

Factors Affecting the College Choice of African American Gay Male Undergraduates: Implications for Retention

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Recent national statistics call attention to the precarious predicament of African American men in college, but scholars have focused almost exclusively on “highly visible” Black male subpopulations with little to no attention given to the experiences of marginalized subgroups such as African American gay males. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the college decision-making process and retention of Black gay men. Qualitative data collected from seven participants reveal insights into factors considered when choosing a college and conditions perceived as critical to their success in higher education. Implications for future policy, practice, and research are highlighted in the discussion section.

Several years ago, Ronald Roach (2001) posed a prescient question in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, “Where are the Black¹ men on campus?” And like many others since, Dr. Michael Lomax, then president of Dillard University, expressed concern about the comparatively low college enrollment rates of African American males: “I’m deeply troubled by the trend we see among African American males not opting to attend college at the same pace of Black women” (cited in Roach, p. 19). Despite concerns about the plight of African American males in

¹The terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

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higher education, compared to the relative success of Black women, and alarming national statistics indicating that Black women outnumber their male counterparts by 2 to 1—the largest “gender gap” among all racial/ethnic groups (Hawkins, 1996)—little was known about the experiences of Black men in college prior to 2000.

In response to this clarion call about the “Black male crisis” in higher education, dozens of studies and technical reports (e.g., National Urban League, 2007) about the (under-) representation of African American males in postsecondary education have been published since the turn of the century. While a few were published just before 2000, the swelling number of books, articles, conference presentations, and unpublished dissertations have focused on various subgroups of African American males including adolescents (Gibbs, 1988; Hopkins, 1997; Mincy, 1994); high school students who enroll in four-year colleges (Strayhorn & Savoy, 2008); undergraduate student leaders (e.g., Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn, 2007); graduate and professional students (e.g., Strayhorn, in press-a); faculty members (Flowers & Jones, 2003; Hooker & Johnson, 2007; Jackson & Crawley, 2003); athletes (Messer, 2006; Young & Sowa, 1992); members of Black Greek-letter organizations (BGLOs) (e.g., Harper & Harris, 2006); those attending 2-year institutions (Esters & Mosby, 2007; Flowers, 2006; Stevens, 2007; Wellbrock, 1997); economically disadvantaged students (Harris, 1995; Strayhorn, in press-c); gifted high-achievers (Grantham, 2004; Harper, 2003; Strayhorn, in press-d); and even low-achievers (Harris, 2006; Strayhorn & Spruill, 2008).

Not only has there been exponential growth in the number of studies about African American male subpopulations, but there also is enormous diversity in the kinds of topics covered. For example, scholars have devoted recent attention to African American males’ experiences in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields (e.g., Moore, Flowers, Guion, Zhang, & Staten, 2004; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003); engagement in educationally purposeful activities at historically Black colleges (e.g., Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004); retention at predominantly White institutions (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001-2002; Hood, 1992; Strayhorn & McCall, 2007); academic achievement (Davis, 1994; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2007); and intellectual development (Strayhorn, in press-b), to name a few.

While the current literature is important and supplies much-needed information to answer Roach’s (2001) provocative question, important gaps exist in the extant body of knowledge relative to Black male collegians. For instance, while some group-based analyses focus on “highly visible” African American males who tend to enjoy the admiration of their peers and oftentimes both faculty and staff (Ferguson, 2000) such as student leaders (Harper, 2003), gifted students (Bonner, 2001), and athletes (Messer, 2006; Rovai, Gallien, & Stiff-Williams,

2007), no recent studies were uncovered that explore the collegiate experiences of “invisible” or marginalized minority men such as African American gay male undergraduates.

Similarly, research that focuses on how college affects students (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and their decisions at critical junctures throughout the educational pipeline (e.g., high school, college entry, post-graduation, etc.) tends to emphasize changes—that is, growth, development, and learning—that are attributable to college attendance rather than how students’ initial decisions (e.g., aspirations, college choice, etc.) are shaped, managed, negotiated, and related to subsequent decisions (e.g., retention). If we are to respond fully to Roach’s (2001) discerning question, we must come to understand how certain Black men make decisions about enrolling in certain colleges and how such factors affect their ability to “stay” in college. The present study was designed to address this very issue.

Given the preponderance of literature on “visible” Black male populations, it is not surprising, but nonetheless problematic that we uncovered no studies, to date, that focused on the college choice process and retention of Black gay men at predominantly White institutions who, according to research, are likely to face a confluence of challenges that potentially complicate their success in college—not the least of which include social pathologies such as racism (Strayhorn, 2008a) and homophobia (Washington & Wall, 2006). It is out of this context that the imminent need for the present study grew.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research was to study the college decision-making processes of Black gay men at a predominantly White institution and to identify factors that they perceive as critical to their successful retention in college. Grounded in a constructivist epistemological framework, we employed narrative inquiry and in-depth interviews with seven Black gay men to understand (a) how they negotiated their college destination decisions and (b) factors they perceive as critical to their success in college. Our approach seemed justified as narrative inquiry permits one to understand the wholeness of human experience through data in the form of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition, one-on-one in-depth interviews allowed us to anchor the meanings attached to various experiences in the actual words and expressions of participants (Kvale, 1996). Two research questions guided the present study: a) What factors did African American gay males consider when choosing to attend a predominantly White institution? and b) What factors do Black gay males identify as critical to their success in college, as defined by retention?

Literature Review

The literature relevant to the present study can be organized into three general categories: research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student populations, research on African American males, and studies on college choice and persistence². To expand upon the summary provided earlier in the paper, this review of the literature is organized in accordance with these three foci.

Research on LGBT Populations

Research on LGBT adolescents and college students has burgeoned in recent years, largely focusing on the “constructed” identities (Abes & Jones, 2004; Dilley, 2005; Fassinger, 1998) and experiences (Fassinger, 1991; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003) of such students. Still others have focused on the process by which individuals come to understand themselves as LGBT people and how such understandings are reconciled with previously held perceptions of self (Cass, 1984; Jones & McEwen, 2000). For example, Cass identifies stages in which gay individuals struggle to resolve conflicts or tensions between perceptions of self and others (e.g., identify confusion, identify tolerance).

Another line of inquiry focuses on LGBT identity development. Prevailing theories of LGBT identity development (Cass, 1984; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1998) posit an orderly stage-wise progression from a private sense of self as non-heterosexual to a public acknowledgement or acceptance of the identity and integration of one’s LGBT identity into the “core self” (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Generally speaking, such models are useful in higher education in terms of praxis and have been used extensively for research purposes (e.g., Dilley, 2005; Fassinger, 1991; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). For instance, several scholars have employed these theories to provide recommendations for “promising practices” to student affairs professionals (Evans & Broido, 1999; Evans & Wall, 1991) and campuses throughout the country have created theory-grounded programs and services (e.g., Safe Zones) to meet the academic and social needs of LGBT students (Windmeyer, 2006).

While certainly useful, prevailing LGBT theories also are criticized for their limited applicability to within-group differences. That is, these theories are lacking in their ability to account for the intersectionality of multiple socially-constructed identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and those who face multiple developmental tasks (e.g., becoming Black, “coming out,” etc.). For instance, extant theories are limited in their

²The terms “retention” and “persistence” are used interchangeably, in consonance with the theme of this special issue.

applicability to the experiences of “invisible” (Ellison, 1952) racial/ethnic and sexual minorities, such as African American gay males. Black gay men experience multiple socially-constructed identities simultaneously rather than hierarchically (McCann & Kim, 2002). In addition, at least

theoretically, they are expected to manage successfully the development of their racial identity, gender identity, and sexual identity, which, at times, may be at odds with each other (Boykin, 1996). Thus, more information is needed about the experiences of African American gay males and factors that influence their success in college.

Research on African American Males

Recent national statistics indicate significant gaps across racial/ethnic and gender groups. For instance, while 75% of White students enroll in college after high school graduation, only 35-50% of African Americans do so. In addition, a large majority of African Americans who enroll in college are women. Further, African Americans earned only 9% of the 1.5 million bachelor’s degrees awarded in 2004, with less than half going to Black men. Finally, some reports suggest that Black men are least likely to enroll in college (compared to their peers) and most likely to drop out of college before completion (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Several factors may explain why Black men are sorely underrepresented in higher education. Black men are often described using disparaging terms such as dangerous, endangered, “at risk,” uneducable, threatening, and lazy, which generally reinforce negative stereotypes that some peers and faculty accept as true (Majors & Billson, 1992; Strayhorn, 2008b). The problem is exacerbated by the fact that some Black men internalize such beliefs which, in turn, become self-fulfilling, self-defeating, and self-threatening (Steele, 2000, p. 614). In addition, all of this can be intensified at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), where Black men may be one of few and, thus, engage more frequently with White peers and faculty. Still today, Blacks attending PWIs report feeling alienated, marginalized, socially isolated, unsupported, unwelcomed (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Garibaldi, 1984) and under undue pressure to prove themselves academically (Strayhorn, in press-d).

Indeed, there are other challenges that Black men face. This is particularly true for “invisible” subpopulations, such as African American gay male undergraduates. Black gay men not only face concerns similar to their heterosexual counterparts (e.g., undue pressure to prove themselves, unwelcomed, etc.), but they also contend with the negative beliefs of others about homosexuality, intense homophobia in the Black community (Washington & Wall, 2006), and even racism within the gay community (Boykin, 1996). Despite the seemingly insurmountable barriers to their success, the research literature is virtually silent on the experiences of Black gay men in college. Additionally, though we

know a great deal about the challenges that Black students face at PWIs and factors that influence student retention, no studies were readily uncovered that focus on the intersection of these lines of inquiry. It is out of this context that the present study grew.

College Choice and Retention

College choice is a complex process. The weight of evidence suggests that three sets of factors influence college decisions: academic, financial, and individual traits/experiences. For instance, one line of inquiry stresses the importance of academic performance in high school (e.g., Alwin & Otto, 1977) and the location of a college or university (Anderson, 1994). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-phase model of student college choice consisting of three qualitatively distinct phases: predisposition, search, and choice (for more information, see Strayhorn, 2006).

Similarly, the study of retention is complex and enigmatic. In fact, some scholars refer to it as a “departure puzzle” (Braxton, 2000). In brief, Tinto (1993) posited that student attributes form individual goals and commitments. As goals and commitments interact over time with institutional experiences (formal and informal), students’ involvement in the formal and informal academic and social realm of college life affects his decision to stay in college or leave. Thus, we sought to understand the academic and social factors that Black gay males perceive as critical to their success, including their initial goals, institutional experiences, and dimensions of academic and social integration.

So, while professionals in higher education know a good deal about factors posited as critical to the college choice of students in general (e.g., location, institution’s reputation, aid) (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Manski & Wise, 1983; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), factors influencing students’ “choice set” (e.g., access to information, perceptions of ability to pay) (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hearn, 1991), and factors associated with retention (Tinto, 1993), we know relatively little about factors that condition or constrain the college choice and retention of Black gay male undergraduates at PWIs. The next section describes how we collected and analyzed data.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project that centers on the experiences of African American gay males at predominantly White and historically Black colleges in the United States. The present study focuses on Black men at predominantly White institutions only. This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach (Merriam, 1998). We selected this methodology on the basis of a) its epistemic underpinning

about the very nature of knowledge and multiple realities, b) its flexibility due to the exploratory nature of the study and its potential for building a foundation upon which future research can stand, and c) its congruent positioning with our own ethics and values as researchers in terms of how invisible and voiceless people can be seen and heard without doing damage to their authentic “voice.”

Site and Sample

This study was conducted at a four-year public land-grant institution located in the southeast region of the United States. The research university enrolls approximately 22,000 undergraduates and over 6,000 graduate students. Of these, approximately 50% are men and only 7% are African American or Black.

Given the specialized focus of this study, we selected participants who were “information rich” as Patton (1990, p. 169) aptly described. That is, participants were sought who would maximize what could be learned about the experiences of African American gay men at White colleges, namely those who had a “lived experience.” This is known as “purposeful sampling” and is most appropriate for this study as it seeks to understand the experiences of a specific, bounded group.

We worked with the President of the gay student alliance on campus to identify and recruit a pool of prospective participants. Researchers informed the President that prospective participants must satisfy each of the following criteria: a) enrolled as a student (either full-time or part-time) at the university, b) identify as African American or Black and c) self-identify as “gay” or homosexual. All prospective participants were asked, by the President, to participate in this study and to share their email address with the principal investigator. This resulted in six potential participants.

Second, participants were contacted via email, by the researcher(s), and invited to participate in a one-on-one, face-to-face, in-depth interview. All six prospects agreed to be interviewed. As the research evolved, additional participants were identified and invited to participate in the study; this is a form of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) wherein existing participants were asked to recommend the study to other Black gay men at the university with whom they were familiar. These steps yielded another participant, bringing the total sample to seven. Since we wished for our interviews to be candid, we promised them anonymity. However, they can be described in “rich, thick” terms (Geertz, 1973). Table 1 summarizes additional details about the sample. Pseudonyms are used to identify each participant in the study.

Table 1

Description of Study Participants (N = 7)

| Pseudonym | Major | Minor | Clubs & Activities | Mom's Job | Dad's Job | Career Aspiration |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>Terrance</i> | Spanish | Dance | Dance Company | Office Manager | Shift Supervisor | Business or Education |
| <i>Leon</i> | Vocal Performance | Theatre | All Campus Theater | State Internal Revenue Specialist | Owner of a construction company | Musical Theatre Performance |
| <i>Blake</i> | Finance | Accounting Collateral | Cheerleading | House Manager or Girls Program | Manager | Coaching Cheerleading |
| <i>Lamont</i> | Journalism & Electronic Media and French | N/A | Orientation Leader, Model UN, College Democrats | Nurse | Manager | Media Management |
| <i>Lawrence</i> | Architecture | Japanese | Employee: Fast Food and Retail | Self-employed | IT Specialist | Business Architecture |
| <i>Desmond</i> | Public Relations, Psychology | Business Administration | NAACP, Honor Societies, Black Cultural Programming Committee | County Health Inspector | City Clerk's Office | Lifestyle Public Relations Practitioner |
| <i>Sidney</i> | Opera | Dance | Campus Opera/Theater | --- | --- | Famous opera singer |

With the limited prevalence of African American men enrolled in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) and “gay male” representing an invisible identity that is often intentionally hidden, denied in Black male peer groups, and difficult to study (Evans & Broido, 1999), we were encouraged by the sample size (n = 7). Indeed, issues of homophobia, (re)constructions of masculinity within Black male enclaves, and taboo mentalities that encircle “gayness,” make it difficult, if not impossible, to gain access to this severely understudied group of college men. We took several steps to recruit participants for this investigation and we were careful to build rapport and maintain trust throughout the project. Researchers describe how issues of distrust and poor rapport can

compromise any attempt to unearth the experiences of marginalized, disempowered, invisible, “voiceless” people (Glesne, 1989). Thus, we were encouraged that this “select few” could be used to amplify the voices of many.

Procedure

To collect data, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with all seven Black gay men over a six-month period during the academic year. Specifically, we attempted to elicit stories from the participants since stories reflect human consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987). A typical interview lasted 60 to 120 minutes. In some cases, ambiguities and additional questions were resolved by follow-up correspondence with the interviewee via phone, email, or in-person. Data collected during the interviews were based on a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions about each participant’s respective background, schooling experiences, and notable people, places, or circumstances that they believed influenced their college decisions and academic success. Questions were designed to prompt rich, thick reconstructions of the reasons for African American gay males’ choice of college and factors perceived as critical to their retention in college.

As this qualitative study sought to understand one’s college decisions and the meanings attached to such experiences, the amount of time required for serious reflection and critical analysis of data is great. Thus, all interviews were audiotape recorded and professionally transcribed for subsequent analysis, in consonance with the high standards of naturalistic research.

Data Analysis

To analyze data, we employed the constant comparison method as described by Glaser and his colleagues (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, transcripts were read and re-read to generate initial categories of information or “codes;” this is known as open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coding is the process of “organizing the material into ‘chunks’ before bringing meaning to those chunks” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 171).

Next, we collapsed codes by grouping categories that seemed to relate to each other while leaving intact those that stood independent from all others. This smaller list of categories was used to generate what we call “supercodes,” or preliminary themes. We then compared and contrasted themes to understand the degree to which they were similar; closely related themes were collapsed or renamed so that the “whole name” reflected the sum of its parts. This iterative process was repeated until no new codes or themes were found—a point called saturation in the literature. Finally, we settled upon a list of themes that seemed to

represent the findings of the study. Each participant reviewed the final list of themes and he was able to clarify, revise, ask questions about, and add elements (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

We used AtlasTi (Muhr, 2004), a qualitative data analysis software, to store transcripts, save codes, generate reports of common words, and assist in data management.

Trustworthiness and Quality

Several steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness and ensure quality of the data and subsequent findings in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1986) identify four measures by which rigor and accuracy in qualitative research can be evaluated: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These four metrics “replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity” used in quantitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 21). Credibility was assured through member checks, follow-up correspondence, and storage of all data sources that could be easily retrieved and (re)tested throughout the research process. Additionally, we discussed presuppositions, preliminary ideas, and interpretations with three peer debriefers, that is, disinterested but skilled peers who were qualitative research experts and/or were familiar with African American or gay male issues.

To ensure transferability, we provided rich, thick descriptions of sites and participants from which data were collected. Findings from this study will likely transfer to other large predominantly White public research universities, Black gay male collegians who face similar experiences, and/or four-year colleges located in the southeast region of the United States.

Finally, dependability and confirmability were ensured through audit trails conducted by members of the research team (i.e., one professor, two graduate students), peer debriefers, and one campus administrator who became involved in the research. Despite our many attempts to render findings that are credible, transferable, and dependable, like Henstrand (1991), we cannot promise that these findings represent anyone’s truth except our own. Participants’ perspectives have been interpreted, and interpretation may distort their intended meaning. Still, we have taken care to “penetrate the surface to discover insights into [decisions] of the humans” we studied (Henstrand, 2006, p. 15). In addition, we struggled to do so in such a way that we “give voice to those who have been marginalized (Glesne, 2006, p. ix) without doing violence to their “told” experience.

Findings

From the analysis of data emerged two key findings related to the college decision-making process of African American gay males at predominantly White campuses.

College Choice

First, participants overwhelmingly noted that they came to college to “come out,” and therefore chose a college environment that would allow them space to “come out” and to “live out.” For instance, Desmond, a 19-year-old public relations and psychology double-major from Memphis said:

It's like I came here expecting college to be a life-changing experience...and it was or it is. And, I expected to get away from Memphis where I would be around more open-minded people and feel free to be me...Black...gay...well, I prefer to say homosexual....

In another example, Blake (finance major and cheerleader), who describes himself as a “Black person and a gay person,” explained:

Like I came to college knowing that I knew sometime in freshman year that I would be out. And I know a lot of Black people aren't. And if you can live with that, sure, go for it. But I couldn't. Just accept that.

Similarly, Terrence (Spanish major, dance minor) said that when he arrived at college he expected:

Definitely just to get out there and meet different people and meet other homos and go out to clubs and all that kind of stuff [like you see] on TV or website, and just have fun basically.

Secondly, participants, on average, acknowledged that they considered the location of the school when choosing a college. Often these calculations were made with reference(s) to family or parents. For example, Lamont (majoring in journalism and French) said:

I just didn't want to be around my parents for that long, and where I'm from, if you stay there and give up school, you're bound to stay there for the rest of your life. I just didn't want to be a townie.

Still others talked about the need to “go away” for college so they could “come out,” “be free,” and enjoy meeting other gay students unencumbered by their families' preconceived notions, negative perceptions, and biases.

A predominantly White college seemed an appropriate choice,

according to all of our participants, as six of the seven grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods, attended predominantly White high schools, and all of them wanted a “safe space” to “come out.” PWIs were seen as a place where students could avoid negative perceptions of homosexuality that often plague Black communities. For instance, Blake pointed out:

Sometimes there’s still, like, a negative view of the Black community on being a gay person. So it’s like, I don’t have to deal with it because I’m not going to see these people.

Retention

Similarly, participants identified two factors that seemed critical to their success in college: supportive relationships with peers and family, self-determination and independence. Participants consistently identified supportive peer relationships that they believed influenced their success in college. And, almost without exception, participants referred to White gay peers and reported having few Black gay friends. When they did report Black friends, most were Black heterosexual women. Lamont shared how his White gay friends helped him:

Like, I’ve got lots of White gay friends...I have quite a few friends that came here from home. I came knowing a lot of people, a good amount, and I know people that don’t go to the university, but they live in [the area]. And they’ve been to the university so they understand what it’s like. And I’ve got some friends that I’ve met here and they’re part of my support group....

Not only do Black gay males identify supportive peer relationships that help them academically, but there are social benefits associated with peer interactions, as Terrence explained:

I have a lot of friends...I have quite a few girls that I’m really close with. I mean I talk to them quite a bit. Like we always go out for dinner and stuff like that. I always hang out. And then I have a couple of friends back home that I talk to and hang out with whenever I go home.

Finally, participants perceived themselves as self-determined, motivated, and independent, which, in their view, affected their ability to succeed in college. For instance, when asked about other individuals upon whom they rely for support in college, several participants (e.g., Lamont, Leon, Desmond) stressed the role that they played in their own success, stating, “I’m a pretty self-supporting person,” or “I like to figure things out myself.”

Some attributed their ability to “stand out alone” to a sense of

“between-ness” that they experience as a Black gay male at a PWI—that is, not being fully compatible with Black peers and cultural spaces (e.g., Black cultural centers) and not feeling fully “at home” among White peers. However, participants could not always pinpoint a moment when they were aware of being “betwixt and between.” Nevertheless, some participants described how this feeling caused them to be more independent and “true” to themselves. One participant reflected on how his identity led him to care less about the perceptions of others:

Like, you really have to be real. You can't really think about what others think of you...do what you want to do. And do what you feel like doing, I guess. You have to be you and you really can't worry about what anybody says about you or thinks about you. You have to be true to yourself.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to study the college decision-making process of Black gay men (BGM) at a predominantly White institution and to identify factors that they perceive as critical to their successful retention in college. Importantly, the BGM with whom we spoke stressed the fact that they went to college to “come out” and therefore chose a college that provided space to come out and live freely. This is a significant finding, as it has implications for college choice theory (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and those who assist students in making college decisions (e.g., parents, teachers, counselors, and student affairs professionals). Existing theories do not consider “coming out” in explanations of students’ college destinations. Future work should build upon this study to rework prevailing three-stage models that fail to account for this consideration.

Second, Tinto’s (1993) theory suggests that students who engage in formal and informal academically and socially integrative experiences are less likely to leave college. In this study, BGM identified supportive peer relationships as critical to their success in college. Specifically, they identified interracial gay peers who helped them navigate the academic and social currents of their lives. On the one hand, these findings are consistent with previous research on the importance of supportive relationships to the success of Black male collegians (Strayhorn, 2008b). However, these findings contradict perspectives that assume “one size fits all” for Black students. In other words, while some research suggests that Black students are most comfortable among Black peers and in Black social enclaves (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Tatum, 1997) and other cultural spaces (e.g., Black cultural centers) on campus (Patton, 2006), our findings point to an important caveat—that this is not necessarily

true of all Black collegians. Issues of homophobia, gender expression, and even spirituality may reduce, if not eliminate, the ability of Black gay males to feel comfortable among Black peers at PWIs. Future research should address this issue more directly.

Similar to Freeman (2005), BGM in this study “often mentioned themselves as their own motivators” (p. 15). For instance, participants talked at length about how they were career-oriented and their desire to excel professionally or to avoid “what they didn’t want to be” fueled their decision to stay in college. Noteworthy, however, is that students tended to attribute their self-directedness to their “lived experience” as BGM in a White environment. Making sense of their experiences and countering racism (in predominantly White spaces) and homophobia (in predominantly Black spaces) facilitated a sense of independence and self-determination. In other words, what Landreman et al. (2007) call “critical incidents” seemed to catalyze their self-authorship. Self-authorship consists of three major stages: The Crossroads, Becoming the Author of One’s Life, and Internal Foundations (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Thus, future researchers might employ self-authorship as a theoretical frame to investigate the way in which BGM develop epistemologically.

There are several practical implications for those who work with Black gay males both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, many college campuses have established specialized centers whose missions are to assist in the academic and social development of either African American or gay students. These centers provide a myriad of services to the respective groups they serve, ranging from tutoring and mentor programs to alumni networking opportunities and alternative social events. While these centers have filled a much needed gap in support of many students, findings presented here suggest the need for centers that serve specific subpopulations. Such initiatives could be accomplished either by expanding services currently offered, or perhaps a more efficient solution, to develop collaborations between these two distinct centers (e.g., cultural centers, LGBT offices, etc.).

Inside of the classroom, faculty members can play a critical role in establishing a safe, comfortable learning environment for all students. Faculty members should consider these results and give attention to the multiple identities of each student. Armed with such awareness, faculty might reflect on how specific readings, lessons, or comments may affect learning outcomes.

Similarly, academic advisors should be aware of how identity can impact a student’s academic pursuits. For instance, some Black gay male undergraduates may elect to major (or minor) in Africana Studies and Queer Studies, or to pursue some combination of courses across these majors. Still, others will prefer majors that—on the surface—appear unrelated to race, gender, or sexuality. The take home message is relatively simple: Black male collegians are not all the same. Indeed,

Black men represent a remarkably heterogeneous group consisting of various subpopulations whose experiences are much more different than similar. Therefore, “one size fits all” approaches are likely to be unsuccessful and inappropriate as they may only be tangentially related to the particular challenges and needs of a specific subgroup like Black gay males.

Conclusion

This research extends our understanding of racial heterogeneity among Black collegians, within-group differences among Black males, and how racial differences shape interactions among gay peers, while unearthing factors associated with the success of Black gay male undergraduates. With additional studies of this kind, we can come to know more about Black gay men who potentially face multiple oppressions, disparate disadvantages, or triple threats.

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