Perspectives on identity, disclosure and the campus environment among African American gay and bisexual men at one historically Black college

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This qualitative study examined how 6 African American men at one historically Black college made meaning of their gay or bisexual identity, made decisions about to whom they disclosed this identity, and how their sexual identity experiences were mediated given the context of the campus environment. The findings suggest although this particular HBCU (historically Black college and university) provided the participants an overall supportive and uplifting environment, they experienced challenges with publicly expressing their sexual identities. Implications and recommendations for future research and practice are offered.

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been a cornerstone of education for African Americans. These institutions are lauded for providing students who might not have otherwise been able to pursue higher education with a supportive and caring environment (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Within the current body of literature on HBCUs, little attention has been given to the experiences of African American gay and bisexual men on these campuses. Yet, Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) contended that the campus climate is central to psychosocial development, particularly given the homophobia and heterosexism latent in campus environments. Thus, African American men who identify as gay or bisexual may face unique challenges at HBCUs because of their sexual orientation.

HBCUs rarely have student organizations, offices, centers, or other resources devoted to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) concerns. For example, Willis (2004) found that HBCU libraries do not provide high quality information on gay and lesbian studies. Students exploring their own sexual identity, faculty who wish to discuss LGBT experiences in class, or those who simply want to learn more about the subject would find very little in their libraries. In addition, news headlines have suggested that HBCUs are unwilling or unprepared to deal with LGBT concerns. Such was the case at Morehouse College, where a student was beaten with a bat when suspected of making sexual advances toward another male student (Monroe, 2008). Hampton University was accused of practicing discrimination against SPEAK, a student organization for LGBT students that has been denied a campus organization charter twice, with insufficient explanation (Perry, 2007). Incidents such as these might suggest that HBCUs consciously work to prevent the establishment of LGBT-oriented organizations and that students in these environments may be forced to keep their sexual identity secret in order to obtain their education.

The perceived lack of support for LGBT students at HBCUs may stem from what Walters and Hayes (1998) termed “institutional homophobia,” or the dismissal of the legitimacy of gay students, faculty, and staff. It should be noted however, that institutional

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Homophobia is an issue that spans beyond HBCUs. It is a sanctioned mindset prevalent throughout education. Walters and Hayes stated, “Homophobia is so ingrained . . . that many individuals and institutions who express antigay sentiment, impede movements toward equality for gays, and fail to confront blatant forms of homophobia and may not identify themselves as biased against homosexuality” (p. 3). The reality is that few institutions have disseminated enough information to adequately educate members of the academic community about the experiences and needs of gay and bisexual students. As a result, the campus environment can be extremely unwelcoming for these student populations, but some HBCUs are taking serious action and about 23 institutions are collaborating with the Human Rights Campaign, an advocacy organization for LGBT people (Associated Press, 2007; Oguntoyinbo, 2009) because incidents like those that occurred at Morehouse and Hampton indicate a need for HBCUs to address LGBT concerns more directly.

The purpose of this study was to examine how six African American men at one HBCU viewed their sexual identity, made choices regarding disclosure of their sexual identity, and navigated the institutional environment within the context of their sexual identity while attending college. Through their stories, others can be educated and move toward developing empathy, acceptance, and resources for African American men who identify as gay or bisexual.

**LGBT STUDENTS OF COLOR**

Researchers have examined the experiences of LGBT students in college (Evans & Broido, 1999; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Sanlo, 2004), yet rarely are African American students’ experiences accounted for in the literature (Loiacano, 1989). As a result, little is known about these students who have unique experiences due to their race and sexual orientation. The often conflicting nature of these identities is especially difficult for women, who must grapple with racial and sexual identities in addition to gender subordination. For men, societal expectations of what it means to be a man and the associated latent hetero-masculine undertones associated with them can be equally challenging. Conflicting identities can lead to a great deal of confusion, particularly in how gender is performed, as opposed to the expectation of how it should be performed. Wall and Washington (1991) stated, “African American men struggle with being respected as a ‘man’ within the community” (p. 73). They, as well as Icard (1986), observed that, within the African American community, men are expected to be successful, which is often defined in heterosexual terms, meaning marrying within the race, taking care of the wife and children, and role modeling good behavior for future African American men (Wall & Washington). Role modeling is a rather salient need given the general issues that African American males face in higher education. Washington and Wall (2006) suggested that it is absolutely possible for some African American males to experience college without ever having the opportunity to connect with an African American male mentor; add sexual orientation into the equation, and the chances become even slimmer. As a result, these students may never have a role model in college who can truly understand the complexity of their experiences.

Washington and Wall (2006) contended, “One of the issues facing a man of African descent with a homosexual or bisexual orientation is how he names himself and then how he becomes seen and named by others” (p. 179). Some African American males may affiliate
with the African American community or the gay community, but are less likely to use terms such as “gay” or “bisexual” because they have political ramifications and to a large extent are viewed as “whitewashed” terms (Washington & Wall). For the African American participants in Christian’s (2005) study, maintaining racial bonds was more important than sexual identity, and they did not openly identify as gay because their family and support systems were largely African Americans.

Given the perceived ramifications associated with identifying as gay or bisexual African American communities, African American men may choose to refrain from disclosing this aspect of their identity (Battle & Bennett, 2000; Mays, Chatters, Cochran, & Mackness, 1998; Ostrow, Whitaker, Frasier, Cohen, Wan, et al., 1991). Although “coming out” is viewed as a positive experience in sexual identity development, the construction of this process may be interpreted differently among African American males. “Many lesbian and gay African Americans do not feel that coming out beyond themselves and other close gay and lesbian friends is necessary—or even smart” (Wall & Washington, 1991, p. 71). For example, Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) found that the Black participants in their study rarely participated in gay-related activities, felt discomfort with disclosing their sexual identity, and shared this identity with few people. Akerlund and Cheung (2000) affirmed,

> Even if the coming out process is portrayed as a positive step for gay men and lesbians, it is always perceived as a difficult process for people of color to form a healthy gay/lesbian identity while simultaneously maintaining a positive ethnic identity. (p. 279)

The coming out process is likely to be different for African American men in comparison to their White counterparts because doing so means dealing with homophobia and traditional male expectations within the African American community and racism in the gay community (Han, 2007).

Recently, a number of significant publications have emerged that highlight the experiences of African American college men (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2004, 2006; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). Although critical toward understanding African American males in college, few studies focus specifically on their sexual identity. Aside from Washington and Wall (2006) and Harris (2003), both of whom focus on African American gay and bisexual men at PWIs, research has not focused on their sexual identity experiences, much less at an HBCU. Washington and Wall’s work explored identity development, spirituality, self-naming, and role models; whereas Harris focused on the dismal engagement of African American gay men at PWIs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To date there are few developmental theories that specifically capture the experiences of African American men who identify as gay or bisexual. Aside from the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI); (Jones & McEwen, 2000), many student development theories explore the processes of sexual and racial identities as if they are mutually exclusive processes. This presents the development of African American men in a disjointed framework. Attempting to “fit” the participants of this study into a “hodge-podge” of theories would be a disservice to their experiences. Furthermore, doing so would ostensibly ignore the intersecting nature of identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. In essence, “simple two- or three-category schemes often may fail to capture the complexity of many lives” (Patterson, 2000, p. 1052).

Moreover, despite assertions of diverse
participant pools, the majority of sexual identity development theories are based upon the experiences of largely White samples. Critiques of existing theories of LGBT identities indicate they are outdated, too linear and discrete in nature, grounded in male experiences that rarely account for lesbian identity, lack attention to bisexual identities, and have homogeneous samples (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Levine & Evans, 1991). Poynter and Washington (2005) stated, “Theories of identity development rarely address overlapping and multiple identities and how they intersect” (p. 42). They and others (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) asserted the need for identity development theories to acknowledge the complexity of multiple identities. For example, how do LGBT identities intersect with African American identities? This does not suggest, however, that some commonality of experience does not exist among LGBT individuals regardless of race or gender. Patterson (2000) argued, “Felt attractions, actual sexual behavior, and sexual identities may match one another for some individuals, but for others the situation may be quite different” (p. 1052). This study does not produce a new theory of gay or bisexual African American men and, although the MMDI provides a lens to better understand simultaneous developmental experiences (Abes et al.; Jones & McEwen), a need still remains for a developmental theory of sexual identity, based upon empirical studies, that clearly accounts for the experiences of African American LGBT populations.

Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, and Soto (2002) conducted a study to examine the influence of dual-identity development on the psychosocial functioning of African American gay and bisexual men. Extending Sedenos’s (as cited in Crawford et al.) work, Crawford et al. discussed four identity statuses for this population: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. African American men with an assimilation status have a low sexual identification and high racial/ethnic identification. These men have no vested interest in the gay community but feel strongly connected to the African American community. Men reflective of the integration status strongly identify with their sexual and racial identities and are involved with the agendas of both communities. Men in the separation status have a strong connection to their gay or bisexual identity but very little connection to their African American identity. The marginalization status refers to men who have little to no identification with their sexual identity or their African American identity. Moreover, they have no interest in these communities. This model is important for framing this study because it specifically addresses some of the ways in which African American men may view their racial and sexual identities. It deals less with development and more with where they currently see themselves.

The second perspective that provided insight for this study was queer theory. The term “queer theory” was introduced by Teresa de Lauretis in the 1990s to cleverly disrupt the brewing “complacency” and “homogenizing discourse” that characterized much of the scholarship within LGBT studies (Halperin, 2003). Queer theory has a host of applications across disciplinary contexts. A major goal of queer theory is to “destabilize and critique heterosexuality, emphasize sexual diversity, draw attention to gender specifics and frame sexuality as institutional rather than personal” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999, p. 511).

Scholars agree on a number of general ideas about queer theory. For example, queer theory is particularly concerned with deconstructing heteronormativity, or the normalization of gender and sexuality into stable, finite, or binary identities (Abes &
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Kasch, 2007; Pinar, 2003). Queer theory is also committed to destabilizing “key hegemonic practices which produce ‘normalized’ and limited representations of heterosexuality and operate to police expected gendered behaviors and norms” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999, p. 510). Queer theorists assert that gender and sexuality are socially constructed identities and that how one understands and names their experiences with these social constructions is mediated both internally and externally by the self and environment. Moreover, identities have fluidity, ultimately shifting and altering based upon the context of experiences. Queer theory acknowledges the interplay of sexuality, gender, race, class, culture, and other identities that significantly impact the changing nature of lived realities. It also critiques the power dynamics deeply embedded in the prevailing construction of sexual identities. For example, a dominant construction of sexuality is the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality, where the former is viewed as normal and the latter is deemed unnatural and abnormal. Additional binaries include male and female, masculine and feminine, and man and woman. Such binaries are not only confining but also reinforce institutionalized behaviors that privilege certain identities over others (Quinlivan & Town). Queer theory challenges the manner in which privilege is embedded in gendered and sexualized identities and contests the “othering” of those who do not fit neatly into prescribed heteronormative categories. Thus, “nonheteronormative practices and subjects [serve] as crucial sites of resistance” (Green, 2007, p. 28)

The incorporation of Crawford et al.’s (2002) work along with queer theory scholarship is pertinent in providing a lens through which the findings of this study can best be understood. Although Crawford et al.’s statuses offer insight into the salience of race and sexuality in the lives of African American males, queer theory reminds us that identities are fluid and constantly shifting based on experiences and context. Moreover, queer theory re-centers discourse, allowing for the challenging and dismantling of how sexuality is constructed to maintain marginalization. Together, these theoretical perspectives examine ways in which racial, sexual, and gender identities align for some and hang in contentious balance for others.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a constructionist paradigm that guided how interpretations were made regarding participants meaning-making of their sexual identity experiences within their given campus context. The underlying assumption of this paradigm is that reality is not discovered but, instead, socially constructed and shaped by actors (Crotty, 1998; Esterberg, 2002). Broido and Manning (2002) summarized four common themes that shape the constructionist paradigm: (a) relationships are subjective and mutually shaping; (b) realities are complex and infinite; (c) values of the researcher, participants, setting, and theory influence the research; and (d) what emerges from the research is context-driven. Given the philosophical framework, I chose a phenomenological case study research approach. The central phenomenon focused on being an African American gay or bisexual man at an HBCU. The research questions included, “How do African American men make meaning of their gay or bisexual sexual identity?” “How do they disclose this aspect of their identity with others?” and “How do they perceive their experiences at an HBCU?” The goal of phenomenological research is to identify and examine phenomena through the lived perspectives of those who personally experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Researchers who use this approach, “search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the
central underlying meaning of the experience” (Creswell, p. 52). Phenomenological research enables the researcher to describe, interpret, and report data that informs how educators approach their work with different student populations. Case study research provides greater understanding of a phenomenon within a contextual setting (Yin, 1993). The contextual setting is Scott College, an HBCU in the Southeast. Merriam (1998) noted, “The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon” (p. 29). In other words, the HBCU at which the participants in this study attend can reveal much regarding how they make meaning of their sexual identities. Given that case studies are “anchored in real-life situations” they illuminate participants’ meanings associated with the phenomenon under study (Merriam, p. 41).

With the assistance of the Vice President of Student Affairs at Scott College, snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify participants. The participants ranged in age, academic discipline, and status. Table 1 provides demographic data of this group.

Data collection consisted of one individual, semistructured, face-to-face interview lasting 2 to 3 hours, with 6 African American college men who self-identified as gay or bisexual and attended the same HBCU. I also participated in one preliminary meeting with 4 of the 6 participants. The goal of this meeting was to establish trust and rapport with participants. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) noted that the process of establishing relationships with participants tends to serve the researchers’ interests. In this case, the participants initiated the preliminary meeting, and I believe it was mutually beneficial. The majority of the time was spent responding to their questions about the purpose of the research, my motivations for conducting it, and contributions of the findings. They also wanted to know more about me as a person and my assumptions as I approached the study. I spent a significant amount of time acknowledging the sensitivities associated with their sexual identities and explaining my positionality. In addition, I spent time with the participants beyond the interview setting when they invited me to dinner and subsequently to a nightclub they frequented. They insisted going to the club would give me a better sense of their social lives. I also attended homecoming events in which they were heavily involved. I remained totally open to experiences they felt were important toward building a greater understanding of their lives. Jones et al. (2006) asserted, “Establishing rapport and developing trust take time, care and persistent attention throughout the research” (p. 76-77). Given that

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my visit to their institution spanned a short time frame, the intensity of my involvement with the students was extensive, allowing us to foster on-going relationships.

Once data collection was completed, the interviews were professionally transcribed. The analysis began with *epoche*, which involved an extensive examination of reflective notes that were taken prior to, during, and following data collection. Reviewing the notes helped me to acknowledge the thoughts, assumptions, and preconceived biases that I held, allowing the voices of the participants to emerge rather than my own (Creswell, 1998). The next phase of the analysis involved phenomenological reduction or *bracketing*. I examined the phenomenon by identifying and interpreting key quotes, generating the meaning behind the quote, and ascertaining how the meaning revealed the essence of the phenomenon. Rossman and Rallis (2003) contended that the process of bracketing is essential in qualitative research because of the role of the researcher in constructing the study. I then engaged in horizontalization wherein participants’ extracted statements were examined as having equal value. I noted quotes that materialized during the analysis that resonated with the research questions and the phenomenon under investigation. The statements were then clustered into 22 nonrepetitive units of meaning. I generated five themes from these meaning fields to accurately portray the participants’ experiences, wrote textual (what participants experienced) and structural (how participants experienced it) summaries for each theme, and constructed a composite depiction that captured the essence of the participants’ experiences as African American gay or bisexual men (Creswell; Patton, 2002).

**LIMITATIONS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Meyer (1995) declared, “Individuals who do not accept themselves, and who have not successfully ‘come out,’ are less likely to participate in studies of gay men than individuals who accept themselves” (p. 40). Therefore one of the limitations of this study is that the men who participated in this study may have demonstrated a somewhat healthier identity, confounding some of the stressful and difficult experiences that students who have not “come out” may have expressed. In other words, the men in this study represent experiences that in all likelihood are that much more difficult to navigate for African American males who are still grappling with their sexual identity. This assertion is supported by Wall and Evans (1991) who opined, “It is most difficult to find out what those individuals who are at the earliest stages of development are thinking and feeling” (p. 33).

As an African American heterosexual woman, I am aware of how my experiences and understanding of African American gay and bisexual men may have affected how I interpreted the data. To ensure trustworthiness, I practiced reflexivity throughout the process of this study by maintaining a journal in which I continuously asked myself about which things surprised me and why. I also enlisted the assistance of four African American male peer debriefers, two of whom are educators, three identified as gay men, and three graduated from HBCUs. They were asked to critique and to problematize my interpretations. For example, one of the debriefers challenged me to rethink how labels are used to identify one’s sexual identity. Specifically, he contended, “Oftentimes, African American men don’t use terms such as ‘gay’ because these labels are deemed too confining.” His feedback along with others helped add depth and complexity into my interpretations of the participants’ voices. I wanted to ensure that this research would be a true contribution to knowledge rather than a reproduction of societal oppression. I also worked very closely...
with the participants to confirm and challenge my interpretations through member checking, which occurred during and immediately following the interviews. Participants also received transcripts of their interview to review and revise. The participants offered detailed suggestions to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations. Another limitation of this study is that only one interview was conducted with the participants. Although the interviews were lengthy, additional interviews would have added to the richness of the data.

I also considered the transferability of the data in this study because each participant represented a unique perspective (Patton, 2002). Transferability would allow readers to determine the relevance of the participants’ stories to their own experiences and ascertain whether the implications and recommendations could be contextualized beyond the participants’ experiences. In short, I did not assume that every African American male who identifies as gay or bisexual has the same experiences of the study participants, nor did I assume that the context of the HBCU in this study is the same as other campuses.

Trustworthiness was also established through the participants trust in me as a researcher. Their initial trust may have stemmed from the fact that the Vice President of Student Affairs of Scott had recommended me and they had great respect for and trusted him. The other indication of trust emerged as each participant asked me why I was conducting this study. The participants repeatedly commented that they were pleased to see that someone was interested in their experiences. Another aspect that strengthened this study was the number of participants. Both Patton (2002) and Polkinghorne (1989) contended that phenomenological research has no finite number of participants. However, they conveyed that participants must have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The content of this manuscript stems from a larger multi-campus study of African American LGB students at HBCUs. Given the sensitive nature of this research topic, it was extremely difficult to access and recruit participants. I anticipated interviewing at least three students on the campuses I visited. However, I interviewed six at Scott College. Surprisingly, much of what participants shared in the interviews was similar in nature, and as I spoke with each student individually, categories increasingly emerged across interviews. Jones et al. (2006) noted, “Saturation occurs when the researcher begins to hear (or observe, or read) the same or similar kinds of information related to the categories of analysis” (p. 71). My sense was that had I interviewed more African American men who identified as gay or bisexual on the campus, similar themes would continue to emerge. However, six was the maximum number of participants I could recruit. Wall and Evans (1991) explained the difficulty that researchers have in finding participants due to the ramifications associated with having an LGBT identity. I owe a great debt to the 6 students who agreed to participate.

**FINDINGS**

It’s Just Not That Deep . . .

This theme focuses on how the participants identified themselves and the meaning they placed on this identity to navigate their life experiences while in college. I began each of the interviews by asking participants to describe themselves and their background and to tell me about the identities that shaped who they were. In asking this question, I only sought an opportunity to get to know participants prior to moving into the interview protocol. However, as I examined how they described themselves and their characteristics, a trend emerged. All of their descriptions rarely if at
all encompassed a sexual identity. For example, after Denzel discussed where he was born and raised, his major, and his siblings, he described himself as “Black, male, 19 years old, raised in upper middle class suburbia . . . I’m Baptist Christian.” When Giovani described himself, he explained, “I just call myself Black. . . . As for who I am, I’m Black. I’m a male, I’m educated. I’m spiritually connected to a higher power.” In another case, Keith stated,

Well, um, a Black male, 21 years old, attending Scott College. . . . I’m a pretty outgoing person; like I’m really social. . . . I’ve always been a real goal-oriented person. That pretty much sums it up in a nutshell. . . . Like if I had to explain myself to somebody I would say that I’m a Black male and I wouldn’t label myself any further than that.

Consistently, they all referred to themselves using two descriptors, “Black” and “male.” None of the participants placed a high priority on their sexual identity, and it never seemed to be particularly salient. Denzel plainly stated, “Being homosexual, does not define who you are.” George described one reason that this trend was so prevalent among their self-descriptions stating, “It’s just not that deep.” In other words, their sexual identity was not what they perceived to be a “salient defining identity.” For example, Wil commented,

I feel like I know myself outside of my sexuality. Like I am “me” first and then this. . . . Personally I never let my sexuality be so deep where it really, really affects a part of my life. Maybe I downplay this and maybe this is my problem but I treat my sexuality like, “I like frosted flakes.” . . . I strongly believe I’m a person first.

Similarly, Mark stated, “It’s just such a small aspect of my life and most of my friends are straight.” Another factor for them was that heterosexuals do not define themselves by their sexual identity. Keith offered,

I’ve never let it take complete control of me and my identity. If I was straight I don’t think that I would identify myself with my sexuality, so it didn’t really influence anything too much. It’s just like a part of me like so many other things that don’t necessarily impact me.

In essence, the men expressed that the only thing that made them different from any other African American male on campus was that they were attracted to men.

Four of the 6 specifically mentioned the importance of race. Denzel noted, “I don’t think it would be fair to my African American identity or my male identity to say that this is any more important than they are. I think it’s just an added aspect.” George’s comments encompassed much of what the men shared regarding why race was more significant than their sexuality. He explained:

As an individual . . . I’m a gay man or a bi-man or whatever, but I’m also an African American man. And so the question then becomes what’s the priority. . . . I feel that every single time as of right now, the homosexual responsibility needs to take the backseat to the African American. . . . For me the issue is that as Black people we are far more disenfranchised than the homosexual people . . . we don’t have anybody fighting for us like they do.

The Precarious Question of Women

Each of the participants shared how they came to understand their sexual identity. Their responses represented a spectrum. Consistent among their responses was the feeling that they were “born this way,” that they “always knew something was there,” and that it was not a “choice.” Wil described his sexual identity as “gay,” but shared, “I think that’s still to be determined for me.” Wil had accepted his attraction to men and was at a point where he was internally processing the attraction and his level of comfort with it.
In comments from 4 of the 6 participants, the issue of intimacy with women arose. Although the participants recognized their attraction to men, their comments suggested that a struggle existed due to simultaneous attraction to women. George described his sexuality with more fluidity and discussed the possibility of being in a relationship with a woman. He noted, “I just say as of right now I’m sexually free and cavalier. . . . The sexual partners that I’m enjoying happen to be men. But . . . if a good woman came along, I would consider a relationship with her.” Denzel also explained his attraction for women, but did not consider himself to be bisexual. He stated, “I’m still attracted to girls. I don’t label myself as bisexual because I think sexuality is more than just an attraction. . . . I feel like I won’t connect with a girl emotionally and it would never be more than sex.” Giovani stated, “Well, I’ve known all my life . . . I wasn’t one of the people who just got turned out in college.” As he discussed his experiences, he noted, “I’m still open to marrying a woman.” He often made reference to his former girlfriend who was now his best friend. Although he agreed that his attraction to men was not a choice, he believed that he could consciously choose the person he wanted to love and his best female friend was worth so much to him that he was willing to choose her.

Keith described himself as bisexual. He defined bisexuality in the following way:

I think that by definition it is having an attraction or being intimate with males and females. In my particular case, I’ve always had an attraction towards males and females. But recently, my attraction to guys seems to be stronger than it is to females.

He later described in the following excerpt how he sees his bisexuality:

I know it’s not something you can choose. . . . From early on, I identified with both sides. . . . I started having sex with males and females at the same time. I actually started with females first . . . that’s because then my attraction to females was stronger. But even still there was something about males that intrigued me. And over a period of time that kind of overpowered my feelings towards females. I have to accept this cause this is how I feel . . . and I was like you know maybe this is just a phase. But it’s not a phase.

Although he was attracted to women, Keith, like Denzel, refused to engage in any relationships with them because he could not be emotionally committed. Mark identified as “homosexual” and had accepted it after being truthful with himself. He stated, “I think it’s something that’s always there. . . . I believe that it’s something you are born with. I don’t think it’s something you can choose.”

There’s a Time and Place for Everything

This theme explains participants’ perspectives on disclosing their sexual identity and emerged when the participants discussed to whom they would divulge their sexual identity. They discussed whom they told, the process of having the conversation, and the benefits and consequences of telling others. For them, coming out was not a public process. They did not feel a sense of urgency to disclose their sexuality to others. Understanding themselves and coming to terms with their sexual identity was most important. Some were willing to share their sexual identity more willingly than were others if asked, but they all agreed that it was not something that needed to be broadcast. All discussed situations where they made conscious decisions regarding to whom they would disclose. Denzel’s statement, “I’m a strong believer that there’s a time and a place for everything,” represented a consensus among the comments expressed in interviews. The
people with whom they shared their identity were usually friends. Giovani stated, “I don’t talk about it. It’s not important. Why do you need to know? I execute and I bring results; that’s all you need to know. . . . It depends on the situation . . . I don’t broadcast.”

All of the participants in this study were selectively out, meaning they carefully selected to whom they would disclose their sexual identity. The participants were so selective that at least 5 of the 6 would offer an extended pause when I approached the topic of sexuality in the interviews. Keith attempted to explain this phenomenon of “pausing” while sharing how he discloses his sexual identity:

It’s because. . . . You know why? Probably because if you were just someone I didn’t know I would just be like, “I’m straight. I’m a heterosexual, like why would you ask me that?” But because of the setting [referring to our interview], I would have to say I’m a bisexual male. If asked that on an ordinary basis I wouldn’t say that. [I would say] I was straight.

The idea of being asked about their sexual identity was problematic for all of the participants. However, their responses to being asked were different. For example, Mark stated that he would divulge his sexual identity if asked, but does not “wave it around” because it is only one aspect of his identity. However, other participants could neither fathom why others were so concerned about their sexuality nor understand the relevance of knowing. Therefore instead of immediately disclosing that identity, they wanted to know why the question was asked. George explained:

’Cause if someone were to ask, first I don’t think it’s any of their damn business . . . why is it going to be relevant to you? And that’s with anything about me. I’m going to question them first. . . . But if it was somebody that I was comfortable with [I would] because I know that when they see me they don’t see that [referring to his sexuality]. They see George who’s all this other stuff and “Oh yeah, he’s gay.”

Denzel explained how he deals with the notion of disclosing his sexual identity, how doing so would say nothing about who he is, and the subjectivity involved in the process:

When people would say, “How old are you?” I’d say, “Why is that important?” You knowing how old I am is not going to tell you anything about me. . . . the way you get offended by people judging your age is the same way you should be offended by people judging your sexuality. It does not define who you are. . . . my sexuality does not precede me. You don’t know “that gay guy” and then later find out who I am. You know me, you know my name, you know my accomplishments, and then you might later find out that I’m gay which at that point it’s a complete afterstatement because I’ve already established myself. . . . Like it depends on the person. . . . I’ve had to approach it differently with everybody, but I do first establish myself, second establish our relationship, and then now I know you and the kind of person you are, now I know how to approach this with them.

Disclosure was also problematic because they did not see why they needed to be so quick to disclose when heterosexuals do not. Keith explained,

The only people that know are the people that I choose to tell. . . . you know, if a girl tries to approach me or whatever, I’m not like, “Well I’m bisexual.” I don’t feel it’s necessary. I cause like heterosexual people don’t walk up and say, “I’m heterosexual, hey how ya doing?”

Participants discussed the intrinsic value of disclosing their sexual identity to others. One benefit was that by sharing this information, their relationships with friends were strengthened and made them feel more comfortable. George stated,
Like I see them [referring to his friends] every day and I’m with them all the time, so it just didn’t make sense . . . it allows me to be so much more comfortable around them. It allows us to have the relationship that we do because I’m not hiding anything and because I’m not living a double life; because I don’t have to maintain an image for them.

Denzel discussed how one friend to whom he disclosed felt “completely honored that I would trust him enough to tell him that.” Keith also described a situation that ushered in disclosure to friends and ultimately led to a better relationship with his friends. He, like the others, found that those who were considered friends usually suspected that participants were attracted to men. He stated,

Now all of my closest friends know. And all of my closest friends are straight . . . . They know and they’re real accepting of it. I think me telling them actually made us closer. It feels like I don’t have to hide anything.

It’s Better to be Low Key

In the fourth theme, participants discussed some of the consequences associated with disclosing their sexual identity. Disclosure had both personal and psychological ramifications. One consequence dealt with future aspirations. All of the participants had anticipated working professionally in high profile careers. As a result they felt it was important to maintain a low-key sexual identity. By doing so, their plan was to establish themselves within their respective profession and do excellent work so that if and when others learned about their sexuality, it really would not matter. Keith commented on maintaining discretion about his sexuality:

You have to have some type of restraint and discretion in everything that you do. Especially right now because I want to go into entertainment . . . and so once you go public then you have all types of people going into your past . . . And the reality is no matter how comfortable you are with yourself, society still looks at homosexuality and bisexuality in a certain light. And if you don’t protect your own name . . . it can stop you from a lot of opportunity . . . Like really be used against you.

Stereotyping and essentializing were other consequences that the participants articulated. Keith explained, “I don’t openly admit things because I don’t want people to stereotype me.” He also explained that if a situation arose where he was confronted with being bisexual he would respond, “I’m straight and argue up and down and tooth and nail . . . that I’m straight.” The participants expressed that a major stereotype associated with Black men was that they all were flamboyant, feminine, and loud. Although they understood the diversity among Black gay and bisexual men, they believed that society was unwilling to accept these differences and only wanted to view this population in one stereotypical way. Denzel stated, “You cannot go into public acting wild, flamboyant, loud, ignorant because that is where these negative connotations come from.”

A third consequence mentioned was the loneliness or isolation that can occur when there is no one with whom to share that part of themselves. For example, Wil noted,

People get upset with me because I don’t spill my guts like some of my friends do . . . and so I think the gay aspect of it has just been a lot, cause I’ve had to deal with it kind of like on my own.

Giovani also offered that he had experienced moments when he felt like he was on “eggshells” because he couldn’t, “say things I truly think sometimes,” thus his decision to not share with others led to some discomfort.

As they discussed the notion of disclosure, I learned that the participants’ perspectives
differed with regard to some aspects of disclosing their identity. Some were willing to take extra measures either to hide their identity or make it more elusive whereas others were not. When Denzel was in high school, he was adamant about keeping his sexual identity private. He stated, “In high school I was a complete closet case. Like no one knows. If you know I might kill you and dump your body in the river [laughing]. So you can’t tell anyone else.” Although he admitted that he has moved beyond denial, sharing with others is a difficult process for him that can induce feelings of anxiety. Keith described himself as “creative” when he talked about covering his identity. He noted, “I really embellish a lot of things. I cover up things. That’s pretty much how I deal with it because I do so much like with school and work, I’ll just say I’m too busy to go out. Or say if they’re [referring to women] really trying to talk to me, I might have a kid . . . I’m really creative.

Wil and Mark believed there was no point in compromising their sexual identity by hiding it from others. Wil commented, “I had a problem with talking in code and saying ‘she’ instead of ‘he’ and saying this instead of that. And I hate that. If we’re going to talk let’s talk. And I think when I stopped talking in code then people started to know.

He further noted that oftentimes people felt uncomfortable with his confidence. He stated, “So personally I think that makes some people uncomfortable. That I don’t have to tell you a single lie. . . . People are so intrigued how I can go about my daily and be gay.” They each had reached a point where they thought that hiding this aspect of their identity was neither necessary, nor healthy. Mark stated, “The thing that made me decide, “OK, I can’t do that” is all these men that have been married for 20 years and coming out and saying they’re gay. I think that’s so unfair to their wives. That’s why I say, “OK, I cannot do that. I cannot lead that lifestyle.” So I think the influence for me was more those people that are living a fake life.

Placing “The Gay Thing on the Back Burner”

This theme focuses on how students experienced their sexual identity within the campus environment and how they managed this particular aspect of their identity on campus. This theme highlights their general thoughts about the campus, how topics of same-sex relationships were addressed on campus, and how their sexual identities had to be sacrificed before being tolerated. The participants expressed generally positive experiences at Scott College. For example, Denzel noted, “I personally feel like all Black students should go to an HBCU. It’s such a cultivating experience. Like for the first time everybody wants to see you succeed, everybody. Like the janitors want to see you succeed. . . . I don’t think that’s something you get from a White institution. I think most HBCUs are very, very cultivating.

Mark echoed similar sentiments when he stated, “It’s been very rewarding to me. I have been able to be myself a lot more than I guess I would at home . . . I’ve learned a lot in class. I’ve been able to be involved. I have a more diverse friendship base than I ever would at any other college.

Out of all the respondents, Giovani described a very different experience at Scott College. He stated: “This school is a great institution for someone else, not me . . . they have a history of creating leaders or whatever.
It's that they figured out this equation, "Oh this works so now we use a cookie cutter and just repeat it a thousand times and produce leaders." It works for the majority. But they are trying to make me a cookie and this print doesn't work. You need a different one. They teach you how to be this certain Black man for corporate America. It's just a lot and it's just not me.

As the participants discussed the campus climate, they usually made a comparison with other HBCUs. They believed that Scott College was much more open and welcoming than were other institutions. Mark commented,

It’s more open and acceptable than it would be on most [HBCU] campuses. . . . I haven’t really been to too many other HBCU campuses to see how they are but I can’t imagine that they are as accepting as we are here.

They noted that in the classroom, discussion about same-sex relationships were not unfamiliar. For example, Mark stated,

In every class, I mean as a teacher when you look out in a classroom and know that thirty percent of your class is gay, to ignore that would be ignorant of you. So in every class it definitely comes up.

Keith expressed a slightly different point of view. Although the topic emerged in classroom settings, they were not given sufficient attention. He stated, “When it does come up, all of the views are like one way. ‘I hate homosexuals’ and that’s it. Not ‘I hate,’ but ‘it’s wrong.’”

The participants offered three perspectives on the topic of same sex relationships on campus. The first perspective was that the topic was taboo. Keith explained:

You seldom hear the topic be addressed on gay people. I can’t recall ever hearing of an awareness week or a seminar . . . everything is just like really hush, hush.

Like the guys on campus that are really flamboyant, they all hang together. So people identify those as the gay people . . . But really, the reality is there are a lot more. . . . So I think that, it just kind of goes unnoticed. . . . People want this school to be viewed in a positive light. Anything that steers away from that is kind of like taboo, like let’s not even go down that road.

The second perspective was that the people were aware of it, did not necessarily agree with it, but respected those who identified as gay or bisexual. Denzel stated:

Although Scott does not encourage homosexuality per se it is very accepted. Like we have policies against gay bashing that are probably stricter than most HBCUs. . . . Like you would be shunned for gay bashing here. . . . Like, if two guys were holding hands, and someone was to yell out “faggot,” people would not look at them holding hands, they would turn around and say, “What the hell is your problem?” Like straight people would say, "Did you really just call them a faggot?” Like you will be shunned here for gay bashing. You do it secretly; you whisper it. You better whisper that. . . . It’s still not being accepted yet, but at least at HBCUs it’s not being like frowned and shunned and [gay students are not treated like] black sheep . . . they might not be ready to accept it or encourage it, but they have gotten to the point where they’re not going to tolerate gay bashing.

The third perspective was that people were aware of it, but did not care to focus heavily on it as long as the student was taking care of business. George shared:

Administrators don’t give a damn because some of them are gay too. And if they’re not [gay] they’re in the same reality that it’s here and a person’s abilities and capacities aren’t contingent upon his sexual orientation. . . . You know some
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gay guys feel as though Scott is all about sweeping it under the rug. It’s not about Scott sweeping it under the rug; it’s about Scott wanting people to see you for you. So what, you’re gay. You brush your teeth in the morning too but everybody doesn’t have to know it. We just assume that you just take care of your business.

The political climate of the campus was also a consistent topic among the participants. All of them agreed that the campus climate was very political. Keith explained,

It’s very political. You really learn that it’s who you know, not what you know. Networking is really big here, and you just really have to kind of navigate your way through people and kind of see where your opportunities lie.

Similarly, Denzel shared,

Status on this campus comes from influence. If I were to tell you the five most popular people on this campus, one of them is the SGA President, one of them has just been nominated to be a Rhodes scholar, one of them is head of the judicial board. None of them are football players, basketball players, or track stars.

George noted that the campus environment was one in which students either “sink or swim.” He chose to swim by getting involved on campus and placing “the gay thing on the backburner.” As a result it was important for LGBT students to be highly involved and well known for their talents before their sexual orientation became public knowledge. George described one student leader in the following way:

Administrators and students alike respect him. When he walks on the yard people know his name and they go out of their way to speak to him. And I’m really glad about that because it allowed me to be comfortable with being gay because I know that when people see me they see George for who he really is.

This student was in some ways a role model for George because he demonstrated the possibilities that George would have in his leadership role. The student that George described was well respected and well known regardless of his sexual orientation. Keith also discussed one male student on campus who had achieved the necessary status to overcome any negative reactions regarding his gay identity. He stated,

Like everybody knows, but nobody really looks at him differently. . . . He’s social. He talks to girls, talks to guys, will do stuff with the SGA, will participate in different activities and clubs and organizations. So the more people you know and you form camaraderie with, they don’t look at your sexuality as much as opposed to if they don’t know you.

While respect was earned, the participants also had to be mindful of who they dated. George’s comments comprised a consensus of how the participants viewed relationships with other men on campus:

So there are categories of men with respect to sexuality or being gay. And category A is a “cunt.” For all intents and purposes he’s a punk. Everybody knows it, there’s no hiding it, and he’s comfortable with it, and he just does his thing on the campus. . . . Category B has the guys who are like really just effeminate. You would think they are gay but they’re not. They’re the metrosexual. . . . Category C is the “trade boys”: the people on the football team. Just guys that you just would really not think are gay, but really are. And then you have category D, which is what I date. Category D has the political kids. The Greeks. People with status who would not like their business put all out there because they have an image to maintain. Category D people only mess with category D people. . . . If I’m going to mess around with somebody at the cost of my image, I’m going to do it with somebody who has as much to lose as I have.
During the discussion of involvement, the participants mentioned that there was a recognized organization on campus for LGBT students. However, the membership in that organization was extremely low for several reasons. First, many students, particularly males did not want to be associated with the organization because, through membership, they feared others would become aware of their sexual orientation. Second, participation in the organization had political ramifications for those seeking status on campus, and some students did not want to be activists for gay rights. Third, participants did not see a need to really participate in the organization because they had their own support systems and social networks. Keith did not feel as if good supports were in place for LGB students on campus but also noted that if there were supports, students would not take advantage of them. He stated,

So, I think the biggest problem is that even if the school tried to do that [truly support an LGB organization] people would try to conceal their identity so much that if they’re not ensured that it’s going to be exclusive, they won’t participate, regardless. Like no matter how much they need their help.

George offered another perspective stating:

One, people who are gay on this campus probably are not comfortable enough to join something that’s out like that. And two, those that are comfortable don’t give a damn or don’t give enough of a damn to make it an activist part of their lives; and would I join it? Quite frankly I don’t see the need to. Like it’s just like I said, it’s just not that deep to me. . . . I’ll be far more effective in making it happen with the status that I have now as opposed to me being in the student organization.

Although the student organization did not appear to be particularly helpful or of interest to participants, they noted that they found support among friends. Their comments suggested that peers were the major source of support for LGB students. Mark shared that support generally came from other students. He said, “I mean where ever you turn you can find someone who probably is going through something similar as well and you can always talk to them.” Giovani, on the other hand shared a different perspective: “I’m very lonely. I don’t have many friends. Though I know tons and tons of people, I don’t have any close friends really. I don’t have any mentoring relationships.”

In the final phase of each interview, I asked the students about what they thought hindered full acceptance of LGBT students. Giovani, Denzel, and Keith offered comments that represent those expressed by the participants. They noted that tradition was by far the most relevant factor. Giovani stated,

And this school, it’s like going to a car dealership saying I want a Camry. This school says, “This is the only line of Camry we have. We don’t have a CD player, we have only tape players. We don’t have sunroofs. We don’t have automatic windows. No options. No anything. It’s just a great car. We produce it well. It runs good and it will last you a long time.

Denzel stated,

I think it’s safer for Scott to support [homosexuality] than it is for them to ignore it because of tradition. Scott is probably one of the most traditional HBCUs in America. I mean because of tradition there’s just certain things Scott will not let go of.

Finally, Keith commented,

I mean tradition has something to do with it I think . . . they’re deeply embedded in tradition and it’s like, “If times change, if people change we don’t care ’cause this is our curriculum. This is how we’ve been
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doing things. This is how we got things done and we are sticking to it.” And I think that a lot of times they do make changes but when they do make changes they are long overdue.

DISCUSSION

A number of important observations emerged from this study and lend themselves toward a discussion of how 6 African American college males who identified as gay or bisexual viewed their sexual identity as well as how they shared this aspect of themselves with others and their experiences on campus. In terms of how the men identified, it was obvious that their sexual identity was seen as a part of themselves, but not nearly as salient as other aspects, such as being “Black men.” Through recognition of the needs of the African American community, they tended to identify most with their race. This conclusion supports Christian’s (2005) findings. Sexuality did not emerge immediately in their discussions, likely due to their ability to attach less power to it or their decision to place emphasis elsewhere (campus organizations and leadership) until it was okay to be gay or bisexual. They all recognized the challenges associated with their sexual identity but did not allow it to consume them. They acknowledged several aspects of their identity including race, culture, religion, background, major, involvement, etc. Approaching identity in this way also seemed to be more intrinsically rewarding because they could see themselves beyond their attraction to men. Participants expressed themselves in ways that represented the assimilation stage of Crawford et al.’s (2002) model of psychosocial functioning of African American gay and bisexual men. Assimilation is most fitting because the participants expressed a greater connection to the African American community when they explained their identity rather than to their sexual orientation. This is not to say that their sexual identity carried no importance but that race and gender seemed to take center stage at this point in their lives. Moreover, issues affecting a broader LGBT community were not as significant to them. An alternative perspective could be that for these men, being an African American gay or bisexual man means having to choose between identities and ranking their importance (see Wall & Washington, 1991). As a result of perceived pressure to choose, their racial and gender identities took precedence over their sexual identity.

Another observation was how these men described their sexual orientation. They offered different descriptions for themselves and viewed their sexual identity in various meaningful ways. Their descriptions suggested a spectrum of sorts, with no obvious label. This finding is supported by Poynter and Washington (2005), who asserted, “For African Americans . . . the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender are often associated with White culture. As a result, many people of color distance themselves from these terms” (p. 45). For example, bisexuality did not always refer to attraction to both men and women. Indeed, some men who said they were gay were still attracted to women and open to the possibility of being with a woman somewhere down the road in their lives. For these men, it seemed their sexual identity was more of a present state of being, not necessarily a permanently fixed state in their lives. The one consistent factor mentioned among them all was that they were attracted to other men and had been intimate with them. However, the spectrum that they represented suggested fluidity within their definitions, which is supported by Jones and McEwen’s (2000) assertion that identity is fluid and dynamic.

With regard to use of language to identify themselves, there was a difference between
who they were attracted to and the actions they chose, or would choose, to take in any particular situation. In other words, it was possible to be attracted to a woman, while also fully engaging in intimate relationships with men, and to see oneself as bisexual, gay, or “sexually free.” This finding confirms what Washington and Wall (2006) noted about the likelihood of African American males to use these terms. Although Washington and Wall suggested that these terms are not used due to political ramifications or the terms being perceived as “whitewashed,” the participants’ comments offered some additional insight into why these terms are used less often. These concepts were somewhat limiting, connoted a stagnant or permanent status, and presented a direct contrast to the multiple viewpoints they had about their sexual identity. Using queer theory as a lens, the participants’ perspectives challenged categories of sexual identity that, while reinforced in mainstream society, are often limiting. Given the range of descriptions for how the participants viewed their sexual identity, it appeared to some degree that the terms “gay” or “bisexual” were not the most accurate concepts, but instead denoted a common denominator terms. That the men viewed themselves in different ways supports the notion that African American men are not a simple, monolithic group.

Authenticity within one’s sexual identity was also important to the participants. By authenticity, their responses suggested that, at bare minimum, it was necessary to have an internal understanding and acceptance of an attraction to men. They offered numerous stories of how some students on campus wanted to be gay because it was the “cool” way to be different. It was seen as a fad that people engaged in, but something about which they really had no comprehension. The participants explained that the same men who claimed they were suddenly gay, would likely graduate, marry a woman, and have children. This was different from some of the participants who were still open to marriage with a woman. Although they would always be attracted to men, they felt they could consciously choose to restrict that aspect of their sexuality to be with a woman. Thus, their sexuality was not something that could be turned on and off, but could be managed in a direction of their choosing. As the men mentioned, being attracted to men was not a choice; however, acting on that attraction was a choice and they believed they could control their actions. Again, much of what the participants said could be analyzed using queer theory because their perspectives do not fit neatly into prescribed categories. Upon reading their experiences, some dominant underlying themes about sexual identity are clearly being challenged. For example, from the participants’ perspective, it is possible to be attracted to a woman without considering oneself bisexual. Moreover, identifying as gay or bisexual does not necessarily preclude one from engaging in relationships with same-sex or opposite-sex individuals.

Another aspect of the findings was disclosure of their sexual identity, at times a very touchy topic for participants. They did not broadcast their sexual identity and believed doing so was unnecessary. They were highly selective about who they told and often found that the friends to whom they disclosed were honored by their decision to share and in some cases had suspected that they were attracted to men. A major benefit of sharing with friends was that it allowed participants to be open and comfortable, as opposed to feeling like they were hiding something. Thus, sharing involved intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Also, through disclosing to close friends, participants found a safe space to deal with the challenges of relationships and societal expectations. The participants were quite baffled and could not
understand why others on campus were so concerned about their sexual identity. Their responses suggested that those who wanted to know were not concerned about their well-being but more interested in fueling rumor mills and satisfying curiosities. The men viewed themselves as productive members of the campus community who brought results, thus their sexual identity was not important in the overall scheme of things. Moreover, they were not quick to disclose their identity because heterosexuals, whom most of their friends consisted of, do not. This finding confirmed the work of several scholars who agree that African American gay and bisexual men construct the coming out process very differently and are less likely to disclose their sexual identity (Battle & Bennett, 2000; Mays et al., 1998; Ostrow et al., 1991; Rosario et al., 2004; Wall & Washington, 1991).

In terms of how the campus environment influenced their meaning making, it was clear that all of the participants, with the exception of one, established a firm sense of congruence with the campus despite instances where their sexual orientation was not validated or recognized. The one student who did not necessarily feel a strong sense of congruence was able to successfully navigate the campus environment regardless of moments that reminded him of why he did not feel as if the institution was a good fit. They knew the importance of tradition and maintaining a positive campus image was at times contingent upon not having their sexual identity validated, which is why it needed to be “placed on a back burner.” Given that their race was validated, the HBCU environment was supportive. Therefore, the fact that their sexual identity was not always validated did not hinder these students from being successful. Moreover, had there been more resources, in all likelihood they would not have used them. This may be the case because the institutional culture aligned with their own perspectives on their sexual identity carrying less salience. It is important to note however, that although the participants did not explicitly state that their sexual orientation significantly impacted their collegiate experiences, the stories they shared indicated that, in their campus environment, being gay or bisexual carried certain ramifications, which required the participants to be particularly thoughtful about how they got involved, who they dated, and in whom they confided. The political nature of the environment was consistent in what the participants shared and their involvement was shaped by this climate. Renn (2007) found that participants joined LGBT organizations and activities and through their involvement they achieved leadership roles that, subsequently, reinforced their LGBT identity, whereas this study’s findings deviate from that experience.

The participants, while finding benefits in disclosure, also knew there would be consequences. Terms like “isolation,” “walking on eggshells,” and “being stereotyped” were realities associated with disclosing identity. It was clear that the consequences could have dire impacts on their psychological well-being if their disclosure was not well received by others. Although refraining from disclosure to others was a choice, to some degree it was stifling because of the consequences. In terms of balancing the consequences, sometimes loneliness or isolation was better than dealing with people who could not or were unwilling to comprehend the participants’ experiences. It was also better than being stereotyped. Stereotypes seemed to have a profound impact on the participants because they did not want to be placed in a group with every other man, particularly flamboyant men or those with effeminate characteristics. Most disturbing to the participants was the possibility of being associated with overtly flamboyant men.
The participants expressed that these men represented society’s stereotypical perspective of Black, gay men and wanted no association with this stereotype because they believed it was detrimental and proliferated negative stereotypes. This finding affirms Wall and Washington’s (1991) statement regarding the issue of earning respect as a “man.” Negative stereotypes associated with being feminine and flamboyant can affect how these men are perceived by others, prompting them to maintain stringent specifications about to whom they disclosed their sexual identity.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study raise several implications for how people, particularly heterosexuals, can better understand the experiences of the participants. Although the participants in this study were college students, it is possible that other African American men in and beyond college can relate to some of the experiences and perspectives they described. However, it is extremely important for student affairs educators and researchers to refrain from essentializing the participants’ experiences. When their experiences are essentialized, two things occur. First, the heterosexual/nonheterosexual binary is reinforced and the participants are placed in the larger context of nonheterosexual identities as abnormal (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Second, an inaccurate portrait is painted, creating an erroneous depiction of their experiences, and maintaining a system of oppression plagued with stereotypes that do very little to bring greater understanding to the larger educational community. Furthermore, Rhoads (1997) cautioned against over-generalizing the experiences of LGBT students, because doing so can compromise the integrity of research used to learn more about this population. The key is in understanding that, although the men in this study described similar experiences, a space still remains in which further research can explore the nature of the differences in their gay and bisexual lived realities, as well as the ways in which race and gender intersect with these identities (Wall & Evans, 1991). There must also remain recognition that identities such as race, gender, and sexuality only represent partial aspects of one’s identity.

Another implication of this study is the need to broaden the notion of what “coming out” means. Oftentimes this phrase is synonymously linked with a verbal expression of one’s identity. Individuals who do not come out are viewed as less developed, on the down low, or lacking authenticity where their sexual identity is concerned. This connotation is a stark contrast for the study participants. Thus student affairs educators must be mindful of how coming out is characterized in the literature, and extra caution should be taken to understand same-sex attraction through the lens of those who ascribe to it.

Sexual identity development is an ongoing process, and the men in this study are still negotiating their sexual identities. Their attraction to men is real for them and something that they understand at this point in time. However, their decisions about how they deal with this attraction and the associated societal challenges have the potential to change. The impetus for this change may rest in them gaining an increased awareness of the ways that societal stereotypes and homophobia on a larger scale relegates their sexual identity to the margins. Their increased awareness of how this identity is located in society, that is, silenced, treated as something that needs to remain invisible, or as if it is nonexistent, will likely engender thoughts about how their sexual identity affects other aspects of their lives. It will be important for those working with this population to understand that how
they name and experience their identities is not final but instead a continuous process.

Student affairs educators can play a significant role in helping these students deal with both negative and positive experiences related to their sexual identity. Negative experiences include feelings of depression and isolation, whereas positive experiences might involve establishing intimate relationships or a network of understanding friends. The participants would benefit from being able to talk about their sexual identity without judgment. As the findings indicated, the sheer possibility of having to deal with rumors, stereotypes, and ignorance is enough to keep some of them from speaking openly about their sexual identity. To a huge extent, the negative experiences have implications for the emasculation of the men in this study and those with similar experiences. When lumped into a category or stereotype where they feel that the overarching perception is that of flamboyant, loud, and feminine, African American men can be further marginalized, ultimately contributing to their internalization of these images and fueling internalized homophobia. Thus, the mentoring and role-modeling to which Washington and Wall (2006) referred can be an excellent resource for the participants, particularly in having the opportunity to benefit from interactions with people who genuinely care about their development and understand their identity.

The research described herein focused on experiences, many of which influenced or stemmed from the sexual identity development process. Thus, this study is not about development per se. However, future research should specifically examine the development of sexual identities among African American males as well as other racially underrepresented populations. Also, future research should examine the role of gender in how African American men present themselves and the extent to which masculine gender performance expectations influence their behavior and perceptions of gay or bisexual men who have a more feminine gender representation. Research should also examine the ways in which cultural scripts surrounding masculinity shape how African American males understand the convergence of their different identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and class. The participants did not view their identities as separate entities, but race, for example, emerged as significant. Thus, further examination is warranted on the factors that cause some aspects of their identities to emerge with more saliency than others and the various outcomes associated with establishing a more integrated identity. Moreover, the manner in which multiple identities may usurp or further proliferate oppression should be explored. Such research can inform how the participants deal with homophobia, heterosexism and other types of oppression. This implication not only relates to the participants’ experiences, but also reflects the earlier discussion of the limited nature of developmental theories and the need for more theories that acknowledge the complexity of multiple identities. Although this study focused on men, it is also important to consider how lesbians and bisexual women’s experiences may be similar or different (See Patton & Simmons, 2008).

The findings of this study indicated that peer support was the most significant resource for participants. Thus, HBCUs, and postsecondary institutions in general, should consider the creation of psychoeducational counseling groups, which can provide a safe space for developing identity. These campuses can also benefit from more partnering with the Human Rights Campaign to bring more education to the student body. Another recommendation is to examine institutional traditions to ascertain ways in which they exclude or marginalize members of the campus community. As Wall
and Evans (1991) noted, “the majority of social activities during the undergraduate years are heterosexually based” (p. 30). Consequently, students who do not identify as heterosexual would likely have a difficult time in deciding whether or not to participate in traditionally based campus events that occur at many HBCUs and are perceived to exclude LGBT students. HBCUs can also enhance the curriculum by offering a course on LGBT studies that could be counted toward general degree requirements or inviting speakers to campus who are knowledgeable about this topic and can offer sound perspectives to members of the campus community. Such efforts can lead to decreasing institutional homophobia (Walters & Hayes, 1998), while increasing support and education not only to LGBT students at HBCUs but to the entire campus community.

Student affairs educators should broaden their understanding of LGBT identities. Given what participants in this study shared, how individuals name their identity and the language they choose is important. Student affairs educators must be mindful of this by providing students the space to describe themselves rather than imposing descriptions on students. It is also important to look critically at the theories we use to guide our professional work. As noted earlier, student development theory, particularly theories pertaining to identity, are limiting in nature. Thus, as educators apply theory, these limitations should remain ever-present. Moreover, there is a clear and pressing need for additional theoretical frameworks. Wall and Evans (1991) purported, “The lack of research to support developmental theory is a problem. . . . The problem is even greater when one is seeking information specifically concerning the development of various subgroups, including ethnic, racial, differently-abled, or age-specific populations” (p. 32). In working with students, another recommendation is to encourage them to examine how their identities intersect. This encouragement should not involve students “ranking” identities, but perhaps acknowledging “salient” identities and understanding their degree of saliency and the internal and external factors that influence their perceptions of their identities. Student affairs educators should create programs that strategically encourage multiple identity exploration among students as well.

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