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Research in Brief - "It's Kind of Apples and Oranges": Gay College Males' Conceptions of Gender Transgression as Poverty

Cover Page Footnote

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“It’s Kind of Apples and Oranges:”

Gay College Males’ Conceptions of Gender Transgression as Poverty



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The terms gay, (e.g., Marine, 2011) queer, (e.g., Rhoads, 1994; Renn, 2010) and transgender (e.g., Valentine, 2007) continue to evolve and be sites of contestation in which definitions, self-identification, and coalition building are not only difficult between groups, but also within groups. Furthermore, while many social service agencies and universities have created offices representing and in support of sexual orientations and gender identities under the moniker of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT), this conflation "is contested in theory and in practice" (Renn, 2010, p. 132). It is due precisely to these meanings of categories and definitions that further explanation is warranted, not just of themselves, but also of their potential intersections, particularly as it relates to the services provided by these agencies and offices.

Similarly, the concept of masculinity (or masculinities) continues to evolve through the work by scholars of men and masculinities studies (Kimmel, 2008; Laker & Davis, 2011). The seminal work of James O'Neil and his colleagues around gender role conflict, or men's fear of femininity, continues to serve as foundational knowledge when working with college men (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 2010). This concept of gender role conflict also creates a dangerous cycle of socialization for males due to the restrictive and limiting behaviors that are placed upon them due to this fear of femininity (O'Neil et al., 2010), which further manifests in men's acceptance and enactment of sexist values, attitudes, and behaviors (Kimmel, 2008). Additionally, gender role conflict reifies hegemonic notions of the categorization of masculinity.

That individuals categorize themselves and others is an innocuous observation. However, as Valentine (2007) suggested, "the ways in which these categorizations are made, and which categories come to have effects in the world, are never neutral" (p. 5). Cisgender¹ gay males represent one population within which one can explore the effects of intragroup categorizations, specifically in relation to expressions of femininity. As a population, cisgender gay males maintain certain privileges due to their gender identity (i.e., men), but also face oppression due to their sexual orientation (i.e., gay). Given these complexities, the purpose of this paper is to blend constructivist and critical theoretical perspectives, or what Kincheloe (2001) referred to as epistemological bricolage, to explore the ways in which self-identified gay males make meaning of gender variance and transgression from the gender binary as a form of poverty within the gay male population. The questions framing the inquiry are:

1. What are the ways in which gay males make meaning of multiple expressions of masculinity within the gay male community?
2. How do hegemonic masculinity, sexism, and

genderism influence the meaning making of gay males?

3. How do the intersections of gay males' multiple identities influence their understandings of gender expression?

A Word on Poverty

Before moving to the findings of our study, it is important to discuss what we mean by using the words poverty and poor. As the definition above mentions, the words poverty and poor are most commonly associated with socioeconomic class and a lack of money or wealth. However, within our work, we are using these terms in a new way to signify a deficiency or insufficiency. Admittedly, these are loaded terms,

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especially when used in conjunction with marginalized communities (e.g., gay males, transgender students). Although our use of the words poverty or poor could be misconstrued, we use them in this study to relate to the way gay male participants saw gender variance and gay male femininity as a deficiency of necessary or desirable qualities. We do not mean our use of these terms to signal that gay males and/or gender nonconforming individuals are somehow deficient. Rather, we seek to uncover the ways in which gay male participants view gender variance and transgressing the gender binary, specifically gay male femininity, as a form of poverty.

Method

The original qualitative study for which these data were gathered used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) as a means of understanding how gay males in college made meaning of their multiple identities, specifically their sense of masculinity and

¹ Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals whose assigned sex at birth aligns with their gender identity (e.g., someone who is assigned a female sex at birth and self-identifies as a woman).



Image by Tom Eversley

sexuality. Although the original study used constructivist grounded theory, we used epistemological bricolage (using both a constructivist and critical lens in combination with one another to view the data) to draw findings and implications from the data.

Seventeen cisgender gay males between 20 to 23 years of age who were either attending or had recently graduated from three different universities in a metropolitan area of Southern California were selected for this study. Open, maximum various and discriminate sampling (Patton, 2002) were used to select participants for this study. While one's gender performance was not a factor for inclusion in the study, out of the 17 participants, four identified as very masculine, 11 identified as somewhat masculine, and two identified as 'not masculine at all' or 'effeminate.'

Participants were each interviewed in-depth twice. In the first interview, participants completed an activity adapted from Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, which indicated the saliency of their social identities. Additionally, after the first interview, each participant responded to journal prompts about their sense of masculinity, their sexual orientation, and the intersections of their identities.

All interviews were transcribed and data were coded and analyzed via initial, axial, and theoretical coding schemas (Saldaña, 2009) as were researcher field notes and analytic coding memos. A peer debriefing team of three individuals reviewed all data and provided feedback and insights on the researcher's initial and categorical coding schema. Following data analysis, eight participants took part in a focus group to review the initial emergent theory and

provided feedback on the major themes and subthemes of the study, which aided in triangulating the data and increased trustworthiness.

Findings

After we analyzed the data, we found three key concepts that illuminate the process by which gay college males make meaning of intragroup gender variance. These three themes include: (1) gender coding and policing (an interpersonal construct); (2) hyperawareness of

gender transgressions (an intrapersonal construct); and (3) the reification of hegemonic masculinity (a sociocultural construct).

Gender Coding and Policing

Study participants had substantial experiences with gender policing and coding, both exhibited by, and enacted toward, them. Almost all of the participants struggled with the concept of masculinity as it related to them and expressed feeling as though others would not see them as fully masculine due to being gay. Thus, participants were reifying what it meant to be both a 'good' or 'poor' gay male, a juxtaposition that played out internally and externally. Many of the participants shared stories of homophobic (and therefore, hegemonic) behaviors enacted towards others, particularly prior to coming out.

Gender coding and policing affected their intimate relationships as well. For example, Mason, a participant in the study who self-identified as "not masculine at all," discussed his difficulties in connecting with other gay males; he recounted another gay male telling him, "You're just too feminine for me." This explicit and direct message from another gay male signaled to Mason that his overtly feminine gender performance was a diminished—or a poor—display of masculinity.

Sexual roles with other males tended to also produce gender coding and policing. Approximately half of the participants indicated they had sexual encounters with other males. Many of the participants indicated that being the "top," or the one penetrating his partner, was seen to be more masculine while being the "bottom," or the partner being penetrated, was to

be more feminine. Bryan recounts his feelings on this topic, saying:

I guess I've always been lucky in terms of who I've had sexual encounters with, but yeah...I mean, I wouldn't mind bottoming or whatever. It's the thing that I don't want to feel like I'm always on the feminine side of having sex. Stuff like that. Because you know, in my head, if you're taking it, then you are more of the woman, and for me, it's always – I've always tried to be more masculine and manly so I don't get the stereotypical gay attachment to me.

Bryan's statement illuminated two issues. First, he established an equation in which "bottoming" was synonymous with being more feminine. Secondly, Bryan expressed a propensity to avoid being seen as feminine, which he saw as a pejorative stereotype of gay males. While Bryan's statement provides insight into how gay males make meaning of sexual encounters and sex roles, it also displays the confluence of sexism and genderism (Bilodeau, 2009; Wilchins, 2002).

Hyperawareness of Gender Transgressions

Participants connected gender transgressions to their own meaning making in a variety of ways. These gender transgressions often were experienced as larger societal issues that were then internalized by the participants (for example, the Proposition 8 movement in California). At the same time, the Prop 8 movement kept other issues (e.g., increasing intragroup acceptance for alternative gender expressions, an issue that increases a sense of safety and a sense of belonging for all individuals) in the background (Conrad, 2010; Halberstam, 2012). However, the Prop 8 movement itself was steeped in the very heteronormative ideal of the need to marry. This also reflects a very homonormative ideal (Warner, 1999), which signals that gay males who are not committed to marriage equality are in 'poor' form or are out of step with the gay rights movement.

Gender transgressions experienced by the participants were also influenced by others' perceptions of media as well. Participants internalized the messages they heard from others, which played into the dichotomous gender societal roles. As a result, Bryan and other participants felt

compelled to eschew anything socially ascribed as 'too feminine,' again reinforcing the idea that to be 'feminine' is equated with a form of poverty of intra-group gender variance.

Exposure to the gay community off campus allowed for many of the study participants to grapple with gender transgressions individually, but also within the larger LGBT community. While discussing his recent 21st birthday outing with friends, Mason recalled his friend giving him a pink sash that had "Fabulous" written across it. Immediately after, he learned his friend was taking him to a straight bar instead of a bar in the gay neighborhood of the city. He said:

I was like, "Really?!" It's really straight there. So I think I was kind of practicing that sort of transphobia of wearing something that was feminine. I eventually took it off. And I feel bad because she went all over the place to try to get that sash, but yes, even small instances like that, that [sic] our aversion towards that, anything that's feminine."

Mason raised this story during the focus group, and other participants interjected their own thoughts. In response, Marc said:

What's interesting is if you were out with your friends or maybe if you went out to [the gay neighborhood], you wouldn't even second guess it, wearing pink and "fabulous." Just knowing that there are straight people who are different from you, you're working about their perception.

On one hand, Mason's and Marc's responses to this situation were perfectly understandable. There are sizeable risks and potential consequences inherent in a male wearing a pink sash that states "fabulous" on it in a neighborhood bar that caters to predominantly heterosexual college students. One's personal safety and well-being could be compromised by

such behavior. On the other hand, limiting one's behavior upholds hegemonic ideals about masculinity while simultaneously further enacting genderism that reifies the gender binary.

While one's behaviors may shift in different spaces (e.g., wearing the sash may not feel appropriate in a predominantly heterosexual space, yet it may be quite acceptable in a gay-affirming space), some of the college males felt as though these notions of hegemonic masculinity

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still were very present within gay-affirming spaces as well. Masculinities scholars (Harris, 2010; Kimmel, 2008) have often discussed the connection between hegemonic masculinity and the hypersexualization of college males through a culture of hooking up and the prevalence of alcohol use. The gay male participants in this study demonstrated the ways in which hegemonic masculinity played a role in their lives. Will acknowledged messages around masculinity were often a part of the gay bar culture, in particular hypersexuality and the competitive and aggressive nature of hooking up with others, both of which are consistent with O'Neil's (1981) elucidation of male gender role conflict and strain. He said, "I think, like, especially if you go to bars and stuff, there's a big... it's like if you're more masculine, you're thought of as higher. I don't know. Sometimes it feels like that."

Even in gay-affirming spaces, one's gender transgressions were closely monitored by oneself and others. The study participants discussed many of their behaviors within gay-affirming spaces, which were fraught with deeply held notions that reify hegemonic masculinity. By engaging in these behaviors, these males are replicating and supporting patterns that only dissuade them. For example, many of the participants attempted to avoid falling into traps of the "stereotypical" gay male, but in fact, they followed other held stereotypes (e.g., gay males are only interested in sex, significant use of alcohol). In this way, gender transgressions serve to limit the full range of possibilities for one's sense of self, as some possibilities were understood to be connected to being in 'poor' standing with other gay males.

This fear of being a social outcast pressed upon the gay male participants, providing the impetus for their viewing gender transgressions as a form of poverty and, as a result, upholding hegemonic masculinity.

Reifying Hegemonic Masculinity

The illusion of a cohesive LGBT community was not as tight as the often-cited moniker would have one believe, especially with the view held by some gay males in the study that to transgress from expressing hegemonic masculinity was to be a poor gay male. Put a different way, some participants understood any gender expression that strayed from dominant masculine gender norms as a form of poverty. Moreover, participants expressed using gender transgressions, marked as a form of poverty, to castigate gay males they deemed to be too feminine to the fringes of the gay male community. Luke stated this best when he said:

There's [sic] so many parallels between the trans community and the gay community; some so that aren't really related. Sometimes I feel like we're all grouped together, but there's so much about transgendered [sic] people that I don't understand. And I'm willing to understand, but to me,...it's kind of apples and oranges a little bit.

There was often a lack of desire by the participants to challenge the social gender binary despite acknowledging the negative consequences of upholding both hegemonic masculinity and cisgender privilege. Even while these males are gay, which puts them on the margins of what it means to "be a man" and thereby being 'poor,' they still strove to be seen as "normal men," which meant not troubling the gender binary through their language and gender expression. This finding extends Bilodeau's (2009) finding that genderism exists throughout the collegiate environs by suggesting gay males comply with and further this form of oppression. This fear of being a social outcast pressed upon the gay male participants, providing the impetus for their viewing gender transgressions as a form of poverty and, as a result, upholding hegemonic masculinity.

Implications

One key implication for practice is the need for educators to be conscious of the vast intragroup diversity that exists within identity groups. The interpersonal and intrapersonal violence that resulted from the reification of hegemonic masculinity (in which they themselves participated) has detrimental consequences for gay males, among other marginalized populations. For example, sexism, gender-based homophobia, and transphobia are endemic to gay male populations, and create conditions where those gay males who transgress hegemonic gender norms are made to feel like 'poor gay men,' are ostracized from gay male peer groups, or are policed into conformity by their peers. As a result, practitioners should take care to not assume knowledge or understanding of anyone based on identity markers or labels.

To take this one step further, higher education professionals must be reflexive of the ways in which they may be complicit in the promulgation of gender coding and policing that reinforces hegemonic masculinity. The authors encourage colleagues to interrogate systems that uphold hegemonic ideals, rewarding individuals who adhere to rigid gender binaries and traditional gender role expectations. These ideals are often deeply embedded within higher education institutions and viewed by many as status quo. Therefore, they may not always be easily identified. However, we suggest educators use the following questions as a way to begin exploring one's own adherence to hegemonic masculinity: In what ways am I complicit in enforcing gender norms to students and colleagues on campus? How do the programs, services, and initiatives my office/department offers maintain a rigid gender binary? Can we create opportunities to engage students around healthy positive masculinities rather than messages steeped in hegemonic masculinity?

Another key implication from this research is the need for greater specificity with the language we as educators use. For example, when scholars use the term "college men," they are often not talking about college men, a category which would include, for example, transmen (e.g., Green, 2004) and the expression of female masculinity (e.g., Halberstam, 1998a). Instead, they are discussing college males, thereby reinforcing a binary that establishes a flawed logic for the gender-based homophobia and transphobia these individuals exhibit. This study has peeled back a layer on the scholarship being done on "college men." Even through the multiple drafts of writing this paper collaborative, we, as the authors, needed to be reflective of whether we meant to use the term "males" or "men." We urge educators to think through their language and suggest educators ask themselves the following questions to elucidate who they are researching and/or discussing: who do we mean to include by using these terms?, Who do we mean to focus on?, and who are we potentially excluding?

Conclusion

The data from this study, which focused on how gay males made meaning of intragroup gender transgressions as a form of poverty, suggests that identifying as a gay male is far from uncontested terrain. While gay males who transgress or trouble the gender binary are not deficient, the fact that other gay males view them as such speaks to identities as both sites



Image by Tom Eversley

of coalition and community as well as tension and refusal. The role educators play in working through these identity-based contestations is vital, specifically for students with marginalized identities. For these students, identifying with their subordinated identity (e.g., identifying as a gay male) can be liberating. However, patterns of oppression may continue to resurface within these marginalized communities, as indicated in the present study for gay males. Being careful with how one comes to understand students and student populations, becoming more specific with language, and challenging students to reconsider their thoughts, attitudes, and actions are steps educators can take to ensure that identifying with and identifying as remains an act of liberation for all in marginalized communities.