Published in final edited form as:

Am J Community Psychol. 2015 March ; 55(0): 202–214. doi:10.1007/s10464-014-9697-4.

Community Connectedness, Challenges, and Resilience Among Gay Latino Immigrants

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Abstract

To date, relatively little psychological research has focused on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Latino/a immigrants to the United States. This qualitative study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to explore the unique sources of stress, challenges, as well as opportunities and factors related to resilience among 13 gay Latino first- and second-generation immigrants. Iterative coding of interview transcripts revealed four key themes, each of which is illustrated with verbatim quotes: 1) feelings of connectedness to the LGBT community, 2) feelings of connectedness to the Latino/a community, 3) intersectional challenges and strategies, and 4) well-being, strength, and resilience. As suggested by these themes, gay Latino immigrants have distinct sources of stress and conflict, many of them associated with community memberships, but also draw on unique sources of support and adaptive thoughts and behaviors in facing stressors. Implications for studying risk and resilience factors among stigmatized populations, including LGBT individuals and immigrants, are discussed.

Keywords

gay Latino immigrants; intersectionality; cultural conflict; resilience

The Latino/a population in the United States has grown substantially over the past decade and continues to rise. As of the 2010 Census, Latinos and Latinas had grown to make up about 16% of the U.S. population (roughly 50.5 million people), with immigration being one of the main drivers of this increase (U.S. Census, 2010). Moreover, it is estimated that 379,600 adult Latino/a immigrants to the United States identify as LGBT (Gates, 2013). Members of minority populations, and particularly individuals who simultaneously belong to more than one minority group (such as LGBT Latino/a immigrants) have unique experiences and challenges that are not encountered by non-minority individuals (Meyer, 2003). The current study used interviews to explore the unique psychological challenges,

conflicts, as well as opportunities experienced by sexual minority (i.e., LGBT) Latino immigrants.

In aiming to understand how LGBT Latino immigrants experience various social categories, this study was guided primarily by intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; also see Cole, 2009). An intersectional approach recognizes variability in the experiences of people who share one or more social categories, and does not assume specific patterns of similarity or difference. Rather, this perspective emphasizes the critical examination of differences in social class, status, and privilege that vary across people in the same group or between groups (Cole, 2009). Additionally, intersectionality calls attention to the socio-structural positioning of characteristics, or identity statuses. Specifically, it recognizes that 1) identity statuses are necessarily mutually influenced by one another, 2) an individual's identities are a reflection of existing power structures among social groups in society (e.g., gender), and 3) any constellation of characteristics simultaneously confers certain degrees of both power and privilege because these constellations are situated in the broader societal context (Hankivsky, 2012; Shields, 2008). This framework dictates clear and specific focus on the experiences of sexual minority Latino immigrants, without necessitating systematic comparisons with other sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, or immigrant groups. In this study, and by way of qualitative methodology, we sought to explore the phenomenological experiences of gay Latino immigrants living in Southern California.

Little empirical work to date has adopted an intersectional approach in seeking to understand the experiences of LGBT immigrants (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012; for an exception see Collins, von Unger, & Armbrister, 2008). LGBT Latino immigrants face unique challenges due to being simultaneously an ethnic minority, sexual minority, and an immigrant. At a structural level, the experiences of LGBT Latino immigrants are colored by institutional barriers such as discrimination, residential segregation, decreased access to services, and the impact of immigration policies (Morales, 2013; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). For instance, one study found that foreign born Latino youth used health services significantly less than U.S.-born youth, suggesting that immigrants are disadvantaged in this regard and experience compromised access to care and, subsequently, poorer health (Bridges, de Arellano, Rheingold, Danielson, & Silcott, 2010). Immigrant "enclaves" or densely populated immigrant communities also can shape gay Latino immigrants' experiences and impact well-being in numerous ways; these communities have been associated with social and health benefits, but also with socio-economic disadvantage (e.g., poorer housing conditions, lack of access to services, etc.) (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012).

The challenge of adjusting and adapting to a new culture may be particularly difficult for sexual minority immigrants also experiencing stressors due to their ethnic or sexual identities (Xu & Chi, 2012; McWhirter, Ramos, & Medina, 2013). At the intra-individual level, some difficulties sexual minority immigrants may face include racism-related stress and anxiety (Alamilla, Kim, & Lam, 2010; Harrell, 2000), chronic expectations of being negatively stereotyped by others (Pinel, 1999), and being hyper-vigilant to potential threats related to their sexual identity (Meyer, 1995). At the interpersonal or intergroup level, conflicts between cultural values or pressures within Latino culture and personal beliefs also

may present challenges for LGBT Latinos/as (Castillo, Conoley, Brossart, & Quiros, 2007; Lehavot, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). For instance, traditional gender role expectations and norms of masculinity and femininity are particularly stringent within Latino communities (Diaz, 1998). For gender non-conforming gay Latinos, the cultural value of “machismo,” a strict and idealized form of masculinity for men, may be a source of conflict and challenge (Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, & Tracey, 2011). In fact, in one study of Mexican-American men, stronger endorsement of machismo and feelings of conflict between gender roles was associated with greater stress (Fragoso & Kashubeck, 2000). Being a member of both an ethnic community and the LGBT community necessitates the navigation of varying cultural scripts, values, and expectations; a skill that people who are members of just one of these communities may not require.

Because of the varying values, norms, and expectations of their various communities, LGBT Latino/a immigrants may encounter difficulties interacting with different social groups and communities. For example, LGBT immigrants are often not welcomed or accepted in many ethnic communities (APA, 2012). Similarly, Latino/a sexual minorities encounter discrimination, prejudice, and lack of acceptance from the majority White and “mainstream” LGBT population (Han, 2007; Teunis, 2007). LGBT immigrants may be discouraged, then, from accessing sources of support that might typically be utilized either in the Latino community (e.g., family members) or in the LGBT community (e.g., support services and organizations) whether due to overt hostility or simply the perception of being unwelcome. Along with navigating these different social spheres, immigrants must contend with potential at-odds pressures to acculturate and “fit in” with American culture, while at the same time preserving their cultural or ethnic heritage: a stressor in and of itself (Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002).

Although LGBT Latino immigrants face very real challenges and difficulties, their unique and intersecting characteristics also may afford them psychological benefits, sources of support, and sources of resilience (Morales, Corbin-Gutierrez, & Wang, 2013). As members of multiple communities, they may be able to access distinct or greater overall community-based sources of resilience, such as supportive social networks, opportunities for community involvement, and group-specific health or social services (e.g., free health clinics) (Davis, Cook, & Cohen, 2005). For example, support from peers or from family members is beneficial, serving as a protective factor against the negative impacts of immigration stress and related difficulties (Finch & Vega, 2003). Different community connections seem to afford protection against unhealthy behaviors as well, for instance, against engaging in risky sexual behavior (O'Donnell, Agronick, San Doval, Duran, Myint-U, & Stueve, 2002; Ramirez-Valles, Kuhns, Campbell, & Diaz, 2010). In addition, when asked to describe the factors that were associated with a positive sense of self, LGBT people of Latin heritage listed factors such as strong family connections and friend networks, greater insight and ability to take different perspectives, more empathy and compassion for others, and engagement in social activism (Almario, Riggle, Rostosky, & Alcalde, 2013). Insofar as group memberships are the basis for positive self-evaluations (cf., Tajfel & Turner, 1979), belonging to and identifying with many social groups may also provide multiple sources of pride and positive feelings. Such identity-based pride has, in fact, been shown to protect against negative mental health consequences such as depression in the face of discrimination

(Lee, 2005). Moreover, people with multiple stigmatizing characteristics report distinct psychological benefits such as deeper introspection, personal growth, and freedom from societal conventions and expectations (Bowleg, 2013).

In sum, the experiences of LGBT Latino immigrants entails a complex interplay of both challenges and potential conflicts, but also of sources of support and resilience in the face of such challenges. Friends and family, for example, can be potential sources of support to the extent that they are accepting, but also sources of conflict if they are disapproving or condemning of an LGBT Latino's sexual minority status. The analyses presented focused on identifying some of these common stressors and difficulties, as well as gleaned information on resources, support, and coping strategies.

Method

Participants

This study analyzed interview transcripts from 13 gay Latino men who were also first- or second-generation immigrants to the U.S. These transcripts came from a larger project which included interviews from sexual minority Latino/a and Asian immigrants from metropolitan areas of Southern California. The participants in our sample: 1) were at least 18 years old (actual ages ranged from 19 to 53 years); 2) self-identified as gay or queer; 3) indicated their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino; 4) were first-generation (i.e., non-U.S. born) or second-generation (i.e., at least one parent born outside of the U.S.) immigrants; and 5) felt comfortable completing the interview in English. Eight participants were born in the U.S., and 5 were born outside the U.S. but were citizens or permanent residents and had immigrated to the U.S. when they were between 2 - 21 years old. Eleven reported English as their most commonly spoken language, and all had completed at least a high school education. Eight were employed either part-time or full-time, and 7 reported earning less than \$20,000 annually. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants and their demographic characteristics (using a pseudonym for each participant).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through advertisements in LGBT community newsletters and online (e.g., Craigslist and social networking sites), postings in community-based organizations (e.g., LGBT community centers), and word-of-mouth. Individuals who indicated interest in participating in this study completed a pre-screening survey to confirm their eligibility and were then contacted by phone or email to schedule their interview.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted individually by one of five trained interviewers in quiet locations convenient for participants (e.g., community centers, coffee shops) and lasted between 1-2 hours. Upon meeting their interviewer, participants received an overview of the interview and provided their written consent to take part. Next, demographic information was ascertained and used to determine the ethnic (e.g., Latino, Chicano) and sexual orientation (e.g., queer, gay) identifiers participants preferred. Interviews were digitally recorded with participants informed that they could pause or stop the interview at any time.

The interview protocol had five main sections of questions and follow-up probes. First, participants described themselves in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and immigrant status, both separately and in combination (e.g., “What does it mean to you to be a Latino gay immigrant?”). Following this, participants discussed their feelings about various communities or social groups (e.g., “What does it mean to be a member of the Latino community?”). The third section solicited participants’ views of their ethnic culture and “mainstream” American culture (e.g., “What aspects of American culture differ from the beliefs and practices important to you?”). Next, participants described their sexuality and experiences coming out or disclosing their sexual orientation to others (e.g., “What does ‘being out’ mean to you?”). Finally, participants described general experiences as a sexual minority immigrant and any connections they perceived to their health and well-being (e.g., “Keeping in mind your ethnicity, sexuality, and immigrant status, what is important for others to know and understand about you?”).

Upon completion of the interviews, participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire and received \$50.00 cash compensation. The interviews were then transcribed for analysis. Two interviews could not be transcribed due to poor audio quality, reducing the final sample to thirteen interviews.

Coding of Interviews

The transcribed interviews were imported into ATLAS.ti 7, a popular software package used for qualitative analysis. After a careful initial reading of all of the transcripts, a three-level coding process was undertaken. For first-level coding, two coders coded one interview together to determine the general coding framework. Two steps were utilized in this process. First, the elements from the transcripts to be coded were identified by selecting verbatim quotations from across the entire interview that focused on passages in which participants explicitly discussed their experiences as Latino, gay (or queer), or an immigrant. The length of selected sections of text varied from one to several sentences. The second step of the first-level process utilized a combination of open coding and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to preserve the respondent quotations as accurately as possible. As such, highly specific codes were attached to the data that reflected the meaning-making elements associated with participant responses. For example, a participant’s statement, “I feel that I’m more comfortable when I am sort of surrounded in the area by a lot of other gay people” was coded as, “feeling more comfortable around other gay people.” After jointly coding this interview, the two coders each separately coded half of the remaining interviews. The coding process included frequent communication between the coders in order to ensure that they were using codes consistently.

After coding the interviews, the coders worked together to identify duplicate first-level codes which were then merged to simplify the coding scheme. Duplicate codes were judged to have the same substantive content despite differences in language or terminology. For example, the codes, “being gay is not important to me” and “being gay is not very important to me” were collapsed into the same category. The first-level coding process resulted in a total of 1653 codes.

The next step in the coding process entailed creating broader and thematic categories that grouped codes based on conceptual similarity. This step was accomplished using axial coding and selective coding procedures (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with both coders engaging in this iterative process together to ensure consistency and agreement. First-level codes were grouped into superordinate codes based on the extent to which they addressed similar subject matter. This procedure allowed for maximal preservation of participant data by subsuming the highly specific open codes into broader elements or categories; repeating this process several times resulted in 31 higher level codes. In a final step, the second-level codes were grouped according to their broadest thematic elements using similar check-in and iterative processes between the coders. These third-level codes constitute the main results reported here.

Results

Four broad themes reflecting the experiences and issues voiced by participants emerged from the coding process. The first category of codes involves connections (or lack thereof) to the LGBT community, whereas a second category entails the same toward the Latino/a community. The third thematic category focuses on unique challenges and conflicts that arise from combinations of minority characteristics, as well as specific strategies participants used in dealing with these challenges. The fourth and final theme reflects participants' reports of well-being, perceived success in dealing with the conflicts they identified, and a sense of strength and resilience derived from their multiple characteristics. Pseudonyms for participant names are used throughout the presentation of results (see Table 1).

Theme #1: (Dis)Connectedness to the LGBT Community

Connectedness to the broader LGBT community varied between participants but also within a single interview depending on the situation and issues being discussed. That is, it was common for the same participant to express feelings of connectedness as well as disconnectedness to the LGBT community. The majority (9) reported a sense of connectedness to or importance of membership in the broader LGBT community. The community was seen as welcoming, supportive, and accepting, and as a place where everyone could get along. Statements about this community were generally linked to positive feelings and a sense of "fitting in." Humberto, a 1st generation gay man from Venezuela spoke about the importance of the LGBT community; including that it provided a sense of validation and self-worth:

[The LGBT community] sort of legalizes that you exist in a sense as for who you are...especially in my case, if you have been told throughout your teenage years that you were not right, that there was something wrong with you, I think it sort of negates that and says no, there is actually this. They been lying to you. You exist as a person.

Humberto had not considered coming out until he moved to the U.S. in his mid-twenties. However, despite the importance of the LGBT community to him, he was not very involved in LGBT activities and organizations. The LGBT community for him was more about simply knowing that he had a place where he belonged and was accepted.

Notably, although most of the participants mentioned feeling supported by and connected to the LGBT community in a broad sense, their comments were generally brief, simple, and matter of fact. Edgar, a 23-year-old, spoke about the gay community in such a way:

But from what I've gained knowledge of, they're very welcoming, I felt very welcome. They greet you with a smile, they want to get to know you, not just like know, oh who's that, but really get to know you, where you come from, and what you've done in your life, you know, your ups and your downs. And that's a good feeling.

Responses were much more nuanced, and indeed more personal, as participants discussed ways in which they did *not* feel connected to the LGBT community, even after reporting feelings of connectedness. In fact, a number of participants (8) noted reasons they felt disconnected from the LGBT community at times. For some, feeling disconnected stemmed from the fact that being a member of the LGBT community was not central to them. They insisted that no one characteristic or social group membership (Latino, LGBT, or immigrant) was sufficient or overly important to their sense of self. Instead, they espoused a more holistic self-view beyond these specific characteristics (e.g., "I just want people to see me for me"). Other reasons for feeling disconnected from the LGBT community involved perceptions of gendered and extreme expectations for behavior within this community. That is, the community was seen as too "out there" with stereotypes of gay men as flamboyant or extremely feminine cited as reasons to remain distant. As Hector, a 42-year-old second-generation gay man who adopted a more masculine gender presentation noted:

I guess because I'm not flamboyant a lot of people don't realize [I'm gay] in just general public settings. So I guess if I was more effeminate it would be more obvious and then it might've been an issue for me... because of that I also stay away from gay culture more.

Hector recalled that the only gay role models he had growing up were extremely feminine and that he never identified or saw commonality with them. Presently, he stated that he chooses to affiliate with more masculine men, and wishes to be seen by others and by mainstream society as "just a regular guy."

Another source of disconnection involved the perceived tension between ethnic groups within the LGBT community or between an ethnic community and the "mainstream" gay community. Some participants felt that being an ethnic minority member of the LGBT community was difficult at times; they perceived the LGBT community as largely White and privileged. Perhaps reflecting this, many also felt that ethnic minorities were poorly represented within the community, including in community spaces, in discussions of activism, and in the media. Ernesto, a 49-year-old Peruvian who moved to the U.S. as an adult, described his perception of the LGBT community as narrowly focused, and as having an agenda that was mainly driven by White, gay men. Having lived in several multicultural communities throughout his lifetime, he was particularly attuned to what he felt was a one-dimensional approach to defining the priorities of the LGBT community:

I think their interests are very, like I said, self-serving. It's about what interests them. It's like this whole Prop 8 thing...everyone's fighting for that. That's fine, but

you know minorities are fighting for other things. But, but still the White elite, they think that gay minorities should be fighting for the same thing they are fighting. But it's like what about when they are fighting about immigration, or, you know, the Dream Act, or other stuff? We don't see them. You know, they're, they're just not there, you know? They're totally out of touch.

Relatedly, being treated differently because of one's ethnic background was another source of feeling less connected to the LGBT community. Participants cited specific instances of discrimination or objectification from members of the LGBT community. Ernesto also noted that, while Latino gay men are not included in the political sphere, they are included in social settings (e.g., being invited to parties). He expressed that he thought this differential pattern of inclusion and exclusion was due to Latino men as being seen as "exotic" by the broader and largely White gay male community.

Thus, although the LGBT community was perceived as welcoming and supportive at a very basic, surface level, problems within the community were noted, especially around ethnic group differences and gender roles and presentation; these issues led to feelings of disconnectedness that stemmed from deeper issues such as specific value conflicts or feelings of "other-ness."

Theme #2: (Dis)Connectedness to the Latino/a Community

The second broad level theme encompassed connectedness to the Latino/a community. Similar to descriptions of connectedness to the LGBT community, participants expressed varying degrees of both connectedness to and disconnectedness from the Latino/a community. A majority (8) reported some strong connection to and importance of this community. Participants viewed Latino/a culture as communal and family-focused, and as a reliable, ready source of support. Manuel, a 32 year old, spoke of how his single parent mother raised him and his sister. After bringing them to the U.S. from Mexico, she worked three jobs to put them through private Catholic school, which taught him to never let hardships hold him back. This central importance of the family was also commonly cited as a key aspect of Latino/a culture, and a source of feelings of connectedness:

One thing about Hispanic culture is, you know, keeping the gay part aside, is that it's very inviting... You can go to almost anybody's house as a stranger and you will be welcomed in like family. And I think that's what I love so much about my culture, is people, you know, will be just like family.

Notably, by explicitly separating the Latino/a community from his gay identity, Manuel alludes to that fact that the welcoming nature of the Latino/a community did not preclude it from causing some challenges. However, at the most general level, Latino/a heritage and culture tended to be a source of pride and positivity for participants, and was seen as something that was important to know about and maintain.

Participants' feelings of connectedness with the Latino/a community were derived from a variety of sources. Shared language and cultural practices and traditions provided a sense of commonality and connectedness. Some of the struggles faced by members of the community, such as socio-economic barriers and discrimination, were shared with others,

providing a sense of common fate; to overcome them required community members to work together. Raul, a 33-year-old who was born in the U.S., described his upbringing in a predominantly White neighborhood. For him, experiences such as being called names as a child and facing employment discrimination as an adult, contributed to a sense of appreciation for the Latino community and its history:

...understanding where I'm from...is important to me - to know the history, where my parents are from, and where our community is going. It's important to me because I obviously want us to thrive.

Like other participants, he felt that his Latino group membership was always salient and readily perceived by others (for better or worse) and this led him to strongly embrace his cultural heritage.

There was also a wide range of reasons for feelings of disconnectedness from the Latino/a community; a total of 9 participants reported feeling less connected at times. For many, the important norms and values within the community created distance. In particular, the strong emphasis on religion, and especially Catholicism, in Latino culture was a key reason for feeling disconnected. The Catholic Church's strict prescriptions for following a traditional (heterosexual) family path and raising children, in combination with intolerance of LGBT people, made participants feel disconnected or that they could not truly fit in with the Latino/a community. As Gabriel, a 29-year-old born in the U.S., stated:

I don't believe there's a lot of acceptance just because of the fact that throughout my experiences, Hispanic families tend to be a bit more conservative as far as views on relationships and religion itself, to the point where it would be a bit difficult to be gay within the Latin [culture].

Gabriel reported having faced discrimination from a religious coworker and less than full acceptance from his father, who he described as still hoping that Gabriel was in a phase. His examples illustrate a common view among participants that religious values make it difficult for some Latinos/as to accept LGBT people.

Gender-based expectations also were frequently mentioned as contributing to feelings of disconnectedness from the Latino/a community. In fact, machismo was explicitly mentioned by all but one of the participants as an expectation or value that produced difficulties. Manuel described the strictness of this norm of masculinity, and the consequences of not adhering to it:

...it's tough, you know, to one, being accepted as gay, and two, being accepted as gay and Hispanic because there is that machismo that if you don't fit into this, you are not really a true Hispanic.

Expectations of a traditional (heterosexual) marriage and raising a family were also cited as strong values in the Latino/a community that also undermined feelings of connectedness. Jose Luis, a 37-year-old, 1st generation immigrant from Mexico, described a phenomenon he called being "chased out of my ethnicity":

So I disconnected from them [the Latino community] and I connected with other ethnicities because I was gay and they were gay. So being gay has kind of

disconnected me because I don't play into the whole guy thing, and not having kids. So the disconnections are almost equivalent to the connections I made to the gay community.

For Jose Luis, lack of connection to the Latino community seemed to be compensated for by greater connections to the LGBT community, a community in which gender norms and expectations were less oppositional to his beliefs. Thus, although Latino culture and heritage were sources of pride, support, and connectedness, some cultural values and norms pushed participants away and caused them to feel at odds with the Latino/a community.

Theme #3: Intersectional Challenges and Strategies

Overall, participants seemed acutely aware of their intersecting minority characteristics. Being a "minority within a minority" was reported to be a challenge in and of itself. Generally, having multiple minority characteristics was seen as a source of conflict and potential stress. Participants reported feeling that they were always on the margins; they frequently experienced some kind of challenge related to a specific characteristic (e.g., immigrant status) or from some combination of characteristics. In fact, their multiple characteristics were viewed as providing other people with more opportunities to exhibit prejudice or discrimination.

Perceived clashes between communities -- for instance, between the LGBT and Latino communities as alluded to above -- created conflict and challenge for many participants. Jose Luis articulated how being a part of the Latino/a community meant there were certain pressures and norms that made it difficult to be gay:

For me it means there's a responsibility involved...the responsibility of following the culture that you've been raised with, and that's where the gay thing becomes a conflict at times. 'Cause it can be pretty religious, which is against homosexuality. So you have a responsibility of being who you've been brought up to be and being gay makes it challenging.

His sentiment was common among many participants; it was not feasible to be both a "true" Latino (in values and expectations) as well as gay. Expectations related to gender roles, including following the traditional path towards building a family, starting with marriage, also were a point of contention. When asked to describe an instance of such conflict, Raul commented:

My sister got married about 3 years ago, and while I was there it was a lot of my family, you know, not only from the States, but also Mexico, and it was- especially because a lot of them don't know that I'm gay, so I was asked 'when am I going to get married?' you know, 'what's going on with my life?' So that was a situation where I kind of had to address [it]. It was uncomfortable but I had to get it out there. It was... it's a lot.

For Raul, this conflict could only be resolved by coming out to his family.

The competing values and priorities attached to different and intersecting characteristics also made some participants feel that they always had to stand up for or fight for one of their

minority memberships. Immigrant rights or issues of ethnic diversity were not perceived to be important issues to the LGBT community, and likewise LGBT rights were not seen as important within Latino/a and immigrant communities. Consequently, some participants reported feeling pressure to either choose between or always fight for the priorities and issues most relevant to each of their minority characteristics. Jorge, a queer 1st generation immigrant from Mexico, was undocumented at the time of his interview, fueling his serious involvement in the immigrant rights movement. He described difficulties trying to organize for both the immigrant and LGBT communities, and shared comments he had received from members of each community about social justice aims:

[They'd say] "Oh it's not gonna go through cause it's attached to the... controversial Dream Act." And then the students were saying "Oh it's not gonna pass cause it's being attached with controversial Don't Ask Don't Tell," and I was like, well those are my communities, right? I was like, none of those are controversial, like, those are both specific, like, that was a specific one, where I felt like I was being... I didn't feel like the love from anyone... And I couldn't be happy either, I was like, well, do I need to choose what side I'm gonna be on, you know? It puts people in a certain situation.

Importantly, then, having these multiple minority characteristics felt oppositional for some participants and seemed to put pressure on them to resolve conflicts between the different values, expectations, and priorities they perceived among their communities.

Participants reported using multiple strategies to deal with such intersectional conflicts and challenges. One strategy was a direct, steadfast "take-it-or-leave-it" approach, in which participants met any form of intolerance with total rejection and attempted to remove the source of conflict from their lives (e.g., no longer being friends with a co-worker who made an insensitive remark). Manuel explained that after all of his experiences and the obstacles he had overcome, he had little patience for people who had difficulty accepting him:

You know, I just said screw it. If you don't want to be a part of my life, then you don't need to be in my life. And especially today, you know, I feel that the people that are in my life are in my life for a reason. It's an honor to be in my life... And I feel that if anyone doesn't agree with who I am and don't need to be in my life, period. That's how I manage it... I don't need to deal with people that don't believe in who I am.

Another strategy for dealing with conflicts was avoidance. In some cases, participants simply kept potentially conflicting values or beliefs to themselves and did not press the point with others to prevent conflicts from arising. Participants also described adjusting their normal behavior to avoid potential conflicts. As described by Oscar, a 53-year-old born in the U.S.:

It's hard and you have to be careful because you can't go wear it on your sleeve because you could be the victim of gay bashing and things like that. I don't have a gay flag on my car for symbol as I'm afraid... my tires will get slashed, and you've got to be careful if you're coming out.

Yet another avoidant strategy included distancing oneself from certain communities or individuals. For example, Hector chose to avoid people who do not support LGBT rights:

That's actually kind of made me distance myself from them...With family [it's] different because they're your family and it's not much of a choice. But with friends and especially with former coworkers it's easier to separate and just say I'm done... just distance yourself over time.

In contrast to the research that suggests that rumination or internalization of negativity from others is common among minority group members, the Latino gay immigrants in this study tended to place blame externally, and conclude that other people were ignorant, closed-minded, or not worth dealing with. Complementing this distancing strategy, participants also reported strategically seeking out people who shared their beliefs and also noted this was generally a highly positive experience. As succinctly summarized by Jose Luis:

I guess part of the dealing with the conflicts was gravitating towards [whoever] shares my beliefs, so I don't know if I did much to resolve the conflicts other than gravitating towards more others who were like me.

This process of seeking similar others was gradual and involved a series of decisions and actions that ultimately led him to develop a social network of friends within the bear community with whom he felt supported and comfortable. Gabriel described a similar immersion in the bear community: "It's a part of the gay subculture where you basically, you don't fit into the stereotype of what a gay man would be. For example, bears tend to usually be bigger guys like myself, hairy, a bit more masculine." Both Gabriel and Jose Luis noted that seeking out certain people and spaces such as the bear community was an intentional attempt to connect with a sub-community in which they felt truly accepted despite not matching mainstream gay community norms.

In addition to avoiding or seeking out certain people, another strategy for dealing with intersectional conflicts entailed altering behavior to fit different social contexts. At home or around family, for example, some participants reported altering mannerisms so as to better match traditional gender roles (i.e., masculinity for men). These behaviors (e.g., acting in a more gender-conforming way) served to avoid problems and potential conflicts, and especially with family members and others who held more traditional and stereotyped views and expectations. Indeed, family contexts were described as having the greatest potential for conflict. As reported by Carlos, a 26-year-old of Mexican descent:

...when I'm with my family, definitely, obviously the whole immigrant, Hispanic thing, you know, and you downplay the gay, definitely... other than my family there's no need to downplay anything, like with friends everybody knows who I am. They know I'm Hispanic, they know I'm gay and a second generation immigrant... so there's no conflict there, but with family there is.

Participants also described attempts to keep certain social spheres separate. Friendship networks tended either to be comprised of other LGBT Latinos/as (those who shared the intersectional characteristics), or to be segregated into separate groups of LGBT friends or Latino/a friends. For example, Gabriel explained that he would not bring a romantic partner

or LGBT friend home because of his father's difficulties accepting his sexuality, resulting in what he described as living "two lives":

I tend to separate the two lives as far as actually bringing someone over. I'd bring them over to meet my siblings, but because my parents, my dad especially, since he had a bit of a harder time accepting it, I might not end up bringing a boyfriend or potential partner around him...I tend not to, I guess, mix as far as social aspects. I tend not to mix my family with the gay friends that I've made.

In summary, participants noted challenges associated with having multiple characteristics and communities, but also numerous strategies for navigating such challenges. Strategies were context-dependent, and varied in directness; some participants described direct "take-it-or-leave-it" approaches, while others reported more avoidant strategies. Participants also cited seeking out supportive social networks as a way to reduce conflicts.

Theme #4: Well-being, strength, and resilience

Despite easily identifying conflicts and challenges that might be construed as sources of stress, 9 participants reported that they were currently faring well in terms of overall well-being. They stated that they had overcome negative experiences, and their sense of having conquered challenges was seen as positive and providing a sense of strength and accomplishment. In this way, dealing with challenges was viewed as a source of personal development and growth. Rather than permanent or devastating setback, participants felt that their past experiences with conflict had left them better equipped to deal with future problems, and especially because they had sought out or developed specific communities and sources of social support to which they could turn. The participants also generally had positive views towards therapy or counseling, including many who had been in therapy or who were willing to try it if needed.

In some ways, then, this may be an especially resilient sample, or at least a sample made up primarily of gay Latino immigrants who have successfully negotiated past hardship and are currently experiencing relatively good well-being and psychological health. As such, the sample may underestimate the severity and prevalence of problems experienced by some gay Latino immigrants. In fact, although most of the participants did not report turning to drugs, alcohol, or other destructive behaviors when faced with stress, one participant disclosed his prior thoughts of suicide. As Carlos reflected on a time in his past in contrast to his current state:

I was near committing suicide... because I was just so ashamed of it, that I was like, I'd rather have committed suicide than people find out that I'm gay. And obviously going from that to now to just being completely okay with it and knowing that there's nothing to be ashamed of, um, I think that's a pretty good step.

In addition to personal growth, participants reported developing and using strategies that contributed to well-being and effective functioning, including cultivating social networks that provide validation and support. As Jorge recounted:

For the past two years, I've been around more people who truly understood who I am, and... it's been good for me, because I finally feel that I have a space where it's okay to walk in as a queer undocumented person.

Similarly, more narrowly defined and inclusive communities – communities made up of people who share all or most of the same minority characteristics (i.e., LGBT Latino/a immigrants) – were perceived as providing the most comfortable and supportive environments. Participants sought out these communities and specific sub-communities, and reported awareness and appreciation of them. However, at bottom line, it appears that having any source of support regardless of shared characteristics was important; this point was made by Manuel:

I think the people around me make me feel comfortable... having a support network, not just from my gay friends, but also from my friends in general... I think having a support network helps. I feel like there are people who support me no matter what.

In a related vein, some participants suggested that their multiple and intersecting characteristics had conferred psychological benefits and helped them to cope. For instance, Jose Luis described achieving greater self-acceptance:

Being part of one minority has helped me cope with the fact that I'm part of another minority. Being Hispanic and being an immigrant, and now throwing in that you're gay also, I mean at some point I didn't tell people I was an immigrant. I could hide it, and same with being gay. But being part of one helped with accepting, accepting one helped me accept the other I guess. Just understanding that there's so many different components that make me who I am, and make me feel okay with who I am.

At least for Jose Luis, then, recognizing multiple sources and dimensions of stigma as part of himself, as well as extrapolating or translating ways of coping (and acceptance) across different stigmatized characteristics fostered a sense of uniqueness and pride.

Looking outside the self, having multiple minority characteristics also seemed to encourage insight into the experiences of other minority groups. Raul described feeling empowered by this insight, to the extent that he sought to help younger members of his community deal with some of the issues he himself had overcome:

...there's a lot of young Latino, gay youth that do struggle with [acceptance]... I've encountered some and in doing so, I really really try to reach out and let them know that it's ok and no matter what happens with their parents, that it's going to be fine... I've been there, done that. I've been borderline on a lot of reckless behavior, and just letting them know that there's a better way and that they'll get through it.

Being a 1st or 2nd generation immigrant, specifically, highlighted the obstacles and struggles faced by Latino/a immigrant communities, and in turn, increased the determination of some participants to succeed. Raul noted that although they angered him, negative attitudes about the social groups to which he belonged held by mainstream society motivated him to succeed and dispel stereotypes:

It's frustrating, but I'm determined to be successful and, you know, show people that it doesn't matter what your sexual orientation is, what your ethnicity is, it's about the person.

Overall, participants described considerable pride and positive self-views, self-understanding, social support, and growth from challenges. Difficulties were recast as opportunities for growth and sources of strength rather than as setbacks, leading to greater insight and understanding.

Discussion

Taken together, our analyses of interview transcripts from 13 gay Latino immigrants who described their characteristics and life experiences revealed important themes related to connectedness, challenges, and resilience. Of note, participants had difficulty reconciling conflicting values and norms between two communities to which they belonged and affiliated: the LGBT community and the Latino community. They also described different strategies for navigating these culture and value conflicts, including downplaying their sexual orientation when around (unsupportive) family members, avoiding or rejecting certain people, or speaking out about immigrant rights in mainstream LGBT spaces. Despite describing many challenges and conflicts, participants voiced considerable positivity and optimism about their current life circumstances. In fact, negative experiences from the past were often seen as providing impetus or opportunity for participants to develop character and strength. Our results complement findings from other studies that adopted an intersectional approach to explore the experiences of gay Latino immigrants (Morales, Corbin-Gutierrez, & Wang, 2013). Our results also fit empowerment models of the experiencing stigma, in that overcoming adversity is seen as an achievement rather than as solely negative (Shih, 2004). Thus, in confronting and surmounting challenges, individuals with multiple stigmatizing characteristics (e.g., Latino gay immigrants) appear able to find effective strategies for combating stress and producing resilience-related benefits (see also Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003; Reed & Valenti, 2012). Participants' simultaneous reports of both challenge and resilience also compliment findings from research on "redemptive self" narratives (cf. McAdams, 1993; 2006). That is, participants articulated cohesive narratives of struggle and of overcoming challenges that allowed them to reconcile and understand some of the difficult experiences they had endured, including some participants who felt that their special and unique qualities set them apart from other people. With regard to the well-being and resilience theme (#4) specifically, these results add to the growing literature on potential sources of resilience among minority groups in drawing attention to the positive roles played by family and communities, inter-personal strategies, life experiences, and unique coping mechanisms (e.g., Bowleg et al., 2003; Kumpfer, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers & Collins, 2006).

Beyond describing the experiences of gay Latino immigrants living in southern California, this study demonstrates some of the emergent and context-dependent properties of interlocking minority characteristics. Rather than reporting a strong and enduring connection to one and only one community or social group, participants voiced that there were different times and contexts that led them to feel either more or less connected to their communities.

For instance, participants reported feeling quite close and connected to family members and friends who shared their ethnic background, but also reported feeling less connected to them in contexts in which their same-sex romantic relationships were salient. This focus on how changing social context may make people aware of and influence their experience of the social categories to which they belong is a prominent aspect of intersectional theorizing (Shields, 2012; Warner & Shields, 2013). Rather than presuming a stable sense of connectedness to any particular community, attention needs to be paid to fluctuation and change in connectedness and how connectedness depends on specific social, environmental, and other situational factors, or in other words, the current social space or position that individuals occupy (McCall, 2005).

To date, a good deal of intersectionality work has focused on “master characteristics” such as race and gender, and there have been recent calls to expand the number and range of characteristics to consider (Bowleg, 2012; Hankivsky, 2012). That is, people have many different characteristics and social group memberships that impact how they are perceived and treated by others, but also that “permit” or encourage them to perceive and act in certain ways (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender identity, immigrant status, able-bodiedness). Part of the value of intersectional frameworks is that they call attention to the many characteristics that affect social positioning and behaviors, and also allow for mutual influence and different forms of synergy among characteristics. The current study adds to this body of work by focusing on people marked by several stigmatizing characteristics, and especially in including an understudied but increasingly important characteristic: immigrant status. Our research did not examine potential differences between the experiences of 1st and 2nd generation immigrants, or immigrants from other regions of the world, however, future research should further explore the role of immigrant status with greater refinement. Similarly, gender presentation may also play a crucial role in how ethnicity, sexual identity, and immigrant status are experienced. Given the strong gender-related expectations within the Latino/a community, those who do not adhere to gender roles may be subject to different conflicts from those we documented and that also likely contributes to the greater mental distress and more frequent instances of discrimination identified in the literature (Ramirez-Valles, 2007; Sandfort, Melendez, & Diaz, 2007). Future research could directly explore the impact of both gender and gender differences in the experiences of sexual minority Latino/a immigrants, as well as how gender non-conformity or transgender identity influence experiences of challenge, conflict, support, and resilience.

The majority of participants in our study reported faring well, despite describing many challenges and conflicts. Rather than representing current sources of stress, however, these conflicts tended to be described as more problematic in participants’ pasts. Of course, participant reports of their well-being may have been biased by the self-report nature of our data collection and self-presentational concerns of wanting to appear well adjusted. Aside from this reporting bias, though, these positive outcomes may speak to the resilience of the gay Latino immigrants in our sample and their abilities to develop effective coping strategies; nearly all of the participants clearly identified positive and adaptive coping approaches they had used when confronted with challenges. Although we cannot ascertain with certainty the extent to which our participants were truly doing “well” or even simply just “OK,” they nevertheless described a number of factors and behaviors (e.g., adaptive

reframing of problems) that could reasonably be seen to buffer them against the negative effects of stress. We defer from drawing conclusions about how well our participants were actually or “objectively” functioning or which coping strategies may have been most effective for which individuals. However, we find it highly instructive, and potentially inspirational for future research and perhaps intervention, that the gay Latino immigrants in our sample could articulate the problems and conflicts that they had faced, the coping strategies that they had employed, and in their narratives, described the different strategies they used as successful and as contributing to feelings of resilience and overall well-being.

Finally, simultaneously having multiple minority characteristics conferred feelings of empowerment and motivation to succeed individually and to aid their communities. Importantly, participants said that many of these positive attributes and unique opportunities would not exist had it not been for the fact that they belonged to these intersecting social categories. These individuals recognized (and some often confronted) lack of representation of ethnic minorities or immigrants in majority LGBT realms, and also noticed and contested strict conceptualizations of gender and “appropriate” gender-role behavior in both the LGBT and Latino/a community. In short, and as a result of their experiences with intersecting minority characteristics, they developed insight and motivation to challenge difference, inequality, and injustice. In light of this unique strength and sense of perspective, future psychological research should further examine the role of not only community involvement, but of activism and social justice work in the lives of those with multiple minority characteristics.

Conclusion

This study analyzed first-person accounts of gay Latino immigrants to identify and illustrate challenges, conflicts, resilience, and well-being associated with having multiple minority characteristics. We identified themes related to connection and disconnection from the LGBT community and the Latino/a community, and also noted how these feelings varied with social context. In addition, unique experiences linked to the multiple intersecting characteristics, including community and value conflicts, and specific strategies for navigating these intersectional challenges, were identified. Finally, we explored some of the specific ways that multiple intersecting characteristics were perceived to be related to well-being, personal strength, and resilience. In sum, it seems that possessing multiple minority characteristics or being a member of several socially stigmatized groups may present more and unique sources of challenge or stress while offering numerous opportunities for finding support, connection, and other beneficial social resources. Additional research is needed on the experiences of people who possess different combinations of multiple minority characteristics, with attention paid not only to what is negative and challenging, but also to special sources of strength, resilience, and individual and community empowerment.

Acknowledgments

Research reported in this publication was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under award number 1R03HD067407. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

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Table 1

Sample demographics ($n = 13$).

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Generation (Birth Country)	Primary Language	Employment Status	Education	Income
Humberto	51	Gay	1 st (Venezuela)	Spanish	Full time	Graduate	\$75k-\$100k
Jorge	21	Queer	1 st (Mexico)	English	Student	Some College	<\$20k
Ernesto	49	Gay	1 st (Peru)	English	Unemployed	Bachelor's	<\$20k
Jose Luis	37	Gay	1 st (Mexico)	English & Spanish	Full time	Graduate	\$75k-\$100k
Manuel	32	Gay	1 st (Mexico)	English	Full time	Bachelor's	\$100k+
David	19	Gay	2 nd (Mexico/Mexico)	English	Part time	High School	<\$20k
Carlos	26	Gay	2 nd (Mexico/Mexico)	English	Full time	Some College	\$20k - \$30k
Oscar	53	Gay	2 nd (U.S./Mexico)	English	Unemployed	Some College	<\$20k
Hector	42	Gay	2 nd (U.S./Mexico)	English	Self-employed	Some College	<\$20k
Gabriel	29	Gay	2 nd (Mexico/Mexico)	English	Full time	Some College	\$20k - \$30k
Edgar	23	Gay	2 nd (El Salvador/Guatemala)	English	Part time	Some College	<\$20k
Raul	33	Gay	2 nd (Mexico/Mexico)	English	Unemployed	Associate's	<\$20k
Hugo	48	Gay	2 nd (Venezuela/Italy)	English	Part time	Graduate	N/A

Note: Birth country for 2nd-generation is represented as (Mother's Birth Country/Father's Birth Country.)