Understanding Sexual Minority Male Students' Meaning-Making About Their Multiple Identities: An Exploratory Comparative Study

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Abstract

This exploratory comparative study examines the meaning-making experiences of six sexual minority males attending college or university in Canada or the United States. All of the participants identified as sexual minority males who were cisgender, out to family and/or friends, and between 20 and 24 years of age. In particular, the participants spoke about the intersections between their race, gender, and sexual orientation as salient aspects of their multiple identities. Using a blend of qualitative methods, including case study, phenomenology, and grounded theory, I identified four themes that emerged from the data: (1) engagement in a social justice curriculum; (2) involvement in LGBT student organizations or resource centres; (3) experiences of discrimination and dissonance; and (4) engagement in reflective dialogue. I discuss the implications of these themes for professional practice and future research.

Résumé

La présente étude comparative exploratoire examine les expériences de recherche de signification de six hommes de minorité sexuelle fréquentant des collèges ou des universités au Canada et aux États-Unis. Tous les participants se sont définis comme des hommes cisgenres âgés entre 20 et 24 ans et ayant dévoilé leur homosexualité soit aux membres de leurs familles respectives, soit à des amis. Les participants ont entre autres identifié le recoupement de race, de genre et d'orientation sexuelle comme étant les principaux aspects de leurs multiples identités. À l'aide d'une variété de méthodes qualitatives dont la phénoménologie, la théorie ancrée et des études de cas, j'ai relevé

quatre thèmes récurrents parmi les données recueillies : (1) la participation à des programmes d'études en justice sociale; (2) l'implication dans des organisations estudiantines ou des centres de ressources pour LGBT; (3) l'expérience de discrimination et de dissonance; et (4) l'engagement dans un dialogue réfléchi. Je discute des conséquences de ces thèmes en milieu professionnel et en prévision de futurs projets de recherche.

Introduction

Much of the literature on college men has aggregated the term "men" to largely represent White, cisgender, and heterosexual men (Berila, 2011; Davis & Laker, 2004; Harris & Barone, 2011). While understanding college men who fall within these identities is important and useful, it unfortunately has caused further marginalization and the invisibility of other men, particularly those who in are sexual minorities (Berila, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2012). Up until recently, most of the scholarship on sexual minorities, particularly sexual minority males, has been informed by developmental theorists who, when discussing sexual identity development, have largely ignored intersections between an individual's social identities (see Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Rhoads' (1994, 1995) seminal work on sexual minorities' experiences of coming out on campus provided significant insights into how students navigated aspects of their race, gender, and sexuality. However, in the 20 years since Rhoads' (1994, 1995) work was published, the socio-political context of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights issues has changed both in the United States and Canada (Anderson & Fetner, 2008; Rankin, 2005). More recent scholarship (Harper, Wardell, & McGuire, 2011; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012; Tillapaugh, 2012) has shifted away from examining sexual identity in isolation from one's other social identities and instead has investigated how sexual minority students develop from an intersectional perspective.

Over the past two decades, a growing number of college student development scholars (Jones & Abes, 2013; Marine, 2011; Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014) have used intersectionality as a potential concept to examine "categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage with a new lens" (Cole, 2009, p. 170). Crenshaw (2009) coined the concept of intersectionality to frame how individuals construct knowledge at the intersections of social identities at individual, community, and systemic levels. Framing intersectionality in terms of college student development, Jones and Abes (2013) argued that, "with an explicit focus on locating individuals within larger structures of privilege and oppression, intersectionality as an analytic framework for understanding identity insists on . . . a more holistic approach to identity" (p. 135). In her monograph on LGBT college students, Marine (2011) applied this directly to sexual minority student development, saying, "Intersectionality offers a deeper understanding of who we are and how we become the person we are through this constructive process, including how we develop a relationship to our sexual orientation and gender identity" (p. 52). When we situate the development of one's sexual orientation and gender identity within the systemic context in which one lives, intersectionality becomes an important lens through which we can understand how individuals have identities that are both privileged and oppressed within society (Marine, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2012; Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014).

Connected to the concept of intersectionality is the process of meaning-making, which Kegan (1982) discussed as the ways in which humans organize and understand their feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. From his work on the evolution of consciousness, Kegan (1982) posited that individuals' growth over the lifespan is marked by five stages of development; these stages are dynamic in that they fluctuate between stability and instability and involve psychosocial and cognitive constructs. This developmental process of making sense of the world around us and who we are in that world becomes an important aspect of one's growth (Kegan, 1982). Kegan's (1982) work informed Baxter Magolda's (2008) concept of self-authorship, which she defined as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (p. 269). Baxter Magolda's work (2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2008) explored how college students made meaning of their sense of self and their relationships with others.

Meaning-making as an act creates self-generated knowledge and can be useful in helping individuals have a more secure sense of self (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2008), particularly if that meaning-making is done around the intersections of one's multiple social identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (R-MMDI) made meaning-making a core element of their model to illuminate how one's attributes, such as race, sexual orientation, or gender, converge to create one's holistic sense of self. In a recent update, Jones and Abes (2013) posited the Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, which situates their previous work within a systemic perspective of understanding how environment plays a role in the meaning-making process of students. Thus, the college environment provides rich opportunities for students to engage in meaning-making as they move toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Jones & Abes, 2013; Kegan, 1982).

Purpose of the Study

In an earlier study (Tillapaugh, 2012), I sought to understand how gay cisgender males made meaning of their multiple identities, particularly their sense of gender and sexuality. In that work, 17 participants from three different universities in Southern California provided data for a constructivist grounded theory, which yielded insights into the critical influences that helped, hindered, or temporarily paused the meaning-making process of their multiple identities (Tillapaugh, 2012). Yet, I was interested in broadening the scope of that study to understand the experiences of other sexual minority men and their meaning-making regarding their multiple identities. Thus, this qualitative study sought to expand upon the understanding of how young, sexual minority, male adults between 20 and 23 years of age make meaning of their multiple social identities, specifically their sense of gender and sexuality.

Additionally, this paper explores these ideas through a comparative lens, looking at students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States and at those attending Canadian universities. While these two countries are geographically contiguous and share similar cultural constructs and understandings of social identities (e.g., with respect to race, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation), there are nuanced differences between them, particularly with respect to laws, regulations, and policies regarding sexual orientation (Andersen & Fetner, 2008) and the cultures of their post-secondary education institutions (McGrath, 2010). For example, while the LGBT rights movement made

significant progress in Canada during the 1990s around equal rights for lesbians and gays, the influence of the "religious right" (conservative religious communities) on social doctrine and policy tempered the success of the LGBT rights movement in the United States during that decade (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). McGrath (2010) highlighted Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedom as a key milestone in creating campus change in post-secondary institutions, even if institution-wide change did not happen immediately. Comparatively, in the United States during this time, Rankin's (2005) work on LGBT campus climate indicated that sexual and gender minorities often experienced chilly or hostile learning environments in US colleges and universities. Given this information, there is a lack of current comparative research that informs the work of higher education educators in both countries on the meaning-making of sexual minority males' multiple social identities, a gap that this research attempts to fill.

Research Questions

For this particular paper, the research questions that guided the work are:

1. In what ways do gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity intersect for sexual minority males in college and university in the United States and Canada?
2. In the aforementioned intersections of identity and their influence on the participants' meaning-making, what are the differences, if any, between those men studying in the United States and those studying in Canada?

Methods

Since this study was exploratory in nature, qualitative methods were used. Qualitative inquiry provides a good fit for this particular study, given its ability to help researchers who "are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Rather than making one methodological choice, I used a collection of different methodological approaches, including case study, phenomenology, and grounded theory. For example, I used aspects of case study methodology by examining the experiences of the six participants as their own specific cases. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25). Each of the participants and his lived experiences and reality served as an individual case; I was interested in looking across the cases to find commonalities and differences. Similarly, I was particularly interested in understanding the phenomenon of how the participants made meaning of their multiple social identities, so I used aspects of phenomenology to explore this. Phenomenological approaches "focus on the ways we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world, and in so doing, develop a worldview" (Patton, 2002, p. 106). As a result, I engaged in in-depth interviewing and journaling with participants (which will be described further in this section) as active strategies to understand their lived realities of how they made meaning of their holistic identity. Lastly, I used aspects of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory methodology through their concept of constant comparative, which is discussed more specifically later in this section. Each method is largely rooted in a constructivist research paradigm, whereby researchers believe in the social construction of reality (Searle, 1995),

and participants and researchers come together to make meaning of their collective realities through the data (Charmaz, 2006). Given the scope of this research, these methods provided helpful insights on the phenomena being explored.

Recruitment for participants began in April 2013 via an email solicitation on several listservs and through social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. The research criteria for this study required that the participant identify as a member of a sexual minority (e.g., gay, queer, fluid/pansexual), a cisgender male, and a junior, senior, or recent graduate (no more than six months from graduation) of a college or university within the United States or Canada. Participants were also required to be "out" to friends and/or family and to be between 18 and 24 years old.

Six participants were selected using purposeful, maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002); these individuals were chosen for their diverse backgrounds, geographical locations, and campus engagement (e.g., those engaged in leadership roles versus those not). Additionally, an attempt was made to include participants who had different academic majors from one another. Three of the participants chosen represented experiences at Canadian institutions while the other three represented experiences at US institutions. One limitation of this study was that all of the Canadian participants were drawn from the same institution. Each of the six participants was assigned a pseudonym to protect personal anonymity (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Demographic Information

Name	Institution	Class Year	Race	Sexual Orientation	Campus Involvement
Brandon	University of Toronto	Recent Grad	White	Gay	Model UN, health and wellness educator for middle-school-age children
Christopher	University of Toronto	Senior	White	Queer	LGBT activism, peer facilitation, course unions, volunteer work
Derek	University of Toronto	Recent Grad	White	Gay	Leadership positions in LGBT student organizations
Jordan	University of Washington	Junior	White	Gay	Resident assistant, political organizing volunteer, student government
Joshua	University of Louisville, Lafayette	Senior	Black/African-American	Gay	Leadership position in LGBT student organization, leader of academic major student organization, involved with National Association of Black Journalists
Wes	University of Virginia	Senior	White	Gay	President of student-run opera company

Data were gathered in summer and fall 2013 through an online participant demographic survey, two in-depth interviews conducted via Skype using a semi-structured interview guide, and participant journaling. The interview data were transcribed verbatim. Additionally, the journal data collected were based on 11 journal prompts that were similar in nature to the interview questions. The data obtained from these prompts were used for triangulating the interview data and working towards trustworthiness. Initial, axial, and thematic coding were used for data analysis (Saldaña, 2009). When completing the line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts and journal data, I used initial coding to analyze key phrases or words within each of the cases. Examples of initial codes were "coming out," "masculinity," and "privilege." From there, I used axial coding to build larger themes so as to group the initial codes into categories. Sample codes were "positive experiences of masculinity," "student leadership involvement," "connections with mentors," and "security in one's self." Following this, I used the constant comparative method from Glaser and Strauss (1967) when I collapsed the data of the six individual cases into the two groups—the Canadian students and the students in the United States—in an attempt to find commonalities and differences between the data and test how the themes connected (or did not connect) with one another, employing thematic coding to arrive at the four patterns that emerged.

Findings

Data analysis revealed several patterns regarding the intersections of gender, race, and other dimensions of identity in sexual minority males' meaning-making about their multiple identities. There were distinct differences between students studying in Canada and those studying in the United States, which I will address. The four patterns that emerged were: (i) engagement in a social justice curriculum; (ii) involvement in LGBT student organizations or resource centres; (iii) experiences of discrimination and dissonance; and (iv) engagement in reflective dialogue.

Engagement in a Social Justice Curriculum

Out of the six participants, four (two students in Canada and two in the United States) discussed involvement in a social justice curriculum as being part of their college experiences. These experiences were accessed either through an academic-based curriculum— via enrolling in gender and/or sexuality studies courses (Christopher and Derek)—or by engaging in co-curricular diversity training as part of a positional leadership role (Jordan and Joshua). These opportunities allowed these participants to engage in critical self-reflection about their own positionality, particularly about the ways in which they maintained privilege or oppression based on their multiple social identities.

Within the academic curriculum, much of the work experienced within the classroom setting was centred on a critical perspective that interrogated systems of power and privilege. As a result, the students (namely Christopher and Derek) discussed a shift, over the course of their studies, around how they understood their own race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities as well as how those identities intersected with each other in meaningful ways. Derek stated:

> In university, I found that my sexual identity was ironically empowering as a way of accessing the world from a position of disprivilege [*sic*]. Most of my other social identities sit at the top of social hierarchies and often make it difficult for me to gain "outside" perspectives. Living in the world as a gay man gave me a glimpse into how it is to live in a world that was designed neither by nor for people like me.

This understanding of how his sexual orientation as a subordinated identity (e.g., being gay) compared to his other identities—which included him in dominant groups (e.g., being White, being male)—created an opportunity for meaning-making for Derek. By centering his gay identity within the classroom, he was able to use that lens for meaning-making around what it means to be an "outsider," and to interrogate systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

Similarly, Christopher indicated feelings of belonging and inclusion based upon the connections between his identity as a queer man and his academic curriculum. He said, "I think it's interesting the dynamic that happens there [in my gender studies courses] in terms of my voice actually having legitimacy there and actually being praised there, and me benefiting from that experience." Experiences of finding their own voice connected with the act of meaning-making in positive ways to help these men engage in critical reflection about their individual selves. Participants such as Christopher and Derek often discussed these acts of self-reflection as transformative learning, whereby they incorporated what their academic endeavours ultimately had them examine about their own biases, assumptions, and judgments, and they worked through those to take action around social justice in their campus and off-campus communities. These important takeaways were also reflected in out-of-the-classroom settings related to social justice training and education.

The participants' experiences of co-curricular diversity training modules were often included as a part of positional leadership training. Examples of these exercises included privilege walks, in which facilitators ask participants to step forward or back to respond to statements related to personal experiences around power, privilege, and oppression. As a resident assistant, Jordan recalled his experiences in such an activity as a part of his training. He shared some information regarding questions as a part of the activity around sexual identity, and realized through the exercise how he was more privileged than some of his gay male peers because his performance of masculinity often allowed him to pass as straight. Jordan's reflections were significant to him because while he clearly had experienced some discrimination based upon his sexual identity, he recognized through this activity that he had not experienced the depth of discrimination or oppression that some of his peers had. He stated, "I definitely think that my higher level of masculinity might put me into a privilege [*sic*] higher than another gay man because people don't perceive me as gay as much." These types of experiences were useful to the participants in terms of their meaning-making with respect to identities. Additionally, involvement in student organizations or centres regarding LGBT issues provided another opportunity for increased meaning-making around their multiple identities.

Involvement in LGBT Student Organizations or Resource Centres

Among the six participants, three (Christopher, Derek, and Joshua) were actively involved in their campus LGBT student organization or campus resource centre. These men often expressed a greater sense of their sexual identity's salience and had more nuanced

understandings of gender and sexual diversity than their peers who were uninvolved in these areas (Wes, Brandon, and Jordan). For example, Christopher and Derek both reflected on the socio-political distinctions between identifying as either queer or gay and noted that their respective decisions about how they then identified were often informed by conversations that happened within their campus sexuality centre. Additionally, the participants who were involved in LGBT organizations often characterized their interactions in these spaces as "safe" or "accepting" of individuals' unique qualities. As Joshua indicated about his experiences with his undergraduate LGBT student organization, "I appreciated being able to be in an environment where other people truly understood where I was coming from, so that was very helpful." This ability to feel connected to others and authentic in one's self was significant when joined to the men's sense of masculinity, particularly the reification of hegemonic masculinity, in their lives.

Those not involved in their campus LGBT organizations offered varied reasons for this. Both Jordan and Wes indicated that they wanted to avoid the "drama" that often was perceived to be a part of the culture of their LGBT organizations. Jordan also shared an anecdote about a friend of his who was perceived to be masculine and who, when he attended a meeting of the LGBT student organization, felt marginalized by its members. Often, those uninvolved in such organizations were more likely to want to be perceived as masculine by their peers or were still in the closet. The latter was Brandon's situation. He stated:

> I do regret not exploring this facet of my humanity during my undergrad years. I am not sure what I would have done differently though: should I have gone to events held by [my campus LGBT organization], even though I don't have the personality to handle large social events?

Males who were not connected with their LGBT organizations tended to have had experiences like Brandon's, in which they had not made meaning of their sexuality and/or gender as often as their peers who were involved in such groups.

Those males who were involved in LGBT organizations discussed how their involvement in these groups helped them feel comfortable with their holistic sense of self, including experiences of fluidity of their gender and sexuality performance. Active with his campus LGBT student organization, Joshua spoke of being empowered by belonging to the group. He said, "I think my most empowering experience regarding my sexual identity was when I was asked to perform as my drag alter ego at a university-sponsored event. Multiple student organizations, faculty, parents, and administrators were present, and let me tell you...I let them have it!" He stated, "It's moments like that that really affirm how far I've come in developing in myself, and it's amazing how accepting people on campus have become." Derek also indicated how his involvement in his university's queer student union helped him be able to feel confident in his gender and sexuality expression: "The queer student activities are how I met my friends, and I would say that's more how I explored gender in terms of my own personal embodiment of gender as opposed to my ideas about the concept of gender." These LGBT organizations and/or resource centers often provided the space for the men to engage with others and make meaning of their sense of gender in ways that may not have been as permissible in other spaces. By allowing greater fluidity in the performance of gender, these organizations helped the men consider what gender and other dimensions of identity meant for them.

An additional benefit of being involved in an LGBT organization on campus was the opportunity for meaning-making around the intersection of socio-political issues. By becoming involved in LGBT activities, the participants often learned from their peers who had different identities from themselves. As Derek discussed, his involvement in the queer student union on his campus enabled him to gain "a greater perspective on how the world actually works as opposed to how I have always seen it working." Elaborating on this point, Derek stated that the queer student union on campus

> provided a space where I was able to hear stories and perspectives from people who I would not normally hear from in terms of my own personal life and in terms of the greater narratives in the media or the classroom. . . . Yeah, and again, not just in regards to gender or sexuality, but you know, race, class, socio-economic status, immigration status, all those kinds of things.

It was clear to Derek that his involvement in this organization helped him further unpack his own sense of privilege and what that meant to him personally as well as within the systems of which he was a part. Christopher, discussing the importance of both his student experiences in his campus LGBT student organization and his gender studies coursework, emphasized a similar notion regarding the perspectives he had gained through these experiences. In particular, he felt strongly that his involvement helped spark in him a move towards social activism, which became a deeply held part of his identity:

> These experiences have exposed me to a variety of social, political, and cultural worlds. They have exposed me to the profound injustices and ignited the flame in myself and others to fight, dream, and hope for another world—a more just world.

The participants who were engaged in LGBT student organizations often found themselves with a renewed sense of action around LGBT-related activism or advocacy work. At the same time, experiences of discrimination and dissonance also served as powerful meaning-making opportunities.

Experiences of Discrimination and Dissonance

Experiences of discrimination and dissonance were common themes that emerged from the data. Almost all of the participants shared instances—ranging in severity—of discrimination and/or harassment that they had encountered during college. However, it was often interesting to see how the men made sense of these experiences and what they did as a result of those moments. For many, these encounters served as significant learning events and often were reminders about the importance of holding steady in one's self and identities.

Overt forms of discrimination and harassment varied but were experienced more often by the students in the United States. Joshua, who is African-American, shared one example that had happened just prior to his interview; an African-American male drove past him and yelled "fucking faggot." Reflecting on this experience, he commented:

> I do feel like these individuals see me as a closer representation of who they are than someone who is White or otherwise. Therefore, if they are insecure about

their sexual orientation or gender identity, I am nothing but a flesh-and-bone re-minder of who they are on the inside.

This experience of harassment was not the only story Joshua shared. In fact, he was open about the threats he had received from some students involved in a religious student organization on campus and how that experience only reinforced his determination re-garding his own sense of spirituality and religiosity. Through these personally challeng-ing experiences, Joshua had to make sense of what religion meant to him and what his spiritual beliefs were. By doing so, he reinforced his viewpoints on God and spirituality and what those meant with respect to his identity as a gay Black man. In the end, Joshua's reflections on his multiple identities around race, sexuality, gender, and religion allowed him to have greater insights into his sense of self: "My form of activism is living my life, openly and honestly, as a gay Black man. Considering how I can count the number of people who do that on one hand . . . , my unapologetic existence is activism enough." This notion of existence as activism was the way that Joshua made sense of the challenges he encountered around dimensions of his social identities.

Other participants had similar experiences of dissonance, often at occasions or events where they felt uneasy in a social space or setting largely due to their identities being chal-lenged. In our conversation, Derek, who is White, expressed frustration about going out in Toronto's gay neighbourhood, due to negative experiences he encountered, particu-larly from other gay men:

> I find it harder and harder to relate to the mainstream White gay scene now. And not just to the scene, but to many of the people involved. I find it more and more difficult to chill with them because of casual racism or some of the attitudes regard-ing masculinity and gender.

This experience of dissonance was salient for Derek's meaning-making because his edu-cation—both in the classroom and outside it—had him exploring larger systems of op-pression and power, and now spaces that would have been "safe" in the past were no longer so. In fact, Derek experienced this dissonance in a way that became larger than just himself when he thought about dimensions of racism or genderism that played out within the larger gay community. Derek's critique of both "the scene" and the "people in-volved" within the gay community illuminated a perceived commitment by others to pro-tect Whiteness and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, even in a community geared to-wards individuals from a subordinated identity group (e.g., LGBT-identified individuals). This dissonance became meaningful for Derek, as he had to negotiate what it meant to be a gay White man who should feel comfortable in a space created for him yet who had a level of consciousness that understood the racism and genderism that he often witnessed within that space. These experiences of discrimination and dissonance were important to the participants' meaning-making regarding their multiple identities. Another such factor was engagement in reflective dialogue.

Engagement in Reflective Dialogue

For some of the participants, the simple act of discussing aspects of their identity pro-vided opportunities for meaning-making around dimensions of their social identities. In

some instances, these dialogues occurred with their peers or mentors; additionally, some of the participants indicated that engaging in dialogue online helped them in their meaning-making. Some indicated that the conversations occurring as part of this particular research study proved beneficial to their meaning-making.

For most of the participants, dialogues with peers or mentors regarding issues of gender, sexuality, race, and other social identities were salient opportunities for meaning-making. These experiences were often ongoing elements of conversations that helped the men examine aspects of themselves in unique and meaningful ways. For example, Jordan described how attending a friend's presentation on diversity and identity, in his first year of college, opened his eyes to power, privilege, and difference:

> Since that point, I have engaged with others (students, supervisors, and mentors) about these intersections. After talking with them, I began to see how intersections could play larger roles than I had previously thought. For example, I had never really thought about how being a White, cisgendered, gay man holds power. An example of that power is that White, cis gay men are the face of the gay rights movement and of gay men in the media.

Similar to Jordan, Derek shared his thoughts on how his friends gave him helpful perspectives on his identities, and he compared these to the learning gained from LGBT student groups on campus:

> I met a lot of my friends who I was more able to navigate sexuality with and around than through student groups which tended to be more—because of their political aspect, they are more focused on—you know, I am a gay White man so, you know, they're more focused on exploring more marginalized genders and sexualities, which is perfectly great. But for me, that exploration came more on my own time than in those groups.

While these in-person conversations proved useful for him, other participants engaged in dialogues in online spaces via social media.

Engaging in dialogue with others virtually was useful to some of the participants in terms of making meaning of their gender and sexuality. For example, Wes discussed his involvement on Reddit, a social media network that is designed around communities of interest. He shared that Reddit was a helpful resource to him when he was coming out: "There are a couple of sub-Reddits that catered to, not necessarily the masculine—you know, that's where I found the posting you made [the call for participants for this study]. You know, there are a couple that I subscribed to that I kind of check up on occasionally." In particular, one of the sub-Reddits Wes engaged on was a sub-community geared around masculinity and gay men. He shared that through his involvement on that site, "I definitely learned a little bit about, you know, it's okay to be gay and to have that be one single part of your identity. It does not have to define you as a whole person, which I already thought, so woohoo!" For Wes, dialoguing with others around his gay identity and masculinity helped him understand that his sexuality did not define him; instead, it was just one aspect of who he was and who he could be. The lessons gained from in-person or virtual dialogues echoed some of the comments made by the participants as they went through this research study.

For many of the participants, their participation in this research study provided them with the opportunity to dialogue around dimensions of their multiple identities in nuanced ways. For some, these insights were not necessarily brand new thoughts but, rather, reaffirmations. However, others shared that they had never considered some of these thoughts before and were making meaning of aspects of their identities through this process. Wes commented:

> I would say that it kind of helped me reconcile that I'm not just a singular entity. . . . I don't think that I can be boiled down to one thing, and I've kind of found it liberating just thinking about things in this way.

Wes outlined how this liberation of his identity, particularly his identity as a gay male, offered him the opportunity to engage in behaviours that were often restricted to straight males, given that socialization emphasizes rigid gender roles and expectations. Like Wes, Brandon discussed how the interview process had him considering masculinity in more specific ways:

> I find myself struggling to compose a healthy, rational, and inclusive definition that works well for modern Western society. I know a definition should abandon old stereotypes of being athletic, aggressive, emotionally suppressed, and bread-winning. These ideas are manufactured semblances of pseudo-human ideals perpetuated by society afraid of deviation. . . . I have unfortunately absorbed some of these attitudes because they are still a key element of popular culture. I try to correct my thinking and expand my horizons of what gender labels entail.

While Brandon may not have found a clear answer, it was evident that his participation in the study provided an opportunity for him to make meaning of masculinity in new ways. Related to this notion, Jordan shared his own shift in thinking around masculinity that had occurred through being in this study:

> I think it has put me on a path to further thinking about where my desires to be masculine come from. And when I project masculinity now, I think more about, you know, am I projecting my true identity or am I projecting something more artificial than I'm trying to emulate?

Both Brandon's and Jordan's statements imply the potential for continued reflection and insight on how they make meaning of masculinity.

Discussion and Implications

It is clear that several patterns emerged from the data regarding the intersections of gender, race, and other dimensions of identity in the meaning-making of sexual minority males' multiple identities. Additionally, when viewing the themes through the lens of intersectionality, some larger implications arise, based upon the confluence of an individual's social identities and the socio-political contexts in which students live. For example, Crenshaw's (2009) concept of structural intersectionality, or the convergence of social identities through structures and systems, played out in unique ways for each of the participants. As a result of this convergence, the participants' subordinated identities

were more often salient to them due to the dissonance they experienced on their campus. Yet, often those men with multiple subordinated identities experienced tensions among their identities. For instance, Joshua's experiences of intragroup harassment from his African-American peers on campus reinforced the importance of finding a sense of belonging among his LGBT peers and in spaces that affirmed his sexuality. This connects to structural intersectionality, given the tensions he felt, from the intragroup politics, between his racial identity and his sexual orientation. These findings connect with other scholars' findings about intersectionality with respect to sexual minority students (see Harper, Wardell, & McGuire, 2011; Patton, 2011; Tillapaugh, 2015).

Among the participants, those engaged in student leadership roles or academic curricula that had a social justice foundation discussed having a heightened sense of their sexual orientation's salience, and a greater tendency to interrogate systems of power and privilege than their peers who are not involved in these experiences. This finding connects with the work of other scholars who have discussed the mutuality involved between teaching and learning in spaces that bring individuals together around issues facing LGBT individuals (Getz & Kirkley, 2002; Rhoads, 1995). In her work on race, Tatum (1997) found that those with subordinated identities often could "make meaning of another targeted group's experience" (p. 27). Those participants who spent time, in and out of the classroom, interrogating their identities were more easily able to understand the interconnectedness of oppression within society and were more willing to be engaged in positive social change around these areas.

Additionally, individuals who were involved in LGBT student organizations or LGBT resource centres had a deeper sense of belonging to their institution and a greater sense of social support through their peer group, as well as faculty and staff serving as mentors. Stevens's (2004) study on gay male identity development in the college environment connects to these findings. In his work, Stevens found that environmental influences, including physical spaces (e.g., LGBT resource centres), relationships with peers, faculty, or staff, and campus artefacts (e.g., Safe Zone stickers, symbols) became important markers for gay male students and their sense of belonging. These participants were also more readily critical of the LGBT community in terms of replicated and reified images and messages informed by hegemonic masculinity, as well as the dominant messages of Whiteness that often permeate the LGBT community. However, Stevens (2004) highlighted the concerns of gay men of colour who often did not find community in LGBT student organizations, which tended to reinforce White notions of gayness. In this study, Joshua, as the only African-American male, expressed feeling connected through his campus LGBT organization. The discrimination he experienced came from other African-Americans rather than his White peers; Joshua's experiences were opposite to those of the participants in Stevens's (2004) study. This distinction perhaps represents a shift in socio-political consciousness within LGBT student organizations over the past decade, in both the United States and Canada.

Analyzing the data in terms of students in Canada and those in the United States also revealed some initial distinctions. As mentioned, all of the Canadian participants attended the same institution, which limits our collective understanding of the comparative data. For those in the United States, the participants, particularly the White males, often expressed greater concerns around a desire to be seen as masculine—even though they often felt a tension around this. The socialization of hegemonic masculinity seemed to be significantly

present, in some nuanced ways, in the lives of those studying within the United States compared to those in Canada. While the participants in Canada discussed issues of hegemonic masculinity, they often did not do so in ways that were so deeply felt. For example, both Christopher and Derek talked about hegemonic masculinity from a very theoretical and analytical perspective, gained from their coursework in women and/or gender studies and sexual diversity studies, respectively. The Canadian participants largely were aware of how hegemonic masculinity is deeply embedded into one's socialization, whereas many of the participants in the United States did not critique notions of hegemonic masculinity in the same way or to the same degree. For example, Jordan spoke about body image issues that he often had, and how he and his friends would often compare themselves with one another and aspire to look more masculine (e.g., more muscular, more facial hair). These findings connect with Connell's (2001) work on gender and masculinities politics. Connell (2001) wrote: "Masculinities may have multiple possibilities concealed within them. The complexity of desires, emotions or possibilities may not be obvious at first glance. But the issue is important, because these complexities are sources of tension and change in gender patterns" (p. 50). These complex differences of masculinities can vary at the individual level but also according to geographical boundaries and understanding (Connell, 2001). It would behoove higher education professionals to help students unpack these concepts of masculinity in various ways, including peer-to-peer discussion groups and workshop and retreat settings, as well as in the academic curriculum. The participants' lives show how deeply hegemonic masculinity is acculturated into Western society, and higher education professionals can help provide meaningful opportunities for meaning-making by interrogating these concepts. Additionally, the salience of sexual orientation was another significant difference between those in Canada and those in the United States. Within Canada, the institutionalization of LGBT equity within laws and policies (i.e., same-sex marriage, non-discrimination in the workplace) (Andersen & Fetner, 2008), as well as experiences of sex-positive education in educational systems (Oliver, van der Meulen, Larkin, & Flicker, 2013) may have created the potential for greater levels of LGBT-affirming experiences on campus for the Canadian participants than for their US peers. None of the students in the United States shared experiences around their sexual education beyond discussions of pornography and/or discussions with their peers. On the other hand, Brandon, Christopher, and Derek, the Canadian participants, spoke of the sex-positive education they experienced on campus, including workshops on sexual practices and wellness, and discussions in LGBT student organizations about the wide range of sexual practices. This finding provides an important implication for the possible utility of maintaining a sex-positive health and wellness program in colleges and universities.

In their work on the integration and adoption of sex-positive youth education programs in Toronto, Oliver, van der Meulen, Larkin, and Flicker (2013) found that there was "a critical co-constitutive relationship between pleasure and empowerment and between empowerment and sexual decision making" (p. 146). As a result, educational systems that are grounded in a sex-positive philosophy can make important contributions to affirm sexual minorities, well beyond current sexual education programming that often is heteronormative in nature or based on abstinence-only philosophies. By adopting more sex-positive approaches, higher education professionals might be able to help create campus environments that promote the empowerment of all students regarding healthy sexual

decision making, and increased meaning-making with respect to students' sexuality. Examples of this type of work would include: sexual health peer educators who engage in inclusive programs that address sexuality broadly, but that certainly include conversations on same-sex sexual behaviours; the incorporation of sex-positive discussions in Safe Zone trainings, for campus community members to be informed about students' sexual health and well-being; and ensuring that campus administrators working in campus health services avoid bias and judgment when working with sexual minority students, as those attitudes can result in marginalization and shame.

Conclusion

For all six of the participants, their undergraduate experiences provided significant opportunities for them to make meaning about their multiple identities, particularly their gender and sexuality. As Derek stated, "Before university, it was never necessary for me to think about how various social identities shape and are shaped by each other, so the process of understanding intersectionality has been long and personally challenging." The four themes that emerged within this study, relating to how these sexual minority males made meaning of dimensions of their identity, provide greater insights for higher education professionals on how to best support these students.

Additional research that explores critical influences on the meaning-making experiences of sexual minority males would be extremely helpful in continuing to further the scholarship on intersectionality within higher education. Longitudinal research that could span the entirety of one's college experiences as these relate to such students' meaning-making would also help advance our collective understanding of sexual minority males, as well as address the potential limitations of this research (in that many participants were recalling some of their lived experiences that had occurred a few years earlier). These future directions for research could help advance our knowledge of how to support sexual minority males in college.

While students themselves must take the necessary steps to engage in the life of the university, higher education professionals can be proactive in facilitating an adequate balance between challenge and support, in the various ways discussed, to help shape the meaning-making process of sexual minority males and help them succeed in college. To this end, it is my hope that the participants and other students like them can continue to engage in opportunities that heighten their ability to gain new insights into their gender, sexuality, race, and other identities in meaningful ways. 🍁

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