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‘Ballroom itself can either make you or break you’ - Black GBT Youths’ Psychosocial Development in the House Ball Community

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Abstract

Purpose—Social context plays a significant role in adolescent identity development, particularly for youth lacking traditional systems of support. Using ecological and symbolic interactionism perspectives, this study qualitatively explored the psychosocial identity development of Black gay, bisexual, or transgendered (GBT) youth participating in the House Ball Community (HBC). The HBC is a diverse network of family-like structures called ‘houses’, as well as a glamorous social outlet via pageant-like ‘balls’ in which participants compete.

Methods—A series of focus groups were conducted with youth and leaders from the HBC (n=37; age range=17–24). Via cross-case and comparative analyses, specific motivating factors related to entry into and continued involvement in the community were identified.

Results—Factors related to entry into the community included lack of safe spaces, opportunities for acceptance, means of subsistence, and allure of the scene. Factors related to continued involvement included resilience and coping skills development, sexual identity acceptance and pride, prevalence of risky behaviour, and risk of exploitation.

Conclusion—Discussion of these factors provides insight on how self-constructed, supplementary social contexts may provide both unique supports and risks to members, allowing for more focused and well-informed interventions and policies to enhance healthy development in such communities while mitigating risk.

Keywords

youth; gay identity; house ball community; LGBTQ; BYMSM

Introduction

While often varying by global region, nation, or culture, adolescence is universally a period of significant physical, cognitive, and social change, with increasing research attention paid

to understanding how varying contexts may influence individual development (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In addition to inquiries exploring broader cross-national or cultural differences in adolescent development, studies may focus on understanding the risks inherent to narrower contexts, such as increased risk for drug use among inner city youth (Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996) or studies focusing upon identifying endogenous or implemented contexts that might foster adaptive development, such as programs fostering healthy parental behaviours in the home or broader safety in schools and communities (Larson, 2000; Youngblade et al. 2007).

While this line of inquiry is relevant for all youth, the exploration of contextually-informed development may be especially important for multiply marginalized youth. For example, Black gay, bisexual, or transgendered (GBT) youth in the United States often need to navigate communities that may simultaneously value one aspect of their emerging identities while subjugating another (Harper, 2007; Garafalo & Harper, 2003; Martinez & Sullivan; 1998). Specifically, Jamil, Harper and Fernandez (2009) discuss the challenges faced by multiple minority individuals, wherein sexual minority youth may not feel comfortable in their ethnic communities potentially demonstrating heterosexism or homophobia, while those same youths' marginalized ethnic identities may encounter discrimination in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) contexts dominated by Whites. While differing in the relevant demographic variables, such multiple minority dynamics, and their associated risks and consequences, might reasonably repeat globally. Efforts to better understand such phenomena are therefore warranted.

Two theoretical perspectives may particularly inform the understanding of Black GBT youth's contextually-situated development. Given their need to carefully navigate multiple settings, the ecological perspective on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is relevant, as these youth often lack stable, supportive home environments – the typical centre-most microsystem of a “nested” hierarchical structure of contexts or systems. The ecological effects of a society that historically and currently marginalizes Black GBT youth leave them at risk for isolation, estrangement, and increased vulnerability (Martinez & Sullivan, 1998 as cited by Wynn, Filmore, & Paladino, 2014). Moreover, the loss of expected family and communal support (Chatters, Taylor, & Joyakody, 1994 as cited by Wynn, Filmore, & Paladino, 2014) has a significant impact on their well-being and identity development.

This impact of racism and heterosexism, as manifest in less reliable and supportive microsystems, can lead to disproportionately negative health outcomes, such as susceptibility to the growing HIV pandemic. For example, Arnold, Rebchook, and Kegeles (2014), speak to the experience of Black, gay, HIV-positive young men feeling “triply cursed” via marginalization in their Black communities and families for their sexual identity and/or HIV status, while also struggling with broader societal racism. While these perspectives are from young adults, the experiences of losing support or being outright attacked often reach back to key developmental periods during adolescence. Such experiences of alienation and/or rejection from within the Black community can result in Black GBT youth enacting coping mechanisms that can place them at higher risk for HIV and STIs, such as increased sexual risk behaviour and reluctance to obtain HIV testing (Arnold et al., 2014). This is evidenced

by the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that Black young men who have sex with men accounted for 75% of all new U.S. HIV infections among adolescents ages 13–19 in 2008 (2011).

These experiences of alienation and/or rejection of Black GBT youths' sexuality or perceived femininity often come from multiple sources, including family and peer groups, the religious communities to which they belong, and the health care institutions they access (Wilson, Valera, Martos, et al. 2015). Dickson-Gomez and colleagues (2014) conducted a qualitative study on constructed families among BMSM and found that many BMSM formed alternative family relationships with friends or in "houses" due to the biological families' rejection of their sexual behaviour and/or identity. According to the key informants, many of these social rejections were often intertwined with homelessness, lack of educational attainment and mental health problems.

Due to disproportionate burden of HIV epidemic among Black young men who have sex with men (BYMSM; CDC, 2014), a significant portion of the research has focused on understanding the factors that influence HIV transmission among this community. These studies can lend insight on the developmental influences upon Black GBT. For example, a study examining experiences of marginalization and migration amongst gay male adolescents living with HIV found that several youth reported loss of childhood friends (Bruce & Harper & ATN, 2011). Furthermore, there is growing body of research which suggests that such experiences are mutually occurring and interact with the developmental experiences of gay male adolescents to produce health disparities related to sexual behaviour and HIV status disclosure, sexual risk taking, substance use, and psychological well-being (Wilson et al., 2015; Bruce, Harper, & ATN, 2011). Efforts therefore need to focus on a new way of understanding and working with such adolescents in the context of larger systems (Lerner & Galambos, 1998), outside of the traditional individual and family units.

As Black GBT youth also often lack single contexts that are wholly accepting of their identities, the symbolic interactionism perspective (Goffman, 1959), with its emphasis on the fluid management of "many selves", adds additional structure for understanding the psychosocial development of this population. Whereas heteronormative youth of White ethnic background may enjoy the privilege of anchoring their identities in more stable core contexts, such as accepting families, Black GBT youth are often forced to hide aspects of their identity, by setting. For these individuals, adolescent identity development may therefore be more of a process of learning how to manage multiple identities or becoming comfortable with an identity in flux, versus settling upon a single, coalescing sense of self. This may also force them to keep both literal and intrapsychic distance between conflicting aspects of their identity, such that they are unable to feel fully secure or engaged in any specific setting.

More adaptively, they may also seek out or develop settings that are accepting of more integrated selves. Due to the lack of support and availability of role models and experiences of marginalization from their own home communities, many GBT youth search for environments and/or relationships in which they are more freely able to explore their sexual identity development (Bruce, Harper, & ATN, 2011). Again, many Black GBT youth may

not feel welcomed in the predominantly White gay community due to racial stigma and therefore form “constructed families” in which unrelated friends assume roles similar to biological families, such that there are parents and siblings sharing common identities, values, and norms (Horne, Levitt, Sweeney et al., 2014; Dickson-Gomez, Owsczarak, St. Lawrence et al. 2014; Bruce, Harper, & ATN, 2011). These constructed families may consist of older gay men assuming the role of mentoring younger gay men or of more extensive gay family networks (Bruce, Harper & ATN, 2011; Horne et al., 2014).

Some Black GBT youth find such an affirming setting in the House Ball Community (HBC), an understudied culture consisting of family-like structures called “houses” and the competitive, pageant-like “balls” hosted by these houses (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Phillips II et al., 2011; Rowan, Long, & Johnson, 2013). This community serves as a prominent outlet for the exploration of sexual and gender identity (Arnold & Bailey, 2009), and understanding the contextual factors that influence youth engagement within the HBC can provide insights on the adolescent developmental trajectory of GBT youth. While centred primarily in the United States, similar communities are emerging globally, such as nascent scenes in places such as France (Vice Media LLC, n.d.) and Japan (Kichi, 2014).

The foundation for the HBC is typically recognized to have emerged during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, wherein gay and transgender black men would often perform in drag at large mixed race events (Phillips II et al., 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, Black GBT men in these and other large U.S. cities began form “houses” often using the adopted ball surname of a founder (e.g., Ninja or LaBeija) or a famous fashion designer (e.g., Cartier, St. Laurent). The community continued to grow and evolve in succeeding decades, becoming an established social structure, led by gender-nonspecific house “mothers” or “fathers” who manage the image of the house and provide guidance and support to house “children”, or members (Arnold & Bailey, 2009).

Prominent within the HBC are the balls - events in which the houses come together to compete in various categories for cash prizes and “ball status” (Galindo, 2013). Individual house members compete or “walk” in desired categories to achieve recognition for themselves and their respective house (Galindo, 2013). The balls usually have a theme that guides how HBC members will represent their categories for that ball event, along with core categories for each dominant gender, “butch queen” (gay and bisexual men) and “femme queen” (transgender women) (Galindo, 2013). Other categories might include “sex siren”, a category for masculine men who are judged for their sex appeal and physical attractiveness; “butch queen vogue”, a category that uses elements of vogue of hands, spins and dips; “femme queen”, and “virgin runway”, a category that is open to participants who are relatively new to the Ball scene (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2014; Galindo, 2013). The number of categories in a particular ball varies depending on many factors such as prestige of the House ‘throwing’ the ball, availability of cash prizes or trophies for the ball, and other locally determined criteria from Ball leadership. In addition to the trophies and prizes, HBC members gain ‘ball status’ by moving up the ball status hierarchy, comprised of Statement, Star, Legend, and, ultimately Icon statuses, which are based on the number of years in the community, number of awards or trophies amassed, recognition within a particular category, and the number of balls participated in through the years (Galindo, 2013; personal

communication with POSSE CAB). Competition can also be heightened through the use of “shade” - backhanded remarks offered by judges or other ball participants (Galindo, 2013).

In addition to the formal HBC, there is an emergent “Kiki” or family scene that parallels the House structure but does not maintain the formal relationships that are maintained within the Houses. For example, the families can be formed without a particular House parent and the names are not linked to designers or House founders (i.e. Mafia, Foxx, Golden, Kardashian) (Alonzo Gibson, personal communication 8/14/2015). The family scene emerged as an attempt to reject the perceived rigidity of the Ball scene for up and coming participants. In particular, families formed as an opportunity to provide a safe space where youth could practice “vogueing” and other ball competition skills without experiencing the shade or “chopping” (being cut from the category by judges) that occurs during the competitions. Family scene members may move into the Houses as they get more skilled but they may also remain independent of the Houses and still participate in the balls. This new scene provides new opportunities for youth to become involved in the ball scene without necessarily belonging to a particular House.

The HBC thrives, in part, by serving as an in-group for youth who are so frequently excluded from acceptance within more dominant groups (Rowan et al., 2013). Additionally, the HBC provides both the much needed acceptance and support that they lack in other contexts, and a safe outlet for expression, camaraderie, and fun. Therefore, although the HBC is a socially constructed space, it is one of few spaces in which Black GBT youth are able to fully embody their multiple identities in a safe space. For example, Kubicek and colleagues (2013) observed the acceptance of gender and sexual fluidity of many of the House members and Ball participants. Through their observations of the Los Angeles HBC, they noted it was not uncommon to see young men wear women’s attire and refer to each other with female pronouns while taking on stereotypically masculine gender roles during their normal, everyday lives. This is an integral aspect of the Ball scene that influences identity development, and is prevalent within the HBC, given the few safe spaces GBT youth typically are able to access. However, this identity development process is not without risk, and this article will explore some of the apparent adverse aspects of entry into and participation in this community, as well as the many beneficial and pro-social opportunities the community provides.

More specifically, the purpose of this article is to provide a qualitative exploration of specific motivating factors related to entry into this community, as well as factors affecting psychosocial functioning and identity development upon active engagement in the house/ball culture. This article emerged from qualitative data collected during the formative phase of our recent pilot trial (Hosek et al., 2015) of a community-based popular opinion leader intervention within the Chicago HBC, focused on reducing HIV risk and stigma. The present study seeks to add to the existing literature regarding the socialization of youth within this unique and often overlooked systemic context based on emerging themes from the qualitative data.

Methods

Participants

We conducted 6 focus groups to seek advice and feedback on issues relevant to HIV risk within the Chicago HBC. We engaged 37 participants in the focus groups (mean age=20; range 17–24), stratified by age (15–19 & 20–24) and by community role (leader vs. youth member). We conducted a total of 6 focus groups, with 2 representing each of the stratified categories. We recruited participants through announcements at the School of Opulence, a prominent agency serving the Chicago HBC. To be included in the youth focus groups, participants were required to: 1) self-identify as a member of the Chicago HBC, 2) be between the ages of 15–24, and 3) self-identify as Black. To participate in the community leadership focus groups, we required individuals to be in a leadership role within the Chicago HBC (e.g., House parent, School Master). We identified these individuals with the help of a standing Community Advisory Board (CAB) consisting of 11 current members of the Chicago HBC, representing 7 Houses and 3 Kiki Families.

Focus Group Procedures

We recruited focus group participants with the assistance of CAB members, community collaborators, and key opinion leaders. Attempts were made to select a broad range of participants so that there was diversity in age and House affiliation. During the recruitment and consent process, we provided participants with information regarding the purpose and structure of the focus groups, including information regarding the limits of confidentiality. The focus groups were held in a confidential space, lasting 1 to 2 hours. Participants were given \$40 for their time. Recordings were professionally transcribed, and thematic summaries of the focus groups were presented to the CAB for feedback and clarification on emerging themes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted by four members of the research team, all of whom were experienced in conducting research with youth. Analysts coded and analysed data individually and then convened a series of group meetings to review and establish consensus on the emerging concepts and themes. The team kept data analysis meeting minutes and memos following each meeting to track the development of concepts and themes, and to document the initial and developing ideas for the analysis. After reading and reviewing the transcripts individually, members of the analysis team generated codes which were discussed during team meetings and modified based on group consensus. From this, the research team developed a coding structure, and then further developed and refined the list of thematic codes (e.g., self-exploration, stigma, substance use, networking) as additional transcripts were coded and discussed.

After all of the transcripts were coded and the concepts were examined, the analysis team conducted cross-case and comparative analyses. To do this, the team identified consistent patterns in meaning, concepts, and themes across the focus groups and then examined comparative differences based on group membership (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The general approach to analysis was guided by a phenomenological framework as

the team sought to understand the lives and stressors of Black GBT youth involved in the HBC (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). The specific approach to coding and analysis was inductive in nature since this procedure allows for the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis to emerge from the data (Patton, 1990). This procedure allows for an exploration of indigenous concepts and typologies. Once patterns and themes were established through inductive analysis, the final stage of qualitative analysis was deductive in nature, as the major themes concerning the contextual factors influencing youth in the house ball scene were categorized. Within the Results section, quotations are provided to illustrate these major themes, and are identified as coming from respondents in the youth focus groups (YR) or the leader focus groups (LR).

Results

We identified two primary themes - the motivating factors that encourage youth to join the HBC and the factors that impact them once they are involved in the community. Motivating factors included four subthemes: (a) lack of safe spaces; (b) opportunities for acceptance; (c) means of subsistence; and (d) the allure of the scene. The factors related to continued involvement coalesced into three subthemes: (a) resilience and coping skill development; (b) prevalence of risky behaviour; and (c) risk of exploitation. See Table 1.

Motivating Factors to Join

Participants evidenced a wide range of reasons for joining the HBC. For the youth in the study, a number of salient contextual factors at the institutional and community levels were identified that propel youth to join the HBC. Participants discussed the risk and rejection experienced within families, schools, and neighbourhoods leading them to seek refuge in the HBC. They also discussed many of the perceived benefits that attracted them to enter into the community.

Lack of safe spaces—One of the most pressing concerns identified by the participants was the lack of safe spaces for sexual minorities in community and educational settings, driving some youth to seek out alternative spaces. As these youth often come from poorer neighbourhoods, much of the risk they discussed stems from the inherent violence of their neighbourhoods in general.

YR: Well I'll be honest, it's dangerous because the communities that the public schools are in and then at the same time after school is over with it's kind of dark, you've got to ride buses and if you don't have a car you have to walk the streets and the bus and right now it's a gang war. People don't care...

Participants also discussed experiencing violence, or the threat of it, due to their multiple minority status. They described feeling excluded from traditional safe spaces, such as homes, schools or community based agencies, and even - because of perceived prejudice against ball kids - from spaces presumed safe for sexual minorities.

LR: I can't really speak much on that because I never went there (LGBT Community Center). I went there once, but a lot of the kids did say they weren't comfortable. One time I did go and I felt kind of offended because we had to go

through the back. The back or the side of the building and I'm like really? They make the (ball) kids go through the side or the back...

YR: I was scared because I'm gay, like I'm going to get killed because of my lifestyle, so that's another reason why I dropped out of school.

YR: Not only do people have problems at home, but they have problems in the school, surroundings, and a lot of people they tend to try them and they don't feel comfortable in the public schools or even private schools.

While not as urgent as the risk of violence, many participants described the overall lack of acceptance experienced in their homes, schools, and community at large. Rejection by family members or friends because of their sexual orientation led some of the youth to seek out the HBC. Others acknowledged that, while not feeling directly rejected, they were aware of not feeling welcomed in their communities or felt restrained to openly talk about their sexual or romantic experiences with same gender individuals.

LR: Their parents already don't accept them as is, so it's like when they come to the ballroom scene they're trying to feel accept[ed] somewhere, so if they see somebody else doing something, they are going to do it.

YR: Like my father is open to gay and all. They don't really care. But a lot of my friends, and on my dad's side of family I got a gay cousin, and it's hell. It's like you can't come home. You can't have boy company.

Opportunities for acceptance—Another motivating factor for joining the HBC identified by participants is the opportunity for acceptance, support and guidance, grounded in an implicit acknowledgment of their multiple minority status. The house/ball scene appeals to many youth because they feel free to explore their interests and feel accepted within the HBC.

YR: So when younger people come into it they look for acceptance, so when a young mind is looking for acceptance in that type of society it will just be like I'm going to do whatever to get where she at.

LR: And that's where when you say you are a [house] parent. I deal with them in their personal lives, love lives, sex...whatever it may be I play a role in every aspect of their life and that's what people need to realize. Sometimes you've got to pull somebody you love out of something and I just pulled them out of it. I'm like huh-huh. Because I may still be doing it, but I don't even want ya'll to have a part of it.

LR: And then I've been in houses where it's all about they want a support...a family-like system, people to talk to a daily basis, people to hang out with and that's the reason I went into the ball scene.

Means of subsistence—Additionally, the house/ball scene provides alternative means of subsistence for Black GBT youth that are often not available within their communities. Houses can provide a physical home for youth who are often put out by their families, while the balls offer the chance to make money through the competitions. While youth may not

immediately have the skills to obtain cash prizes, the potential opportunity to make money can be enough of an incentive to draw youth into joining the HBC.

LR: Every apartment that I've had I've taken somebody in and I'm not saying just one, there were times when I had five or six girls in a one bedroom when they had couches to sleep on, they made pallets or whatever, but because of my heart and I didn't want to see these young kids on the street that I took them in.

YR: But that wasn't so...because most of the time when you travel or when you walk Balls most of the grand prizes will be like for at least \$500 or more, so when you have talent and you're a contender they'll give it to you.

Allure of the scene—Youth also noted that the HBC has an allure that motivates youth to join the scene, offering opportunities for youth to travel and gain fame and stature within the ball scene. While this might heighten a risk for overvaluation of superficial traits or goals, it may also provide these youth with much-needed boosts to self-esteem and positive self-regard.

YR: When I got introduced into the Ballroom I was such a hot commodity I was like I had people hitting me up like 'okay I want you in DC to walk this Ball and I want you in New York to walk this Ball and Ohio to walk this.' It was just like I was new to it, something brand new and fancy.

YR: Houses are really like club societies, sororities and stuff like that, so when you go and you travel and you walk not only do you shoot yourself name up in the Ballroom scene you also shoot your house name up.

Factors Related to Continued Involvement

In addition to the factors influencing their decisions to become involved in the HBC, participants identified several factors related to continued involvement in the scene. Some of these were an extension or fulfilment of an original motivator (e.g., acceptance and its attendant impact on self-esteem), while others represented drawbacks not always initially apparent to new entrants into the community. Again, the factors related to continued involvement included four subthemes: (a) resilience and coping skills development; (b) sexual identity acceptance and pride; (c) prevalence of risky behaviour; and (d) risk of exploitation.

Resilience and coping skills development—For some leaders, the competition inherent in the HBC allowed them to cultivate resilience and coping skills as youth. Specifically, leaders described having opportunities to improve these skills through preparing for and walking in the balls, learning to work with others, while moving up the social ranks of the community with success. It is important to note that these discussions emerged spontaneously amongst the house parents and leaders as they reflected on their early experiences within the ball community. While leaders noted generational differences from their time growing up in the HBC to the current scene, their reflections on the resilience and coping skills they gained through participation in the ball scene remain salient as status and competition continue to play an important role in the HBC.

LR: I think in the ballroom itself can either make you or break you, and when I say that I mean as far as the ballroom scene can either tear you down or build you up. To me, coming in the ballroom scene I think if anything helped me. It made me more of a stronger person because of stuff I dealt with. When I first came out it made me a lot more stronger and it just helped build my character, but that's just me taking all that in and making it a positive, but then you have some people that take it in and just go negative with it.

LR: I may be judging you on this level but I'm not judging you on that level, because when I was younger we was so hard on each other, like we hit the floor in a ball category like somebody might chop you or you might be walking against someone and they just get really rude to you and then you get on the floor... That's the same person helping you get undressed or getting dressed for another category, there was a lot of them up there. Now the kids are like into their own and they are just like well okay this is my ball and I've got a handle on my ball. That's not necessarily true.

Sexual identity acceptance and pride—As participants began to more meaningfully explore their identities in the safety of the scene, they cited the importance of peers and mentors who helped them in their sexual identity development, as well the exploration of their own characters and personalities. Specifically, they discussed the benefits of having exposure to peers and mentors that were accepting of one's sexual identity and who provided the guidance within the ball scene that helped them embrace their sexual and personal identities.

LR: When I went into the ball scene I was an only child for about 9½ years so discovering I was gay was also a big issue and so I was like who the fuck am I going to talk to you know. I just happened to meet someone who happened to be we've been best friends for over ten years and we started to cross and going to ball and it was like okay, and so we started hanging with ball kids and the people who embraced us and this is people that I knew because it was a hangout.

YR: So when I came onto the ballroom scene it was like I got accepted like you know, because I was the hip boy, but I got took in under good wings and somebody that helped me and like built me up to the person I am today.

Prevalence of risky behaviour—While respondents identified many positive aspects of continued participation in the HBC, they also acknowledged the presence of other certain risky behaviours that might negatively impact the healthy development of adolescents and young adults in the scene. Specifically, participants acknowledged the prevalence and openness of substance and alcohol use at many balls, with some of the youth feeling that certain ball scene participants were there primarily to use drugs or alcohol. Respondents described how groups within the ball scene tended to create an inner circle in which only those who used drugs were allowed, whereas others felt that some of the youth used drugs and alcohol to reduce their inhibitions regarding other risky activities, such as sexual encounters.

LR: Some of the cliques basically if you don't do coke you can't hang with them. Some of the cliques that you don't do...you can't hang with them...They call... they call you dirty, all kind of stuff like that.

YR: I think it is going to parties and...pills and drugs and alcohol and consumed it all in one night and then you're just in that state of mind that you're free and you basically excuse my language, you don't give a fuck. You're just going home with anybody just because you allowed yourself to get drunk. And like so many people they don't know their limits to alcohol or drugs.

Participants also noted a heightened sense of sexual spontaneity and freedom inherent in the balls, but tempered by both the emphasis upon sex at the balls as well as frequently lowered inhibitions due to alcohol and drug use. For example, youth discussed being able to sneak away to the bathroom to engage in sexual activities during the balls, whereas others had to turn down offers for sexual advances, particularly if they fit within one of the coveted ball-related categories, such as Sex Siren.

YR: It's like I don't date them because it causes a lot of rigmarole to date somebody in the Ball scene if you're all both two hot people in the scene. Then on top of that all the cheating and scandal that goes with people dating people in the Ball scene... I'm married. I've been with my dude for three years. You know, we're good. But I get offered so much. Like I come to the Ball, 'Ooo, where you going? Where you been?' da-da-da-da. And if I wanted to be a hoe, I could sneak off into the bathroom.

YR: Now that I walk sex siren – when I was realness with a twist, I was getting in (having sex). Now when you're realness, the gay boys, and I'm not saying nothing about bottoms or tops, I don't know what these people are. But when you are a masculine category in the Ball scene, you get life.

Respondents also acknowledged that houses espouse different values within the HBC. For example, some houses may focus on creating a closer relationship amongst its members, while other houses may focus on gaining recognition within the HBC. A house's values or norms may therefore influence youth's involvement in more risky activities.

LR: I will say I lived in a house where it's strictly about walking balls. They don't care if they see you every day. They don't care about talking to you on the phone. When they say 'this ball is on this day, you need to be here. We need to win this many trophies, we need to look good.' And then I've been in houses where it's all about they want a support...a family-like system, people to talk to a daily basis, people to hang out with and that's the reason I went into the ball scene

YR: They kick people out. And then everybody in the house want to fight that person. Houses against house, families against families. You could tell the classy families and houses against like –like the rowdy houses.

LR: My point is that it makes it easy for those things to support anything negative because they think that it is the glamorous thing to do because this leader is doing that and that leader is doing it.

LR1: Because a lot of these parents are having their kids and I think that's nasty.

LR2: They're into that too, and have parents who do have their children...

LR3: And giving them the drugs.

Risk of exploitation—Beyond the risk of poor modelling exhibited by certain leaders, participants also noted the very high risk for exploitation within the scene, particularly given the emphasis and value placed on competition, stature and hierarchy (e.g., striving to win a particular category, or eventually achieving the coveted title of “legend” or “icon”). Even within this frequently marginalized population, power differentials exist, and this power is often abused.

One form of exploitation that youth within the ball scene may endure is the pressure by judges to engage in sexual activities to prevent participants from being “chopped”, or dismissed, during their walks. Youth also identified the inflated sense of power that may come from judging or parenting, despite the implicit social nature of the scene.

YR: It depends. Like sometimes this could be a panel right here and he can be walking, but I'm going to chop him because he didn't want to have sex with me.

YR: Like a lot of old people they actually think it's a job and it's not. It should be something that you're just doing for fun, and then like when the young kids come out to the old people they're looked at as eye candy.

YR: And the house father tell you, 'Oh, you're for vogue an we're going to make you a new virgin. Vogue. Come on, spend the night at my house. We've got this house meeting.' And they do it. You hear it all the time. And you're like, 'Why would you sleep with that old man?'

Unfortunately, youth also cited a proliferation of sexual abuse in the scene, despite many youth joining the HBC as a means to escape this very trauma experienced during their childhood or young adulthood. From the perspective of the participants, sexual trauma from childhood or young adulthood was perceived as fairly common experience among the House Ball youth, particularly those who identify as gay. In particular, some of the participants talked about not having the correct resources to deal with sexual trauma and using other coping mechanisms that may put them at risk for other health-related problems.

LR: An then a lot of gay people have been molested growing up, you have to always think about that, so when they grow up they are looking for... You know molestation is a form of domination, a form of control, so when they come into the ballroom scene they do look for older men or older individuals to continue that habit. They look for someone to protect them, but they're not really protecting them, they're actually abusing them but those are the people they tend to look for.

Discussion

For many Black GBT youth in the United States, as well as presumably similarly marginalized youth globally, traditional social contexts such as schools, religious organizations and families have failed to meet their psychosocial developmental needs. As

both marginalized ethnic and sexual minorities, these youth not only contend with the negative societal reactions to their sexual behaviour and/or identity within these social structures, but frequently also experience racial prejudice and discrimination, limited economic resources, and limited acceptance within their own cultural community and institutions. Culturally diverse LGBT people must therefore manage their multiple identities via a process of frequent shifting, depending upon an individual's current social environment and stage of psychosocial development (Greene, 2001 as cited by Wynn, Filmore, & Paladino, 2014).

Black youth's ability to find and create supplementary groups in order to forge alternative familial networks is rooted within their resilience. This resilience is demonstrated by their capacity to develop resilient adaptations to a generally hostile and oppressive environment (Wynn, Filmore, & Paladino, 2014). Resiliency factors include dialectical thinking (Jenkins, 2005 as cited by Wynn, Filmore, & Paladino, 2014), the tendency of human thought to consider alternative possibilities, even in the presence of unpleasant realities. Other protective factors are intentionality and redefinition to help protect gay males of colour from the obstacles they face in integrating their multiple identities. Oswald (2002 as cited by Wynn, Filmore, & Paladino, 2014) writes that intentionality involves choosing kin by embracing friends as family, bringing closer people that are gay-affirming, and building community by participating in supportive community resources that enables gay males of colour to experience an extended family network.

For Black GBT youth, belonging is constituted by the desire to find a community where they can create a self-identity that can be articulated without splitting off or hiding portions of the self (Jerome & Halkitis, 2009). In response to economic and social exclusion that Black GBT youth face, the HBC's grounding in Black traditions of communal social support (Murrill, et al., 2008) serves as a literal and figurative refuge for them from the stigma of the "outside world", providing social support and guidance, opportunities for identity expression – sexual or otherwise – and the chance to safely socialize and simply have fun.

However, as might be expected from an autonomous community consisting primarily of adolescents and young adults, individuals often engage in risky behaviours, including frequent misuse of alcohol and drugs, as well as risky sexual behaviour. Fierce competition and concentration of power in house parents and ball judges also raises the spectre of exploitation, particularly sexual coercion. Despite these risks, the HBC remains a vibrant and supportive sanctuary for Black GBT youth. Sanchez, Finlayson, Murrill, Guilin, and Dean (2010) assert that although the community as a whole is defined by the competition at balls, these types of social networks may provide the support needed for members to cope with life stressors and act as settings for the embracing of self-protecting behaviours, including sexual risk reduction. Efforts should be made to strengthen and enhance the aspects of the community that promote positive youth development, while seeking to mitigate features of the scene associated with increased risk and harm.

Implications

Many institutional and individual interventions might enhance the HBC's positive effect on the psychosocial development of Black GBT. Houses often struggle financially to host balls,

and sponsoring/collaborative partnerships with local organizations that are friendly to the community might lessen this burden, while also allowing for health promotion opportunities, increased access to services, enhanced safety, and use of harm reduction approaches, such as designated drivers at balls. As we have demonstrated in our pilot trial (Hosek et al., 2015), the development and encouragement of key opinion leaders can also help diffuse healthier norms from within the community, and continued support of more upstanding leaders may reduce the prevalence of exploitation. The HBC and its partners might also continue to engage schools and other social institutions to recognize and address the deleterious effects of stigma, discrimination, and marginalization of LGBTQ youth of colour in their settings. Finally, while smaller in scale and more difficult to identify, such participant-created microsystems deserve increased attention and support from policy makers at the local, regional, national, and global levels, particularly given their potential to positively influence disproportionate public health outcomes. Additional scholarly identification and exploration of such microsystems, whether emerging worldwide ball scenes or other equally unique and dynamic communities, might aid in these policy-making processes.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides insight regarding factors that might reasonably be expected to affect HBC participants in cities across the United States, the exclusive use of School of Opulence attendees raises two limitations. Focus on the Chicago HBC may overlook regional or geographic differences in the structure or behaviour of various house/ball scenes, while the recruitment of participants from an organization already engaged with an institutional partner may lead to missing considerations or factors endemic to less well-structured houses or scenes. Further, the use of participants already active in the HBC precludes understanding the perspectives of Black GBT who may be ambivalent or even wary of engaging in the scene, for any number of reasons. Thus, future research might seek to explore scenes in more geographically and demographically diverse parts of the country or in other countries, while also seeking to engage Black GBT who have yet to join the scene or may have left it. Studies of broader scope, such as more in-depth individual interviews or longitudinal designs, might also help to clarify our understanding of relevant factors.

Conclusion

The HBC and the youth it serves may benefit from continued attention and support from the research community, particularly through participatory and collaborative work, such as the community-level intervention giving rise to this study. However, researchers should not overlook the fact that this community has evolved just fine on its own, and part of the allure of the scene stems from its very existence on the fringes of dominant culture. Allies should therefore seek to empower the HBC to build upon the inherent strengths of the scene, while allowing leaders and participants the chance to identify their own areas of concern, and autonomously be at the vanguard of identifying and implementing change.

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Table 1

Main Themes related to Involvement in the House Ball Community.

Theme Category	Themes
Motivating factors that propel youth to becoming involved in the house/ball scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of safe spaces - Opportunities for acceptance - Means of subsistence - Allure of the scene
Factors related to continued involvement in the house/ball scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resilience and coping skills development - Sexual identity acceptance and pride - Prevalence of risky behavior - Risk of exploitation