems with men, having difficulty accepting that men were able to be kind in any real manner. As such, I think that night was one of the most important of my college career, without any sense of hyperbole.” For each of the participants, their experiences with sexual behavior created opportunities for personal meaning-making around their sexuality as well as other aspects of their social identities.

Being in a relationship did bring about new experiences of meaning-making for some participants. When Adam met his boyfriend, he no longer perceived the pressure to have sex on the first date:

It was weird. Like the first date, nothing happened. Second date, nothing happened, and it was like the fifth date we finally brought it up and there was actually at this point we actually had more dialogue going and I felt comfortable, like you know, saying what I wanted to say, what I saw, and what I felt. And I think that really helped too.

Matthew had a similar experience to Adam where he discussed having sex with multiple partners in high school and college but recently entered into a long-distance relationship. In explaining his past sexual behavior, he felt that his feelings around sex were “much more nonchalant when it comes to certain things than most people would be.” That experience had unexpected consequences; Matthew stated:

The drawback now of course is that now that I’m in a much more intimate and personal relationship. I have no experience with it whatsoever, and it’s very apparent, and I’m incredibly awkward, and I’m surprised that he’s even sticking with it. But it’s just something that I’m going to have to work through.

Not all of the participants experienced this same phenomenon, but participants who were involved in intimate relationships expressed how they had gained significant learning of expectations around gender roles and expectations through those pairings. While sexual behavior provided opportunities for growth and development, involvement in student leadership roles also served as learning experiences of one’s self.

**Involvement in Student Leadership Roles**

Of the 26 participants, 18 served in student leadership roles, including orientation leader, resident assistant (RA), and student government positions, among others. By serving in these leadership roles, the participants were often placed in positions of visibility as a sexual minority male. These positions often provided them the opportunity to connect with mentors, engage in critical self-reflection in trainings and/or exercises, and increased their social capital within their college and university environment. Discussing his experience completing a privilege walk exercise, Jordan was provided with new insights about the privileges he maintained as a cisgender man. Others discussed how their leadership experiences helped them understand issues of social justice. Understanding the complexities of power, privilege, and oppression through these types of
learning experiences in leadership roles provided a helpful space in which the students could make meaning of aspects of their identity in community with others doing so.

Participants engaged in LGBT organizations or centers often made meaning of the intersections of both their leadership and their multiple identities. Attending a Catholic-affiliated institution in the Midwest, Adam discussed his activism on-campus relating to LGBT student services. When asked about a critical milestone of his college experience, he mentioned the creation of his campus’s first LGBTQ student organization. Jonah, an African-American gay male attending a southern university, indicated, “I had to create my own place here seeing how no one else had the courage nor desire to be a trailblazer (specifically when it comes to visibility and being active as a black gay man).” When discussing the visibility of sexual minority males in orientation leader roles, Keith, a White gay male at a midwestern university, said:

> I think that, because of [having sexual minority males in these positions], I fit in 90% of the time. Like any place, there are going to be people that are uncomfortable with or don’t know how to interact with me, but it’s a small portion of the campus population that I don’t see.

While some may have had experiences that were beneficial to understanding one’s sexuality, there were others who discussed leadership roles having an influence on the meaning-making of one’s gender, in positive and negative ways. Henry discussed his involvement in an all-male a cappella group and how a hazing incident he was a part of reinforced notions of hegemonic masculinity that were seemingly important to him. He shared that this experience “is all about power …This power made me feel manly, and I fed off of it to give me confidence in other areas of my life.” While Henry’s example might be the most extreme, several of the participants articulated the ways in which they upheld the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and how that often became a conflict with their multiple identities. These feelings of being an outsider were shared by many of the participants and are deeply connected to the last theme of ongoing exposure to heterosexism and heteronormativity.

### Ongoing Exposure to Heterosexism and Heteronormativity

Exposure to heterosexism and heteronormativity within varied cultures and environments created opportunities for meaning-making for the participants. Institutional differences between campus environments were an important distinction. Many of the participants at urban institutions characterized their institutions as “inclusive,” a place where it was “quite easy to be out on campus” or which offered “many opportunities to meet and interact with gay men with an immense range of interests and experiences.” Those students in rural areas, conversely, expressed difficulties in their experiences as sexual minority males, indicating that their sexuality “causes one to stick out like a sore thumb” and that they often received “conflicting messages sent from peers [who] conflate issues regarding insecurity about gender expression (Am I ‘manly’ enough? Am I supposed to be?) and sexuality.” For those in rural locations, participants often lacked strong local support networks of other LGBT-identified individuals and tended to uphold hegemonic ideals of masculinity.

When analyzing the experiences of the participants, political and socioeconomic backgrounds often provided some indicators of increased heterosexism and homophobia. Several participants discussed the challenges experienced by some of their sexual minority peers, particularly their acceptance from family in their home communities. Discussing those individuals in his life, particularly from his small southern hometown, Gregory elaborated on how the homophobia and heterosexism he faced only propelled him to stand firm in who he was. He shared: “And by
acknowledging that I care [about others’ perceptions of me], it kind of helps me understand why I’m insecure about it and eventually come to a point where it wasn’t a big deal anymore.” These moments of confronting others’ homophobic perceptions and/or thoughts became an important opportunity of meaning-making for the participants.

The participants of this study represented a wide array of different college environments. For some of these institutions, the climate for sexual minorities could be deemed “chilly” given the lack of institutional support or heterosexism experienced by students. In reflecting about his midwestern university, David recalled,

I have never felt incredibly empowered by my sexuality in college. The closest thing that I have received is the ‘privilege’ (or daunting task) of being the resident live-in professional gay that people ask about every ignorant question about homosexuality to.

This tokenization experienced by David reflects the challenges of sexual minorities who are often asked to educate others without consideration of the psychological toll it takes to serve in this role. For Adam, who took great pride in being an activist around LGBT issues on his Catholic campus, he reflected on the dichotomy that existed for sexual minorities at his institution—to be out or to be closeted, with very little gray area in between. This need to be out and proud or be closeted provides another dangerous condition related to the psychological wellness of sexual minority males on his campus. These experiences of confronting homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity have a direct connection to the holistic development and meaning-making of one’s multiple identities within the college experience.

Discussion

This study explored the critical influences that impact cisgender sexual minority males’ meaning-making of their multiple identities. For those engaged in LGBT-affirming spaces, the participants often expressed that they felt more like their authentic selves and also tended to have stronger connections and support networks with LGBT individuals. This finding connects with Stevens’ (2004) work on the experiences of gay men in college and the importance of safe spaces. Having the opportunity to engage in coursework around sexuality or gender studies provided those participants the chance to critically self-reflect upon their multiple identities and to see aspects of their identities being central to their course of study. Gonyea and Moore (2007), in their study of sexual minorities and their curricular experiences, found that those who were “more out” on campus often reported engagement in “active and collaborative learning activities than both their ‘straight’ and ‘less out’ peers, suggesting that personal openness is related to some aspect of this benchmark” (p. 9). While Gonyea and Moore’s (2007) study was not specific to subject area, the findings from this study suggest that gender and sexuality studies curriculum may be particularly helpful to one’s meaning-making of their multiple identities. In particular, Adam, David, and Christopher, who were in these majors, articulated greater understandings of power and privilege as it relates to their gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and race. These students were often much more involved in sociopolitical student activism and advocacy movements on their campus and in their local communities. These characteristics often connected to Baxter Magolda’s (2001) concept of self-authorship, particularly on finding one’s internal voice and using that to guide their decision making.

Engagement in sexual intimate relationships with other men provided another opportunity for meaning-making around one’s multiple identities. Many of the participants articulated a connection between sexual roles and masculinity or femininity (e.g., bottoming as a feminine/submissive
act versus topping as a masculine/aggressive act). Those subscribing to more hegemonic masculine ideals often upheld these notions more whereas those who were more connected to LGBT organizations or academic work typically had examined the heteronormative and hegemonic influences in this mindset. This finding juxtaposes Kimmel’s (2008) work that found involvement in heteronormative spaces by straight college males reinforced the socialization of hegemonic masculinity. Competing messages about sexual behavior in the media, by one’s peers, and also due to the lack of sex-positive discussions geared to sexual minorities in high school sexual education classes led some participants to greater experimentation and negative sexual experiences, including acquaintance rape (Greyson) and engaging in sexual behaviors because they felt that was what they needed to do (Adam). These findings suggest the importance of interrogating the dominant discourse (such as heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity) in various spaces to strengthen sexual minority males’ sense of self. The participants’ engagement in in sexual behavior with other sexual minorities reaffirmed their sexual identity, produced a stronger internal understanding of one’s sexuality, and increased understanding of one’s sexual values via critical self-reflection.

Involvement in student leadership roles was particularly important for the meaning-making of some participants. Serving as a leader on campus allowed the sexual minority males the opportunity to be in a position of authority and role model for others. While many participants articulated how their student leadership roles helped them expand their understanding of themselves and increased their peer support networks, for some, these roles were a double-edged sword: useful for one’s self-awareness and congruence yet, at times, lonely or isolating. One clear finding from the participants was a general pattern that these students often lack mentors on campus, which is consistent with findings from Dugan and Yurman’s (2011) study on LGB college students and their leadership practices. There seems to be a greater need to address the ways in which sexual minority males can be assisted within leadership roles to increase the connections to higher education administrators in meaningful ways.

Lastly, ongoing exposure to heterosexism and heteronormativity continued to influence the meaning-making of the participants in a wide array of ways. Institutional cultures often influenced this in significant ways, which connects with Stevens’s (2004) and Rhoads’s (1997) works on LGBT spaces within colleges and universities. Institutions that are less LGBT-affirming create increased exposure to homophobic slurs and/or behaviors as well as heteronormative programs and services. Adam’s experiences at his Catholic university in the Midwest demonstrated how campus culture, affected by religious doctrine, can shift but happens slowly and with great psychic challenges for its LGBT students. Those individuals from rural and/or politically conservative backgrounds often were more likely to uphold certain notions of hegemonic masculinity and traditional male gender norms. These findings connect with Campbell and Bell’s (2000) work on rural masculinity where the markers of both masculinity in rural spaces and the rural in the masculine emerge to reify hegemonic masculinity norms, ideals, and characteristics. Geographical spaces create norms and ways of being that influence one’s meaning-making of their multiple identities, which was particularly important for the participants of this study.

Implications for Practice and Research

This study holds several critical implications for professional practice and future research as it relates to the critical influences in sexual minority males’ meaning-making of their multiple identities in college. The data suggest that higher education professionals can increase their outreach to sexual minority males in meaningful ways. While most of the males in this study had minimal involvement in positional leadership roles or student organizations on campus, there were several who tended to
be disengaged outside of the classroom on their particular campus. A variety of reasons were given for this, but often these students lacked a sense of belonging on their campus. Many individuals may want to connect sexual minority students to LGBT-focused student organizations, but many males in this study did not find those spaces welcoming or useful to them. Administrators, instead, might work in collaboration with students to find ways that they may want to become engaged and not necessarily attempt to foist LGBT involvement activities upon them. Many of those individuals who were involved in LGBT organizations or academic curriculum on gender and sexuality certainly gained powerful experiences of meaning-making through those opportunities.

Understanding the LGBT campus climate provides higher education professionals an important insight into the experiences of sexual minority students. Particularly at institutions that may not be LGBT-affirming, even informal assessments of sexual minority students’ journeys can be illuminating in terms of understanding the ways that they are either supported or challenged within the college environment. By using these data to garner support for additional resources or making changes to existing programs, services, and initiatives, higher education professionals may be able to support the holistic development for these students, both in and out of the classroom. The data from the current study suggest that sex-positive sexual health and well-being education can positively affect sexual minority males’ meaning-making of their multiple identities. Administrators would benefit from looking at the connection between sexual education on their respective campuses as one component of the larger campus climate for LGBT students. If sex-positive education does not occur, students will continue to obtain their information from sources that can be inadequate (i.e. pornography, discussions with sexual minority peers, online resources).

Higher education professionals need to be proactive in meeting sexual minority students’ needs for community; for many, their community may often found online. From this study, a large group of participants were using social media sites, such as Reddit and Facebook, to meet others, engage in dialogue, and gain information. Campus administrators would be wise to develop technological competence in using such social media tools to connect with students and engage with them in meaningful ways. The creation of online dialogues that are campus-specific for sexual minority males could be useful in providing information to students who may be disconnected from campus resources but are engaged in virtual realms.

While this qualitative study provides an initial understanding of the critical influences of cisgender sexual minority males, future research on sexual minority females as well as transgender students is needed to increase our understanding of their experiences. By engaging in an exploration of these students’ meaning-making of their identities, increased attention within the student development literature helps increase the knowledge of intersectionality within the student experience. Much of the research on sexual minorities has largely been centered in suburban or urban settings. Increased attention to the experiences of rural sexual minorities would be helpful in outlining their unique needs, particularly given some of the students’ experiences in this study around hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity playing a much larger role in their lives at college. Understanding the travelling between spaces for sexual minorities would also be very helpful. Some of the participants within this study discussed growing up in more rural locations and their decision to go to colleges and universities within urban areas. Having a better understanding of the psychological dimensions of students to traverse multiple spaces would be helpful (e.g., their identities back in their home communities and their identities in college). While some work on the compartmentalization of one’s identities for sexual minority males has been completed (Tillapaugh, 2013), increased attention specifically exploring the rural-to-urban experience would be useful to potentially support students in their holistic understanding of self.
Conclusion

In one of his journal responses, Greyson wrote, “Now I see that I have to maintain a balance between the sides of myself. I don’t think it’s bad to have multiple parts of yourself, as long as you’re honest about who you are to people.” His words are important to consider in terms of thinking about the various aspects to our identities, whether they are social or personal identities. For sexual minority males in college, developing a holistic sense of self, rooted in honesty to one’s self and others, is a key aspect of one’s growth and learning. Higher education professionals must understand better the critical influences that inform and influence how young adults in college, particularly sexual minorities, make meaning of their multiple identities. Higher education professionals must continue to provide spaces, opportunities, and invitations to sexual minority males to engage in this meaning-making process for their own benefit—to see themselves holistically as they are in honesty and their own sense of truth.

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