Published in final edited form as:

Sociol Q. 2017 ; 58(4): 721–737. doi:10.1080/00380253.2017.1354734.

West Hollywood is Not That Big on Anything But White People: Constructing “Gay Men of Color”

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Abstract

Rather than a defined endpoint that is waiting to be discovered or developed, racial and sexual identities can be considered social identities which are fluid, malleable, and socially created through a social process that defines what it means to be a member of a social group. This paper expands the work on how social identities are constructed by examining personal anecdotes used by gay men of color to discuss how they come to see themselves as “gay men of color.” In doing so, we find that gay men of color use a number of cultural tropes that provide them the framework necessary to structure their experiences within a larger social context of a largely white, heterosexual society. Drawing on these cultural tropes, gay men of color create a social identity that is simultaneously raced and sexed through the use of shared cultural tropes that define what it means to be a member of this group.

Keywords

Race; Sexuality; Gay Men of Color; Identity

Few other activities are so widely practiced among a myriad of different groups than story telling. We tell stories about our work, our hobbies, things we’ve seen, and our personal experiences. Yet stories about personal experiences are more than simply anecdotal accounts of past events. Instead, they are structurally situated recollections that help us make sense of those experiences as well as our own place within a larger social context (Aguirre 2000). In order to do this, we arrange our seemingly anecdotal experiences into “temporally meaningful episodes” (Richardson 1990: 118) that link those experiences and bring order to them, making them something that can be told in a systematic way (Baumeister and Newman 1994; Irvine 2000; Gergen and Gergen 1983; Manoff 1987; Miller et al. 1990). In

this way, stories act “like containers that hold us together” (Mason-Schrock 1996: 176) and “provides a person’s life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning” (McAdams 2011: 100).

Because they are embedded in larger social understandings about shared experiences, we are not free to form any story. Rather, personal stories are told within the framework of a number of “canonical forms” that are available for us to draw upon and take on a “master story-pattern” that highlights shared common experiences (Bruner 1987; Mason-Schrock 1996). Such “formula stories,” embedded with a shared cultural meaning, help us build a culturally relevant framework for our stories (Loseke 2007). We connect ourselves to others by drawing on diverse cultural resources that help frame those stories along a shared pattern of experiences that helps us to build connections to, and identify with, those people we believe share those experiences (Rowe 2014). These “culturally structured stories,” in which our personal experiences are recounted within the framework of collective experiences help us develop a sense of who we are within the larger social context precisely because these stories necessitate that they be culturally contextualized within a cultural and social framework understandable to the listener (Miller et al. 1990). Stories become powerful precisely because they draw upon social themes that are widely shared and root us in our experiences in relation to the experiences of others who we believe are like us thereby creating a shared identity based on shared experiences (Chaudhary 2004).

In this paper, we examine the ways that gay men of color construct what it means to be a member of this group by specifically using a number of anecdotes that highlight their collective shared experiences in the larger gay community and their racial and ethnic communities. These anecdotes come to frame their experiences as “gay men of color” and provide members of this group with a number of shared personal experiences that are used to discuss what it means to be members of this group. Doing so, we argue that gay men of color actively construct what it means to be a gay man of color based on these shared experiences. More importantly, we extend the existing literature on the social construction of identities by demonstrating that intersectional identities are collectively constructed by negotiating different minority attributes within social spaces and social context. That is, how members of minority groups come to define the social space and their social context itself leads to the ways that minority identities are socially constructed.

Gay Men’s “Coming Out” Stories

Examining the life stories of gay men, Ken Plummer (1995: 50) found that the stories that gay men tell about “coming out” share a number of similar “narrative plots” that include “acute suffering [and] the need to break a silence” followed by a “significant transformation” once they come out as gay. According to Plummer, this “coming out” narrative is a critical way that gay men come to claim a gay identity. Unlike the “coming out” process envisioned by the stage-wide models of identity, Plummer’s work demonstrates how “coming out” is not simply a stage in the developmental process but a larger “formula story” that allows gay men to make sense of their personal experiences through the adaptation of a life story that is consistent with how they come to see themselves and allows

them to place their personal experiences within a larger social and cultural framework of what it means to be “gay.”

Plummer’s (1995) work demonstrates that the stories we tell about ourselves are not static but rather change as we continue to incorporate larger cultural understandings to our seemingly personal, and therefore individual, experiences, particularly when they allow us to connect our personal experiences with those of others. Seemingly anecdotal accounts that shape the ways that we tell others about ourselves become shared stories in that collections of anecdotal accounts come to have common themes that are shared among many who consider themselves to be members of the same group. These shared anecdotes not only help us to connect ourselves to others who we come to see as being “like us,” but we claim membership in a group through the shared stories that we tell. Thus, storytelling is not just about constructing ourselves but about constructing a community of people who have similar experiences.

In a more recent work, Matthew Rowe (2014) finds that gay men’s narratives about themselves include larger cultural tropes such as overcoming personal challenges by reaching out to others they believe are similar to them and renegotiating interpersonal relationships. While gay men do claim membership in a group and “become gay” by forming new ties, moving away from home, shifting alliances, joining new communities and departing from old ones, these experiences get told using anecdotes that come to share similar themes that resonate with others who believe that they too share those experiences. In order to develop a sense of self through the development of a collective identity, gay men bring together anecdotal accounts of past life events and “[stich] them together in a way that retroactively brings an overall sense of coherence, built around the kind of person one believes oneself to be” (Rowe 2014: 445). Rowe’s work builds significantly from an early work by Stein (1977: 89) that demonstrates how lesbians come to have a sexual identity through “acts of reflexive self-fashioning” that involves manipulating cultural tropes and conforming them to “historically specific and localized norms of identity and culture.” In fact, several studies have explored how specific social and political contexts influence the way that gay and lesbian identities are formed (Armstrong 2002; Brekhus 2003; Hammack and Cohler 2011; Kazyak 2011).

Collectively, these works demonstrate how individuals claim membership in a group by placing their experiences within a shared social context, embedding their personal experiences in shared cultural knowledge, and framing those seemingly anecdotal accounts along shared collective experiences. In doing so, individuals claim knowledge of, and membership within, the group to which they believe they belong. Thus, in sharing what appears, on the surface, to be personal anecdotes, we build a social identity couched within the shared experiences of “people like us.” Listeners understand and sympathize with these stories not only because they empathize with the narrator but also because they can relate their own experiences with those offered by the stories that are told.

Gay Men of Color, Social Context and “Becoming Gay”

While useful for understanding the experiences of gay white men, the master story of “coming out” that shapes the lives of gay white men may be less relevant for gay men of color. For example, Manalansan (2003) and Han (2015) note that the coming out narrative may not be common to many gay Asian men even when they strongly identify as “gay.” That is, unlike gay white men who narrate “coming out” as a process of self-actualization (Plummer 1995), many gay Asian men don’t share these narratives when discussing how they came to see themselves as gay. For black men and Latino men, the cultural trope of “significant transformation” offered by the coming out narrative seem to play a much smaller role than the trope of reconciling multiple competing identity demands (Almaguer 1993; Gracia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles 2008; Hunter 2010; Pitt 2009). In fact, even when men of color “come out” in similar ways to white men, the subjective well-being that white men experience may not be shared by non-white men (Villicana, Delucio and Biernat 2016). More importantly, as Klein and her colleagues (2015: 316) point out, the emphasis on “coming out” marks “coming out” as the endpoint of a linear process towards the development of a gay identity while simultaneously elevating “outness as more moral, more healthy, and more politically viable” way of being that may be less relevant for those who do not “fit” what has come to be understood as the “correct” way of being “gay.” In fact, the over emphasis placed on coming out within the gay community can be frustrating for individuals “who do not conform to what queer and/or trans people are typically supposed to look like” (Klein et al. 2015: 317). And unfortunately, what they are “supposed to look like” is often white (Bérubé 2001; Han 2007).

Nor does this tendency to view “coming out” as a linear process that ends with an affirmation of a “gay identity” address the fact that “being” out is often dependent on contextual factors. For example, in examining life story essays by thirteen gay men, Jason Orne (2011: 682) argued that gay men engaged in “strategic outness,” which he defines as “the continual contextual management of sexual identity.” Rather than being fully “out” or “closeted,” gay men often negotiate levels of personal disclosure and identification within a larger social context which includes not only social spaces but personal relationships as well.

Yet the problem with many of the studies that explore the context in which gay men come to develop a sexual identity is that they often ignore the fact that not all gay men experience these contextual influences in the same way. For example, the role that the “gay community” plays in the lives of specific individuals are often much more complex for individuals who do not fit the stereotypical image of what it means to be gay (Klein et al. 2015). Yet, how members of a group experience the “gay community” is likely to have a strong influence in how they perceive their experiences as gay men. For example, gay men of color experience the “gay community” quite differently from gay white men. Where the gay community is seen as a welcoming and open place for gay white men, gay men of color report experiencing high levels of racism in the gay community (Bérubé 2001; Collander, Newman, and Holt 2015; Han 2007; Robinson 2015; Teunis 2007). In light of the racism that gay men of color feel from the gay community, it is highly likely that members of this group would need to develop a social identity that would help reaffirm their sense of self-

worth, or at least defuse threats to their self-worth, specifically within the experiences that they have within a largely white “gay community.”

This paper expands on earlier works on how gay men construct a social identity by examining the anecdotes that gay men of color use to discuss their personal experiences within both their communities of color and the larger gay community. Rather than take “gay man” and “man of color” as distinct categories that individuals who fall into both of these groups must negotiate, we take an explicitly intersectional approach. As bell hooks (1984) noted in her now seminal work, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, feminists of color in the late 1960s and early 1970s began challenging the assumption that gender was “the” primary factor determining the fate of all women. Instead, these scholars and activists realized that the narratives about “women’s experiences” based on the lived realities of white, middle-class women, often failed to capture the realities they confronted in their everyday lives, particularly as they related to their experiences as people who are simultaneously gendered and raced. Following this earlier lead, scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality theory,” Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill Collins began calling for examining the ways that various social positions, such as race and sex, intersect in ways to create and maintain subordination that was greater than simply the sum of their parts (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989; Davis 1981). Since then, intersectional analysis has broadened to include ways that multiple different social positions and social identities have come to influence and impact the lives of those who occupy these positions, including people who are raced, gendered, and (homo)sexualized. Taking this approach, we simultaneously consider both race and sexuality in order to understand the way that “gay man of color” becomes constructed as a social category in and of itself rather than an additive combination of being gay, a man, and a person of color.

Additionally, this paper adds to the literature on the contextual nature of “gay identities” by examining how the ways that members of a group come to perceive that context influences the way that they construct a social identity. By demonstrating that gay men of color construct an intersectional identity that is simultaneously raced and sexed using their personal experiences within a gay community that they perceived to be racist and communities of color that they perceived to be homophobic, we argue that it isn’t so much the “context” but how individuals perceive the context that matters to how they construct themselves. In doing so, we argue that it is important to not only examine the social context in which identities are created but also how members of social groups come to define the social space and the context itself.

Data and Methods

Data for this study came from 35 interviews conducted between December 2005 and August 2006 with gay men of color during the initial development phase of the Ethnic Minority Men’s Study. This is a larger quantitative study designed to examine the impact of discrimination, sexual partnership, and social networks on sexual risk behaviors among gay black, Latino, and Asian Pacific Islander American men in Los Angeles, CA. Individuals were recruited from a variety of sources, including organizations that target members of these groups, gay newspapers, and notices placed in venues frequented by gay men. A

theoretical sampling frame was used to ensure diversity among participants. Inclusion criteria included (1) being at least 18 years old, (2) self-identified as black, Latino, or Asian Pacific Islander, (3) being proficient in English, (4) reporting at least one male sex partner in the past 6 months, and (5) residing in Los Angeles county. The interview sample included 12 black men, 11 Latino men, and 12 Asian Pacific Islander men. Sixteen men were between the ages of 18–29 years old, 19 were 30 and older. One of 11 Latino men and 9 of the Asian Pacific Islander men were foreign-born. All black men were born in the United States.

Using knowledge gained from focus group meetings during the initial phase of the larger research project, an interview guide was developed to explore gay men of color's personal experiences with their families, communities of color, and the larger gay community. Men were asked to discuss the relationships they had with their families, their sense of their racial and sexual identity, the racial and sexual composition of their social networks, and their experiences of discrimination based on both their race and sexuality. Questions were designed to allow participants to provide small description of their lives rather than elicit short, blunt answers.

Data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990). We began by coding the interviews and identifying a number of different anecdotes that men used to frame their answers to the interview questions. Rather than looking only at their specific answer, we were interested in how the men gave their answers and how they contextualized their answer to make a point. We then grouped these categories of answers into larger themes. For example, a number of different anecdotes were used to convey a theme of "alienation in the gay community." Finally, we examined the trajectory of life events by looking at each interview separately to determine whether a sequential map of themes was evident. Doing so, we found that gay men of color not only use a number of different anecdotes that represent a number of themes but sequentially place them in their own lives to build a life-trajectory that goes from (1) feeling alienation from their communities of color, (2) feeling the need to preserve family ties that led to them believing that they could not be openly gay in their racial and ethnic communities that led to them exploring the gay community while keeping their racial and sexual identities separate, (3) feeling disillusionment in the gay community, (4) then finally claiming an intersectional identity based on race and sexuality by meeting other gay men of color.

Findings

In examining the stories that gay men of color tell about their lives, we found that members of this group used a number of different anecdotes that fit into a "master story-patterns," a way of framing individual experiences as a collective experience leading from a shared social identity, to frame their personal experiences and makes sense of their lives (Bruner 1987). When asked to about their experiences as both a racial and sexual minority, the men drew extensively from existing cultural tropes about racism, homophobia, and the struggle of being marginalized in a largely white heterosexual world. Specifically, we found that the master story-pattern included feeling alienated from their communities of color which leads them to seek out acceptance in the larger gay community. Yet once they become active in the gay community, they experience high levels of racism levels of racism which leads to a

disillusionment with the gay community. It is this disillusionment with the gay community that leads them to search for a more comprehensive life narrative that incorporates both a racial and sexual identity.

Alienation From Communities of Color

A common theme among gay men of color was their shared belief in the difficulty of being a gay man in their racial and ethnic communities due to what they perceive is an attempt to hide the existence of gays and lesbians due to both structural and cultural factors. For example, one black man said:

It really, I mean honestly, it hurts. People act like you don't exist. [The black community] act like you don't exist. They -- they -- and they would rather that you not do certain things because then they have to talk about it or then they have to address the behavior.

The man quoted above also noted earlier that it wasn't necessarily the fact that people did not know that he was gay but rather that there was an unwillingness to talk about being gay openly. Because of the unwillingness to discuss sexual identity gay men of color occupied a unique space within communities of color that did not necessarily reject them based on their sexuality but also failed to validate their experiences fully in the same way that they validated the experiences of non-gay members of their community. For example, an Asian man noted that in the Asian community, the expectation of heterosexuality made it difficult to openly proclaim a gay identity:

You know, the assumption is people are straight before they're gay in the Asian community. But it's not that I want to hide myself, but sometimes you just have to pick your battles. And you know, it's not worth it sometimes in the Asian community to always make a point to people that you're gay.

The two quotes above demonstrate the frustration many gay men of color feel regarding their invisibility in communities of color. It is important to note that a part of the difficulty comes from the importance that gay men of color place in their racial communities. As several scholars have noted, communities of color provide gay men of color provide these men with a sense of self long before they start identifying as "gay" men and provides them with a sense of affirmation in a racialized world (Han 2015; Loiacano 1989; Manalansan 1996). At the same time, the ways that race and sexuality become dichotomized in the larger societal imagination so that "gay" becomes equated with "white" and "people of color" come to be equated with "straight" also limits the ways that gay men of color can negotiate racialized spaces (Boykin 1997; Leong 1995).

Cultural factors also influence the ways that men of color perceive how openly they can be gay in communities of color. For example, one Latino man had this to say about growing up gay in the Latino community:

It's not easy when you are growing up in a strongly macho society. Like for example, the South American society, specifically the Argentinean society. When, I don't know, it's this false closeted portrait that you have to be a man and you have to marry a girl.

While it could be argued that most gay people, regardless of race, face the expectations of heterosexuality (Purnell 2016), what's important to note is that the men in our study specifically attributed their difficulty with being openly gay to their racial and ethnic communities. In fact, many of the men believed that publicly proclaiming a gay identity within racial communities was contradictory to either their racial identity or their cultural values. For example, one black man specifically noted:

Whatever I go through in life, mainly the majority of criticism or reactions that I get are always from black people, because black people feel like it's an embarrassment to the race or, you know, mainly it's an embarrassment, not so much that it's wrong, but that it's an embarrassment.

Similarly, a Latino man shared:

Being Latino and gay, it's hard because, you know, you do have individuals who are saying [that] you're going totally against who you are as a Latino.

This sense of contradiction between their racial and their sexual identities was particularly problematic given that men in our study placed a high level of importance on their racial and ethnic identities and expressed a strong sentiment to being a part of those communities. As one black man noted:

It means I'm not trying to assimilate and be an American -- you know, the All-American -- you know, I'm a black man, born from, you know, the struggles and from the, you know, just from the core of the black people, not just trying to, you know, I'm like part of the struggle, not just part of the assimilation now. I want to identify with the struggles of the black man and our past and try to rise above that, not just overlook it.

As the quotes above demonstrate, many of the men we interviewed saw being openly gay in communities of color as difficult specifically because they saw their two identities as being mutually being in conflict with each other and saw being openly gay as betraying oneself and one's racial and/or ethnic community.

Gay Men of Color and the Need to Preserve Family Ties

As Russell Leong (1995) has noted, for gay people of color, their families are often the only source of racial affirmation in a largely racist society which makes it more difficult for them to risk losing family support by being openly gay. Not surprisingly, many of the men in our study specifically pointed to their families as a result of their hesitation to be more open about their sexual identity. One black man stated:

Because our families, we can't be it. Like you can't -- I think minorities in general you can't do -- you, It's -- I think parents for one thing, like your family for another thing. It's like another burden to put upon yourself. You know, not only are you a minority, but now you're trying to add on. Like the one great thing you have going for yourself is that you're a guy, that you're a hetero guy. But you add on like a gay thing, that's even putting you down even more. So like parents kind of fear for that situation, they fear how their kid's going to be viewed.

One Asian man who indicated that his family was aware of his sexual orientation but he was nonetheless hesitant to be more open about it in public stated that:

I don't want to put them in a position where they have to explain themselves, you know, of trying to justify their feelings for a gay son. Or having to lie to other folks if they don't want them to know. Or feeling shame if the topic of marriage or anything like that comes up. So I just don't want to put that negative, negativity onto my family.

For the man quoted above, and many of the men in our study, the difficulty in being openly gay in communities of color was intimately connected to how their families would be negatively impacted by their decision to live an openly gay life. The man quoted above shared that everyone in his family knew that he was gay. In fact, he also shared that his family members asked about his partner if he attended their monthly family gatherings alone. Nonetheless, he noted that he often tried to minimize the discussion about sexuality in order to spare his parents the worry that comes from the "double jeopardy" of race and sexuality as discussed by Manalansan (2013).

The men in our study also noted that it was difficult to be openly gay around their families due to their own and their family members' discomfort around issues of homosexuality. For example, one Asian man noted that:

I mean, like I said with my family. I gave some examples with that. Just the fact that my parents don't really talk about it or don't want to talk about it when I bring it up. It's kind of like, or just the different treatment I'd get if I'd bring a queer friend versus a straight friend or being more open about talking about it.

Similarly, a black man who stated that his family was aware of his sexuality nonetheless also noted:

I have three younger brothers, and I felt that it wasn't appropriate for me to be sexually active in New York in the presence of my brothers. You know, I helped raise my brothers and you know, I made sure they did certain things that they were supposed to do, and it always felt uncomfortable in being out in front of my family. So my mother actually knows that I'm gay. My brothers now now, but it's not something that we discuss.... So I thought by coming to LA, you know, it's a big city and I thought it would be easier to be gay that I don't have to look over my shoulder, 'cause I don't have any family here.

These experiences of difficulty being openly gay because of their family concerns, coupled with the alienation they felt in their racial and ethnic communities, allowed the men in our study to justify their first initial turn away from these communities without feeling like they were turning their back on their families or betraying their racial identity and provided them the reason they needed for seeking comfort in a "different" community, one they believed might be more open to their sexuality.

Disillusionment in the Gay Community

While initially excited to find other gay men, many of the men in our study noted that the excitement quickly dissipated. In fact, one of the most common anecdotes shared by gay

men of color was the sense of disillusionment they experienced once they made their way into the gay community. As one gay Asian man stated:

And then when I first moved out [from the family home], I moved to West Hollywood, because I thought it would be like a more accepting neighborhood to be in. I stayed there for like over a year, almost, I think, a year-and-a-half. I moved out because, of course, the rent is expensive, and also it was exactly the opposite of what I thought it would be. Like I really thought it would be more accepting, but yet people do see you like what you are. Like what you look like, what color of your skin is. And your look is really important in West Hollywood, and being a minority, you know, majority of people that live there are like white.

Certainly, disillusionment with the gay community is not isolated to gay men of color (Weston 1998). Yet for gay men of color, their disillusionment with the gay community specifically revolved around their racial minority status and their perception that “gay spaces” were largely “white spaces” that were unwelcoming of men of color. This led to many of the men actively avoiding places that they viewed as being largely for gay white people. One gay black man had this to say about West Hollywood, the “gayborhood” in Los Angeles:

It’s hugely discriminatory. The white bigots in West Hollywood, who should be the most understanding, are the most bigoted. So the smallest microcosm in our society that has been discriminated against is one of the biggest discriminators and disrespectful. And so like I haven’t gone to West Hollywood. Well, I went to a meeting the other day. But before that, I hadn’t eaten in West Hollywood in three, four, five years. I probably will never go back to West Hollywood.

The sentiment that West Hollywood was largely a “white” space and unwelcoming of gay men of color was shared by many of the men in our study. For example, one Latino man stated:

West Hollywood is not that big on anything but white people. I mean, that’s not exactly true, but if you go to, but it does happen a lot -- or a lot more frequently in West Hollywood than opposed to Silver Lake or something.

Even the men who lived in West Hollywood often found it necessary to note that their choice to live there was based on factors other than wanting to be in a predominantly gay community. As one black man shared:

Living in West Hollywood in a white community, and I don’t live there because it’s white people and it’s not that I want to live around white people, the rent’s cheap. I have more white people who talk to me now that I have a dog that’s cute. You know, “Oh, that such a cute dog,” or ask me how the dog’s doing and stuff, and I’m just like, it’s really gotten to the point where I’m like, damn, the dog is more, you know, how is it that people can be friendly to dogs and animals, you know, save animals’ lives and stuff, but human lives, they don’t care about and stuff.

As is obvious from the quotes above, gay men of color often assumed a more accepting gay community where there would be less hostility towards them until they actually attempted to participate in the mainstream gay community. More importantly, the men in our study not

only saw racism as directed towards members of their race but towards all non-white men. As one black man stated:

Um, it's just -- I mean, things like you even read online. "Not into black, not into black or Asians. No offense." That's fucking offensive. To categorically deny people. We all have our preferences. But to say friends or, to me that is the most, just, you know, disdainable thing. I've never tolerated that here. Because I, you need to be privileged to know me.... But I have noticed that there is racism, fear, whatever.

The failure of many gay men of color to find a comparable sense of belonging in the gay community as white men was previously noted by Rowe (2014) in his analysis of gay men's life stories. In our study, this disillusionment in the gay community acted as a pivotal point in the stories that gay men of color told about their lives. For many of the men in our study, it represented a point of "significant transformation" observed by Plummer (1995). Their perceived inability to "fit in" to the dominant ways that "gay" is perceived, and the shared sense of detachment from communities of color, led gay men of color to make return to their racial and ethnic roots in order to develop a sense of self that was rooted in both their sexuality and their race and ethnicity.

Claiming an Intersectional Identity

As Barth (1969) noted, comparing the self, or the group to which one belongs, with others leads to individuals emphasizing differences and obscuring similarities. Not surprisingly, the way that the men in our study described themselves as gay men was in contrast to gay white men. For example, as one Latino man stated:

It's like some white American men, we better say, some men that [were] born here in the United States, are more afraid to commit. Why is that? Because, probably in America, this thing is going so fast. We have so many things to care of. We have to pay bills. We have to pay the rent. We have to pay the insurance. We want big fast car models. Some men, some of these men don't want to face those issues. "Oh, forget it," thinking about love or falling for someone, it's too much to deal.

It should be noted that the above quote can also be read as a reflection of American middle-class values, which are not necessarily "white" values. Because of this, we cannot always discern with perfect accuracy the men's distinction between cultural values that are attributable to race, class, or nationality. At the same time, we should note that the men themselves attribute these values to "white men" rather than to social class or nationality. In fact, even the experience of "coming out" as a gay man of color was discussed in opposition to the way white men "came out." As one Latino man stated:

Even though I never came out to them because "came out" to me is, you know -- Hispanics, we handled it, came out in a completely different way than white Americans for example. We don't feel there's a strong need.

While the men in our study told stories about how they were different from gay white men, a more common sentiment shared by gay men of color was their strong sense of connection to

other gay men of color specifically because gay men of color were different from gay white men. For example, an Asian man stated:

I just think they [gay white men] are too, they are too arrogant. I have to say that. I mean, with all honesty, no judgements, no exaggerations. In all honesty, I think they are extremely arrogant, ignorant, and just, you know, it's the white guys who have stood me up always. It's the white guys who never respond to my ad.... They're not interested. Or even a reply, like "I'm not interested." It has never happened, not even once. Black guys, I've had much, much better experiences with. They have at least, you know, like if they send back, most of the time, you know, or if they respond. They will show up. They will, I've never been stood up. They will respond, and they will send back a picture even if they are not interested or whichever. .. They [gay black men] are much more polite and decent that way. Most white guys, very few white guys, have been nice about it. And very few white guys have been decent and reasonable, I have to say.

In fact, experiences of racism were believed to be widely shared by all men of color. After explaining his irritation of having gay white people call him "amigo," a Latino man went on to explain:

You know, I think every Latin person understand it. But in the same sense, you know, every race understands it, because every race has something that's like that.

Men also discussed their hesitation to identify as "gay" using a pan-racial and gendered rationale, making the hesitation to identify simply as "gay" linked to racialized notions of sexuality, gender, and gender expectations. For example, after stating that he doesn't "like to identify [himself] in a category [and] wouldn't confine [himself] to a category," a Latino man stated:

That's an issue that a lot of Latinos and blacks don't really feel comfortable, going back to what we just talked about as far as being title-ized, because it's that male ego thing. You know, I guess it's being brought up, you know, that if you're a Latino you don't want to be classified as a gay guy or whatnot, because your father has brought you up that way, to be upfront and not be -- you know. I guess you kind of understand what I'm saying, as a guy.

What's important here is that the man quoted above also shared that his parents knew that he had sex with men. Yet the hesitation to categorize himself as a "gay man," is placed within the larger context of an experience as a racial minority in the U.S., an experience that he believes he shares with other men of color. Thus, the hesitation to be more open about his sexuality was framed using his strong connection to his ethnic community and gender-based role expectations that he perceives as culture-bound that become pan-racialized in the way that he constructs his sense of self.

Many of the men also were able to frame their own experiences within the larger racialized experiences that they believed were shared by other gay men of color. As one Latino man stated:

I think they struggle also. I mean, they both, as Latinos, they both come from very strong backgrounds, you know. As an Asian -- I mean, I can't personally say "as an Asian," but I, I would say from friends that I've known -- when you're Asian, you're expected also to be a certain way. I mean, you know, literally, I think the, well, I think the only similarities between the three, for example, Latino gay, Asian gay or African American gay, is the fact that as we have that, that, you know, that whole heritage thing in the background or the ethnicity, we know struggle already through that. Adding gay to it, it's like we know struggles so we kind of know how we're going to struggle being gay.

Some men even described their sexual attraction to other gay men of color as linked to pan-racial affinities. As one Asian man stated:

I felt an affinity [with Latino men] because there was such a close identification within the cultures. You know, in terms of being colonized, having a very full set of family. You don't just, you know, throw family away. It's very close knit. Having that flavor, that, you know, just, you're very passionate, very passionate. So I closely identified that with my culture and that's why I was really, really into like Latino men.

In fact, some men even attributed the shift in their sexual desires to being more active with other gay men of color. As one Asian man stated:

At first, after high school, I was more attracted to white guys. I guess it's a whole media thing, especially when I was in high school. Abercrombie was really, really, popular. And if you see the models, the ads, on the freaking Abercrombie magazine they used to have, that catalog. All the guys there, of course, are like muscular and stuff like that, and I thought I was attracted to that. But then as I moved into West Hollywood and met a few friends, they're Asians and we hung out, and then you start to see different things. I'm like, actually no, I'm not, you know, that attracted to [white men]. And now I'm, I guess I'm more attracted to like Asians, the really cute ones, and some Latinos. Some, really -- like guys with, like, dark features

The perceived shared experience as racialized minorities in a largely white gay community provided the men with the necessary frame for constructing their life narratives along both race and sexuality. Rather than racial and ethnic minority men who happened to be gay, the shared sense of disillusionment in the largely white gay community provided the men with the master narrative required to construct their experiences along the existing societal trope of "people of color," facilitating the development of an identity as a "gay man of color," rather than an identity of a "man of color" who also happened to be gay.

Discussion

In recent years, sociological studies of sexual identity has come a long way in examining the ways that social context influences the ways that non-heterosexual identities are constructed (Rowe 2014). Examining the development of gay identities in this way not only challenges the stage-wise models of "identity" but also places social identities within the context of the larger social structure in which identities are formed. However, much of the discussion about

social context in which gay identities form continue to treat “context” as a given, rather than something that is socially constructed, and experienced differently by differently positioned social actors, during the process of identity formation. That is, while much has been done to examine the ways that different contexts lead to different types of gay identities (Brown-Saracino 2015), there has been a dearth of literature examining how members of different groups may experience these social contexts differently, thereby leading to different types of identity development.

In this paper, we expand on the literature on how social context influences gay identity development by examining how the way that members of a group specifically construct their social context influences the ways that they construct their social identities. Using an intersectional approach, we demonstrate that gay men of color experience the “gay community” differently from gay white men. More importantly, the way that they frame those experiences influences how they construct their identities as “gay men of color” in opposition to the dominant “gay” identity that may be available to them through those social contexts. Specifically, gay men of color construct West Hollywood, the epitome of a “gay ghetto” (Levine 1998), as a largely “white” space representative of stereotypically privileged white men and unwelcoming of men of color. At the same time, communities of color are constructed as extremely heteronormative. While other studies have shown that gay men of color do attempt to negotiate multiple communities simultaneously (Han 2015), the men in our study constructed the “gay community” as being separate from communities of color. More importantly, this separation of their communities of color from the “gay community” made it difficult for the men in our study to perceive West Hollywood as a space that is anything but hostile to them as men of color.

By looking at the ways that these men construct a gay identity not only within a social context but how they frame that social context, we demonstrate that the identity of “gay man of color,” is not only something men develop over time through internal struggles but also an identity that members of this group actively construct by giving their experiences both a racial and sexual meaning. Within their own racial and ethnic communities, the men in our study first discuss the differences between themselves and other members of their own racial and ethnic group. Thus, at first, when comparing their experiences to those of non-gay members of their racial and ethnic communities, these men largely see themselves as “gay black men,” “gay Latino men” or “gay Asian men.” These experiences lead them to seek out an alternative “gay community,” which they believe will be more welcoming of them. Yet, having found this group, they come to see that their expectations of finding a welcoming sexual community failed to be realized. This realization provides gay men of color with the cultural frame to describe their “significant transformation” from someone who was alienated in one community and disillusioned in another.

Not only did they frame their experiences as being different from that of gay white men, but also as being similar to those of other gay men of color across racial and ethnic boundaries. This allowed them to construct a social identity bridging their race and ethnicity, and anchored by their sexuality. Thus rather than two separate identities that need to be negotiated against each other or assimilated into each other, our study demonstrates that the identity of “gay men of color,” is a socially constructed category into which one places

himself through the act of collectively framing their experiences in the larger “gay community.”

It should be kept in mind like most qualitative studies, our study has some limitations. Primarily, Los Angeles is a relatively liberal city with a large and visible gay population and large communities of color. Also, Los Angeles is not only racially and ethnically diverse but has highly visible ethnic enclaves such as Koreatown, Chinatown, Thai Town, Little Tokyo, etc. as well as a number of neighborhoods that are seen as being friendlier towards people of color than others leading to racial and ethnic segregation as well. This racial and ethnic segregation may strongly influence the way that gay men of color come to see themselves as racial and ethnic minorities. Men of color in other parts of the country are likely to develop different gay identities based on the different types of social and cultural dynamics they encounter in their everyday lives. Other factors that may influence how men navigate their social contexts include individual’s class positions and educational levels as well, elements that we do not address in this paper given the limitations of our data.

Despite these limitations, the multi-racial and multi-ethnic community of Los Angeles is the ideal site for a study such as ours. Specifically, the multi-racial and multi-ethnic nature of Los Angeles provides a rich opportunity for non-white gay men to share their experiences and collectively construct what a “gay community,” represents along multiple dimensions. Also, the diversity of people and social networks in the Los Angeles area may provide men more opportunities to engage in social interactions outside of what may be considered the “mainstream” gay networks in favor of more “alternative” gay networks, demonstrating to them that an alternative way of “being” gay, outside of the “gay ghetto” of West Hollywood, are possible. The availability of gay sub-cultural groups may make it easier for gay men of color to remove themselves from what they perceive to be the “dominant gay culture” in favor of one that they can perceive as being more reflective of who they believe themselves to be. Men in other parts of the country may not have the same access to inter- and intra-racial social networks within the “gay community.” In those places where there may exist a “gay community” as opposed to “gay communities,” gay men of color may have more limited opportunities to share their stories with each other and frame their personal stories as being a collective story, limiting the development of a collective identity different from the dominant gay identity available for them to adopt.

Given our findings, it will be important for future studies to examine not only the social context in which identities, gay or otherwise, are constructed but also how the ways that individuals and groups come to frame their social context matters to the ways that identities are collectively constructed.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health grant R01 MH069119.

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