# “QUARING” RESILIENCY: EXPLORING RESILIENCY AMONG BLACK, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND SAME GENDER LOVING MEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

RAPHAEL DEQUAN COLEMAN

(Under the Direction of Darris Means)

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary scholars use resiliency as a framework to present an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of Black students and other historically minoritized groups attending colleges and universities (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2010; Morales, 2014). However, Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) exhibit nuanced resiliency experiences given their social location at the intersection of their racial, sexual, and gender identities. Unfortunately, current research on resiliency in higher education presents a narrative that does not reflect a diversity of experiences among Black students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the resiliency experiences of BGBSM, considering how their socialization experiences and institutions contextualize their perceptions of risk factors and vulnerabilities and the compensatory strategies they utilize. This study used Johnson’s (2005) *Quare* Theory as a framework to design the study, collect, and analyze data. Data collection involved interviews and visual elicitation through the development of life history timeline diagrams. The life history timelines informed the development of the life history interview, while the

interview data were analyzed utilizing a *Quare Theory* lens to inform the development of a composite resiliency counterstory. Major findings included: (1) there is diversity in the ways in which Black students access sources of resilience throughout their life course; (2) depending on current social location and past socialization experiences, BGBSM may have perceptions of risk and protective factors that are distinct from their Black peers; (3) compensatory strategies employed among BGBSM are contextualized by the intersection of their racial, gender, and sexual identities and the ways in which they were socialized across their life span; and (4) universities can provide viable resources and support that facilitate resiliency among BGBSM by showing a genuine effort and individualizing their method of support, taking into consideration the individual lived experiences of BGBSM and their own personal biases and experiences as providers and support systems. The significance of the findings has implications for practice, theory, and future research.

INDEX WORDS: resiliency, well-being, Black men, LGBT, Predominantly White Institutions, composite counterstory, Quare Studies

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# DEDICATION

*“Become your ancestors’ wildest dream.” – Ava DuVernay*

This dissertation is dedicated to the memories of my ancestors, named and unnamed. As a #firstgendoc, I acknowledge and affirm the ways in which their lived experiences, legacies, and labor continue to pave the way for me to dream big and pursue my wildest dreams as a Black man. I hope and pray that I continue to make you proud Viola Marshall, Rosalee McAfee, Annie McCullough, Jacqueline Bailey, Oretha Carr, Vernon McCullough Jr., Cecil Bailey, Robert Johnson, and Albert Bailey.

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

*"No movement can survive unless it is constantly growing and changing with the times. If it isn't growing, if it's stagnant, and without the support of the people, no movement for liberation can exist, no matter how correct its analysis of the situations is."*

*– Assata Shakur*

## Background

Assata Shakur's quote (2016) supports the notion that "social justice is both a process and a goal" (Bell, 2016, p. 1). In order for a movement to sustain momentum, leaders and advocates must aim to co-create a society that reflects the equal and full participation of all communities within (Bell, 2016). Unfortunately, throughout history, the balance has tipped toward those holding privileged identities within subordinated groups during key social movements. For instance, the Women's Rights movement's priorities tended to reflect the interests and needs of White women (Crenshaw, 1991). In a similar way, the Gay Rights movement tended to exclude the interests of queer[1] People of Color (Cannick, 2005). Leaders in the movement believed that what worked for White people would work for all communities; a notion that fails to leverage the full and equal participation of all communities to affect positive change (Bell, 2016; Cannick, 2005).

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[1] While not all people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender utilize the term queer to describe their sexual and/or gender identities, I use the term as an umbrella term interchangeably with the acronym LGBT to refer to sexually minoritized communities.

Moreover, Black[2] leaders in the Civil Rights movement labeled pro-gay Black people as a disgrace (Bagby & Lee, 2004). These movements facilitated imperative progress toward equity and inclusion in society. However, the consequences of marginalizing the marginalized leaves those holding multiple subordinated identities in a compromising situation in which they must constantly negotiate the salience of their identities to navigate society and ascertain full participation therein.

Similar to social movements, research and scholarship affect positive social change. While many may view research as parochial or limited in scope and applicability, Appadurai (2006), like many critical researchers, positions scholarly inquiry as an action-oriented process to which all should have full and equal access (Bell, 2016; Prasad, 2005). In framing research as a transformative practice aimed to affect positive social change, researchers and practitioners must continue to interrogate how scholars privilege certain voices and narratives when presenting their claims and conclusions. For instance, recent scholars utilize conceptualizations of resiliency as an anti-deficit framework to discuss the experiences of Black students, and other historically minoritized groups attending colleges and universities (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2010; Morales, 2014). Harper (2010) describes an anti-deficit framework as a lens through which scholars can explore the enablers of success among historically minoritized students. Additionally, the framework names structural and systemic inequities that exists for minoritized populations (Harper, 2010). Scholars attempting to explore enablers of success use guiding research questions that aim to highlight the

[2] African Americans, Black, and Black Americans will be used interchangeably throughout this dissertation, however these terms indicate an ethnic and cultural population who identify as members of the U.S. society.

achievements of students despite factors that complicate their experiences, as opposed to examining why they are "underprepared" or "have lower grade point averages" (Harper, 2010, p. 64). This emerging literature disrupts dominant discourse that portrays Black students, particularly Black men, as uneducated or disengaged (Means, 2014). However, it is important to consider nuanced experiences among those with intersecting marginalized identities (i.e. Black gay or bisexual men), when framing and presenting implications.

Considering the parallel between critical research and social movements as efforts to affect positive social change, I situated this research study in the context of current approaches to exploring the experiences of historically minoritized students and emerging discourse about resiliency in higher education. I, then, highlighted current scholarship about resiliency in higher education, and provided a rationale for the need to consider nuanced experiences among Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) when exploring resilience among historically minoritized students. I concluded with the purpose of this research study, guiding research questions, the study's significance, and a cursory overview of the study's methodological approach and underlying conceptual framework.

**Multiple Consciousness Among Black Gay, Bisexual, and Same Gender Loving Men**

Every day is an act or civic duty for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people (Love, 2017). This proposition reflects the notion that the world is a place where marginalized individuals are constantly tasked with battling and resisting oppressive structures and narratives that present them as subhuman, deficient, or immoral (Means, 2014). The struggle to resist is particularly salient when considering the experiences of those with

multiple subordinated identities (Means, 2014). For instance, Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men experience oppression related to their sexual and racial identities (Bowleg, 2013; Miller, 2007). They must constantly navigate their Black and queer identities, both of which are silenced and vilified by United States (U.S.) society (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Mitchell & Means, 2014).

Racism, particularly against Black individuals, is deeply embedded in U.S. society across multiple social systems, including legal, educational, and healthcare systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Fields et al., 2015; Harper, 2012). Media outlets, books, and even some researchers often portray Black men as violent, hypersexualized, and uneducated (Fields et al., 2013). In higher education, these perceptions disproportionately position Black men to be treated as less than, or a burden to colleges and universities, because of their perceived deficiencies (Harper, 2009, 2010). For example, Black men attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) share instances where their peers, administrators, and educators single them out because they believe they were only admitted due to affirmative action policies (Harper & Griffin, 2011). Additionally, researchers have identified them as underprepared for the rigor of university curricula (Harper, 2010). Exposure to this presumptive rhetoric not only contributes to the perpetuation of oppressive systems that systemically disadvantage Black students, but it contributes to Black men attending universities experiencing fatigue, isolation, and a multitude of psychological stressors that could impede their success (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Contemporary scholars have begun to disrupt this deficit perspective of Black men in higher education, by highlighting the experiences of academically and socially resilient Black men attending colleges and universities

(Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Centering the achievements of academically and socially resilient Black men in college illuminates several of the ways that they resist majoritarian narratives about their abilities and preparation for studies at the post-secondary level (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Similar to detrimental misrepresentations of Black men attending colleges and universities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals are both vilified and dehumanized in U.S. society across several social systems (Means, 2014). LGBT individuals have been labeled as unnatural, sexual deviants, or psychologically disturbed (Dessel, Goodman, & Woodford, 2017). Consequently, certain civil liberties, such as the right to marry, have been delayed and are now constantly under scrutiny by both religious and political leaders. Moreover, some scholars have even blamed LGBT individuals for the start and perpetuation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Kelly et al., 2016). In higher education, LGBT students continue to face discrimination by their peers, and often struggle to find a sense of belonging within their institutions (Dessel, Goodman, & Woodford, 2017). However, similar to Black men, LGBT students have identified ways to resist rhetoric and systems that dehumanize or silence them. For instance, Vaccaro and Mena (2011) discuss the ways queer students engage in activism and social justice advocacy work to affect change within their institutional context.

While scholars have examined the ways Black men and LGBT students have resisted dehumanization and silencing, Black queer men in college are a student population that doubly faces oppression as a consequence of their racial and sexual identities (Henry, Fuerth, & Richards, 2011). It is important to note, that while, Black queer men experience oppression related to their racial and sexual identities, many of

them do have access to gender privilege (Pedulla, 2014). Contemporary scholars highlight how expectations of Black masculinities, dissonance between religious and spiritual identities, and sexual behaviors influence psychological, social, and physical health among Black queer men (Fields et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2016; Means & Jaeger, 2014). For example, scholars showed a correlation between gender role strain (i.e. pressure to assimilate to expectations of Black male gender performance) and sexual risk among Black queer men (Fields et al., 2015). Means and Jaeger (2016) discussed challenges Black queer men face navigating their spiritual and sexual identities, and they highlighted strategies (i.e. redefining spirituality) Black queer men used to reconcile those identities. Moreover, studies that examine behavioral correlates with the incidence and prevalence of HIV/AIDS among Black queer men tend to limit the scope of their recommendations to individual level behaviors such as weak risk reduction intentions or alcohol use, discounting environmental and contextual factors (Kelly et al., 2016). While these studies highlight challenges and vulnerability areas that influence experiences of Black queer men, they only briefly examine compensatory strategies or protective behaviors that may contribute to their resistance to racism, homophobia, and the intersection of these forms of oppression.

In higher education, contemporary scholars highlight the ways navigating multiple subordinated identities exacerbate academic and social risk factors and vulnerabilities areas among BGBSM in higher education (Caton, 2015; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Squire & Mobley, 2015). For instance, to avoid the loss of a major support system among their Black peers at PWIs, many Black queer men choose not to disclose their sexual identity, which

contributes to internalized homophobia and psychological distress (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). Moreover, this pressure to decide between racial and sexual identities may contribute to feelings of loneliness, isolation, low self-esteem, or an overall dissatisfaction with life (Mitchell & Means, 2014). While researchers paint the picture of the challenges of navigating multiple subordinated identities among BGBSM, few scholars highlight how they resist these risk factors and vulnerability areas.

In response to feelings of isolation or loneliness, researchers focus on the tendency of BGBSM to identify or create counterspaces in which their seemingly contentious identities are affirmed (Means, 2017; Woodson, 2013). For instance, Means presented narratives of how BGBSM in college create and identify spiritual counterspaces to resist rhetoric and notions that suggested the inability for their sexual and religious identities to be reconciled. In explorations of college choice, Squire and Mobley (2014) illuminated how some BGBSM would choose between historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) and PWIs to temper the saliency of either their sexual or racial identities. For example, some BGBSM may perceive PWIs to be racist, and choose to attend a HBCU to avoid experiences with racism (Squire & Mobley, 2015).

BGBSM must constantly negotiate the salience of their racial, gender, and sexual identities. While they consistently exist at the intersection of their multiple identities they must constantly resist systems that perpetuate racism and homophobia to combat rhetoric that dehumanizes and vilifies their existence. Similar to literature highlighting the means through which Black men and LGB students resist racism and homophobia in higher education, scholars must explore strategies employed by BGBSM to navigate

compounded oppression attributed to their sexual and racial identities. One approach to framing this resistance is through explorations of resiliency and grit.

**Resiliency and Grit in Higher Education**

Resilience is defined in many ways, and there is no shared way to operationalize the concept of resilience among scholars. Some researchers define resiliency as a process (Buttram, 2015; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2010). Scholars who frame resiliency as a process highlight a dynamic interplay between individual factors (i.e. motivation) and contextual systems (i.e. the social environment) that influence the ability of students to succeed academically and socially (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2014). Other researchers limit discussions about resiliency to an adjective that describes how individuals are able to withstand or quickly overcome negative conditions (American Psychological Association, 2008). Resiliency experts categorize these perspectives as compensatory or challenge models, and researchers guided by this lens explore inner strengths and motivations to overcome life challenges or barriers (APA, 2008; Buttram, 2015). While the compensatory and challenge models of resilience help us understand how individual behaviors and characters contribute to success, it is imperative to explore the role environmental and contextual factors play in facilitating or inhibiting resiliency (APA, 2008). While both understandings are useful in contributing to the proposition of an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of historically minoritized students, I explored both internal and external factors to provide a more informative picture of what threatens or enhances the academic and social experiences of BGBSM attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

Scholars have purported a close relationship between resilience and grit (Bazelais, Lemay, & Doleck, 2016; O'Neal et al., 2016). Duckworth and Quinn (2009) define grit as the "trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 66). Higher education researchers tend to conflate the definition between grit and resilience when presenting their anti-deficit perspectives of the experiences of historically minoritized student groups (Harper, 2009; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). To this end, researchers present narratives of the exceptionally academically or socially resilient among historically minoritized student populations (Harper, 2009; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; O'Neal et al, 2016). For instance, Kim's and Hargrove's (2013) review of resiliency literature on Black men in higher education highlights how researchers share the experiences of 'statistically elite' high-achieving Black men. Utilizing this approach, scholars fail to note some of the psychological stressors that come with the coping strategies Black men employ to succeed in higher education (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). While discussions of grit provide some insight into the ways some historically minoritized students successfully navigate institutions of higher education, focusing on this single individual-level dimension of resiliency fails to fully explore external and environmental level factors that impact resiliency (Golden, 2017).

Therefore, in an effort to disrupt the westernized notion of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" approach to understanding success, I applied a more comprehensive view of resilience that frames it as a process, highlighting both internal and external factors that impact resiliency among BGBSM (APA, 2008). Building upon the work of Buttram (2015), I conceptualized resilience among BGBSM attending PWIs as a part of their social environment. Framing resilience in this way allowed me to highlight the

socially constructed nature of resiliency that reflects the dynamic interplay between risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies that influence resilience among BGBSM (Linda, 2013; Morales, 2014). For the research study, I used the definitions Morales (2014) outlines for the dynamics of resilience to examine what college faculty can do to increase retention of low socioeconomic status students.

> Risk Factors: "Refers to any (usually environmental) dynamics which serve to, or have the potential to, negatively impact an individual on their path toward academic success" (p. 94).
>
> Protective Factors: "Factors that offset or mitigate the risk factors" (p. 94).
>
> Vulnerability Areas: "A particular issue that manifests as problematic in a given situation" (p. 94).
>
> Compensatory Strategies: "Specific actions that alleviate or even defeat risk factors and vulnerability areas" (p. 94).

Scholars exploring resiliency among Black students tend to emphasize the salience of racial socialization in the development of mechanisms through which Black students are academically and socially resilient (Brown, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). For instance, Black parents teach their children about racial pride, the importance of family, and spirituality to equip them to navigate systems of oppression (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). As such several of the compensatory strategies Black students utilize to face obstacles and resist oppression in higher education are contextualized by these teachings. These strategies, while effective in facilitating academic and social success among Black students in higher education, may not always be effective for BGBSM, when considering the ways in which some of these teachings (i.e. those informed by

religion and spirituality) may contend with their sexual identities. Therefore, explorations of resiliency need to expand to consider how a queer sexual identity may influence how scholars explore agency and resistance among BGBSM in higher education.

Consequently, I explored risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies internally and externally, focusing on how BGBSM perceive the interplay of these dynamics in influencing their resiliency at PWIs (APA, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Scholars highlight several risk factors that impact the ability of students to be academically and socially resilient, including lack of access to technology (Morales, 2014) or past experiences of negative life events (APA, 2008). For BGBSM attending PWIs, a risk factor could be lack of provision of culturally relevant programs or resources. An example of a protective factor for BGBSM attending PWIs, could be their exposure to mentors or role models that share their sexual and racial identities (Morales, 2014). When considering vulnerability areas, some BGBSM may experience challenges funding their pursuit of higher education due to losing financial support from family members, if they choose to disclose their sexual identity (Morales, 2014). An example of a compensatory strategy to enhance social resilience among BGBSM, could be the facilitation of discussion groups to allow them to engage in dialogue about the intersection of their racial and sexual identities (Morales, 2014).

Previous studies on the experiences of BGBSM attending colleges and universities, have focused on individual compensatory strategies at they employ to be academically and socially resilient. For instance, Means and Jaeger (2014) highlighted how BGBSM reframed the process of coming out toward a process of coming to terms

with their sexual identity in an effort to compensate for the challenges of disclosing their sexual identity in certain spaces. Some BGBSM actively resist stereotypical tropes or representation of gay men, in an effort to compensate for expectations of Black masculinity (Bartone, 2015). Another compensatory strategy BGBSM use to reconcile their sexual identity with their spiritual identity involves re-conceptualizing their understandings of religion and spirituality (Means, 2017). I explored external and environmental factors that enhance or inhibit their academic and social experiences at PWIs.

While literature about BGBSM in higher education focuses on their perceived vulnerabilities and marginalization, this emphasis can lead to educators overlooking opportunities to capitalize on the agency these students utilize to mitigate barriers to their academic success (Brockenbrough, 2015). Moreover, this research cannot simply focus on individual agency and strategies to resist, but it must interrogate complex educational systemic dilemmas that may perpetuate harassment, violence, and exclusion of BGBSM (Brockenbrough, 2015). Therefore, to ensure the social movement of resiliency literature sustains momentum and includes the voices and experiences of BGBSM, researches must shift from a presentation of risk and crisis to an examination of agency among BGBSM (Brockenbrough, 2015; Follins et al., 2014). To this end, Follins et al. (2014) proposes an examination of resiliency among Black gay and bisexual men. While there has been increased attention paid to sexual risk behaviors and psychological health, a vast majority of literature focuses on HIV transmission among BGBSM (Follins et al., 2014). The dearth of literature that does exist on resilience in BGBSM focuses on religion and strategies used to resist heterosexism (Follins et al., 2014). Future research on resilience

among BGBSM needs to intentionally explore both personality traits and socialization factors beyond those attributable to their racial identity to provide a more comprehensive perspective of the agency they have and utilize to resist systemic oppression they face at the intersection of their sexual and racial identities (Follins et al., 2014). As such, when exploring resiliency among BGBSM, it is imperative to contextualize the risks and vulnerabilities that they face in the context of their social location. Moreover, we must understand how their social identities as BGBSM inform the compensatory strategies that they employ to respond to challenges

## Purpose

Situating my inquiry in the context of social justice movements and expanding literature on resiliency, I applied Quare Theory to explore resiliency among Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Quare studies focuses on the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality among LGBT People of Color (Johnson, 2005). Highlighting these intersections allowed an exploration of the elements of resilience that are accessible and available to BGBSM attending PWI's. Specifically, I examined how they responded to challenges they faced, while centering their nuanced experiences at the intersection of their social identities (Johnson, 2005). Moreover, applying an intersectional theory to the exploration of resilience among this group, highlighted dynamic interplay between the environment and individual risk and protective factors that contribute to the extent to which an individual will be resilient (APA, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Morales, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to utilize a critical lens by applying Quare Studies to explore the dynamics of resilience that are accessible and available to Black gay,

bisexual, and/or same gender loving male students attending predominately white institutions, while navigating multiple subordinated identities. Specifically, I used a composite counterstory to respond to the following research questions.

**RQ 1.** What sources of resilience do Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving male undergraduate students identify during their college career?

**RQ 2.** How do predominantly white institutions (PWIs) influence the ways in which Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving male undergraduate students access elements of resilience during their undergraduate experience?

Harper (2009) describes composite counterstories as a form of counternarrative that relies "on data collected from multiple persons of color who have experienced a particular context or similar phenomena" (p. 702). For the purposes of this study I collected data from multiple BGBSM who have experienced navigating multiple subordinated identities while attending PWIs.

Taking a critical approach to examining resiliency among BGBSM allowed me to situate findings in the context of oppressive social systems that contribute to the racism and homophobia that BGBSM experience (Fals Borda, 2001; Mertens, 2010). To this end, I extended beyond a focus on the agentive strategies BGBSM employ to be academically and socially resilient to include a critique of educational and social practices that systematically contribute to their oppression in higher education (Fals Borda, 2001; Mertens, 2010; Brockenbrough, 2015). Applying a Quare Studies lens I considered the participants' racial and sexual identities, in an attempt to frame the composite counterstories they share to disrupt dominant narratives about their educational and social experiences at universities (Johnson, 2005). To construct these composite

counterstories, I captured narratives by applying qualitative methods to conduct in-depth interviews and elicit visual representation of their life experiences to provide a comprehensive representation of how their socialization informs their current experiences with resiliency (Harper, 2009). Finally, I utilized Grbich's (2015) approach to narrative analysis to co-construct the counternarratives with the research participants, and present findings utilizing participant quotes to support emergent themes.

## Significance

This research study is significant to the higher education field in two main areas. First, this study adds to the burgeoning body of literature related to resiliency among historically minoritized students in higher education. Some research studies focus on resiliency among Black students to provide an anti-deficit perspective of their experiences in higher education (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013), and this study explores the resiliency experiences of Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) considering the intersection of their racial, gender, and sexual identities. This research study also provides higher education scholars and practitioners with information that supports them in informing the development of culturally relevant support resources and services for BGBSM students. I build upon existing resiliency literature by exploring the environmental factors of PWIs that influence perceptions of risk and vulnerabilities among BGBSM. Moreover, I contextualize the compensatory strategies that BGBSM employ to be resilient in their socialization experiences across their life course. Understanding the contextual antecedents of perspectives of risk and applications of compensatory strategies provide a more nuanced and expanded perspective of resiliency among Black students in higher education.

## Conclusion

Exploring resiliency has emerged as an approach in higher education to propose an anti-deficit perspective to the experiences of historically minoritized student groups (APA, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2014; Morales, 2014). Emerging scholarship suggests the need to explore sources of resilience among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (Brockenbrough, 2015; Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014). This imperative is even more pressing to examine the experiences of those holding multiple subordinated identities (i.e. Black gay men) (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014). However, resiliency theorists tend to focus on individual risk and protective factors through the lens of a single social identity to explain the experiences of historically minoritized groups without considering nuances attributable to the intersections of their identities (Kim & Hargrove, 2014; Morales, 2014). To ensure that this social movement through research maintains momentum in its efforts to provide an anti-deficit perspective of historically minoritized students, it is imperative to include voices and experiences of BGBSM in discourse about resiliency. Moreover, we must conceptualize resilience among BGBSM attending PWIs as a part of their social environment, in an effort to highlight opportunities for colleges and universities to enhance their academic and social experiences through the improvement of the programs, services, and resources they provide (Buttram, 2015).

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives." – Audre Lorde*

In this literature review, I explore social identity and the complexity of navigating institutions of higher education, while holding multiple subordinated identities. I specifically examine scholarship about the experiences of Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) and then offer a deeper examination of their experiences in higher education considering the intersection of their social identities. After discussing challenges BGBSM face in higher education at the intersection of their identities, I explore scholarship on resiliency among BGBSM. I conclude this chapter with a review of literature on the conceptual frameworks guiding this inquiry.

## Being Black and Gay, Bisexual, or Same Gender Loving in College

Current scholarship on BGBSM has focused on four major areas of inquiry: identity development and coming out (Bartone, 2015; Caton, 2015), health behavior among BGBSM (Fields et al., 2015; Follins & Dacus, 2017; Kelly et al., 2016), religion and spirituality among BGBSM (Means & Jaeger, 2016; Means, 2017), and academic and social experiences and stressors among BGBSM (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012). Additionally, contemporary scholars have explored factors that influence why Black gay, bisexual, and same-gender-loving men choose certain colleges and universities (i.e., PWI vs. HBCU; Squire & Mobley, 2015; Strayhorn, Blakewood, &

DeVita, 2008).

**Identity Development and Coming Out**

Few existing conceptual models for sexual identity development among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people account for intersecting identities (Cass, 1984; D'Augelli, 1994). Contemporary scholars examine how racial, gender, and other social identities impact sexual identity development among LGBT People of Color (Bartone, 2015, Caton, 2015). For instance, Bartone (2015) highlights individual level strategies that young Black gay men adopt as they negotiate their racial and sexual identities in predominantly Black spaces. The participants highlighted resisting stereotypical tropes about Black gay men and being resilient in the face of current life struggles as a result of past challenges (Bartone, 2015). Caton (2015) illuminated similar strategies, in addition to emphasizing the constant need to negotiate the feasibility or safety to take action in response to negative situations they face as a result of their sexual identity.

Emerging discourse problematizes existing conceptual models' tendency to prioritize the experiences of White gay cisgender men (Brockenbrough, 2015; Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Money, 2014). While recent literature explores nuanced experiences with sexual identity development among Black gay and bisexual men, scholars tend to focus on individual level strategies to cope with existing environmental and contextual challenges or insults to their queer sexual identity (Bartone, 2015; Brockenbrough, 2015; Caton, 2015). Consequently, the proposed study enhances existing literature on identity development among BGBSM by further interrogating individual level strategies they adopt to negotiate their Black and queer identities, while bringing into focus the ways in

which environmental and contextual factors facilitate or inhibit their resiliency.

**Health Behavior among BGBSM**

Public health scholars focus heavily on incidence, prevalence, and prevention of HIV among BGBSM (Fields et al., 2015; Follins & Dacus, 2017; Kelly et al., 2016). In exploring correlates of sexual HIV risk among BGBSM, many researchers focus on their individual health behaviors, discounting environmental influences, and ultimately vilifying BGBSM for health behaviors that are not exclusive to their community (Sanchez et al., 2014). While it is important to highlight and address high risk health behaviors, scholars must consider how contextual factors may influence behaviors such as condom use and engaging with multiple sexual partners (Kelly et al., 2016). Moreover, scholars must exhibit caution in presenting generalizations that may perpetuate stigma and stereotypes, such as suggesting that gay community participation correlates with HIV risk (Kelly et al., 2017).

While literature on health risk among BGBSM focuses on HIV risk and individual behavior, contemporary scholars have started to situate behaviors and perceptions that increase risk in broader social and cultural contexts (Fields et al., 2015; Follins & Dacus, 2017). Naming the ways in which expectations of Black masculinity, cultural tropes, and demonized representations of black gay men contribute to poor self-image, affirmation seeking, and avoiding HIV prevention education challenges practitioners to consider more complex solutions to a nuanced systemic issue. Similarly, a goal of the present study is to enhance discourse about resiliency among BGBSM in higher education by situating strategies they adopt in context. Additionally, I intend to interrogate systems that exist in institutions of higher education that contextualize the

ways in which BGBSM negotiate their racial and sexual identities.

**Religion and Spirituality among BGBSM**

Within and beyond institutions of higher education, scholars have examined the role religion and spirituality play in the lives of Black and African American people (Coleman, 2013; Means & Jaeger, 2016; Means, 2017). This discourse is particularly nuanced when exploring how Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people negotiate their sexual and spiritual identity in an effort toward reconciling these sometimes seemingly contradictory identities. While a growing body of higher education literature highlights how connection to religion and spirituality among Black students may facilitate resilience and success, researchers have presented how having a queer identity may complicate access to this source of resilience among BGBSM (Means & Jaeger, 2016). To reconcile their sexual and spiritual identities, scholars discuss how BGBSM interrogate religious traditions and rhetoric to which they have been exposed to facilitate a process of developing and adopting "their own spiritual guidelines" (Coleman, 2013; Means & Jaeger, 2016 p. 32). While religion and spirituality may be a source of resilience among Black and African American students attending colleges and universities, the present study intends to examine additional sources of resiliency among BGBSM.

**Academic and Social Experiences and Stressors among BGBSM**

As research about BGBSM beyond institutions of higher education evolves to explore nuanced experiences at the intersection of their racial and sexual identity, higher education researchers are enhancing discourse about BGBSM attending colleges and universities. Though scholars are doing the important work of capturing unique

experiences of Black gay, bisexual, and same-gender-loving men (BGBSM) in higher education to inform educational practices, it is important to note that the vast majority of literature focuses on unique challenges in the context of their academic and social experiences that they face at the intersection of their subordinated identities (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012). The primary sources of stress that scholars have identified in research about BGBSM attending institutions of higher education are navigating compounded stigma, negotiating Black masculinities and gender performance, and feelings of isolation. (Fields et al., 2015; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Mitchell & Means, 2014).

**Navigating compounded stigma.** Many scholars examine multiple consciousness that BGBSM experience in college, particularly highlighting experiences of students attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) where the salience of homophobia and racism may be exacerbated (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Mitchell & Means, 2014). For instance, Goode-Cross and Tager (2011) discussed how BGBSM attending PWI's were sometimes perceived as unintelligent and threatening by many of their White peers, and in response to heterosexism and homophobia they experienced among their Black peers, many participants avoided disclosing their sexual identity. Given that scholars focus on the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs, there is a dearth of literature about how BGBSM navigate their multiple subordinated identities in other institutional contexts (i.e. HBCUs; Means & Jaeger, 2014; Patton, 2011). Similar to Goode-Cross' and Tager's (2011) finding among BGBSM attending PWI's, BGBSM attending historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCU) tended to refrain from disclosing their sexual identities in an effort to preserve their image until

they reached a level of success where their sexual identity no longer mattered.

Furthermore, literature on navigating multiple consciousness among BGBSM students highlights the psychological distress that many of them experience without critically exploring the faculties they use to be successful despite adversity (; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Henry, Fuerth, & Richards, 2011; McCready, 2004; Mitchell & Means, 2014). For example, as a result of having multiple subordinated identities, BGBSM are often times forced to choose between cultural expectations associated with their racial and sexual identities in an attempt to avoid discrimination (Henry et al., 2011). Consequently, suicidal ideation and inability to come to terms with their sexual identity are some deleterious psychological effects of intersectionality among BGBSM that scholars highlight (Henry, Fuerth, & Richards, 2011). Navigating multiple subordinated identities exacerbates challenges BGBSM face while attending PWIs, and negotiating between their racial and sexual identities, at times, makes them more susceptible to negative psychological outcomes (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Mitchell & Means, 2014). Naming these challenges BGBSM face at the intersection of their racial and sexual identities provides context for the strategies they adopt to respond negative academic and social experiences while attending college.

**Black masculinity(-ies) and gender performance.** While some scholars have explored the complexities of navigating compounded stigma among BGBSM in college, others have focused on how expectations of Black masculinity(-ies), may exacerbate some of the challenges BGBSM face while exploring their sexual identity (Field et al., 2015; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Researchers have highlighted a distinction between masculine expectations of White and Black men

(Field et al., 2015). They have shown how expectations of masculinity among White men are less proscriptive focusing on their education, employment, and socioeconomic status (Fields et al., 2015). Conversely, Fields et al. (2015) highlight how Black men are expected to exhibit sexual prowess, physical dominance, and gamesmanship. These notions of Black masculinity are pervasive even among BGBSM. Consequently, BGSBM who may have a more feminine gender expression or are perceived as visibly queer may risk exclusion from BGBSM communities, in addition to threats to group membership among other Black men or White LGB individuals leading to feelings of extreme isolation (Fields et al., 2015; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Mount et al., 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the impact that expectations of Black masculinity(-ies) may have on BGBSM students' sexual identity development, while highlighting strategies they utilize to navigate this process, given their social location.

**Feelings of isolation.** Encountering racism and homophobia, while negotiating decisions about queer visibility in deference to expectations of Black masculinity(-ies) and gender performance, may profoundly influence academic and social experiences of BGBSM in college (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Particularly, scholars have noted feelings of loneliness and social isolation among BGSBM as consequences of this pressure to navigate multiple subordinated identities in college (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly). For instance, several authors have highlighted how BGBSM in college experience loneliness and isolation in residence halls, classrooms, and even some social settings with other BGBSM (Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Students highlight how institutional policies, programs, and pedagogical approaches perpetuate feelings of isolation, homophobia, and heterosexism

(Money, 2014; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). For example, language that residential education programs use in their policies about visitation regulations can further marginalize gay men, if they normalize heterosexuality by identifying women as typical overnight guests (Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012). Furthermore, Money (2014) emphasizes how stereotypes and beauty standards attributed to expectations of Black masculinity(-ies) and gender performance may contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness for those BGBSM who do not ascribe to such cultural scripts. Understanding how social and contextual factors can contribute to BGBSM feelings of isolation as they negotiate their racial and sexual identities while attending college can inform institutional policies and practices in an effort to make them more inclusive.

**College Choice among BGBSM**

BGBSM also negotiate their race and sexual orientation, when making decisions about which college they might attend (Squire & Mobley, 2015). While some BGBSM may choose to attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) due to a strong affinity with their racial identity, Squire and Mobley (2015) highlight motivations for BGBSM choosing PWIs. BGBSM note the opportunity to embrace their sexuality or to come out in a diverse institutional context among peers from different social backgrounds and identities, as motivating factors for choosing to attend PWIs (Squire & Mobley, 2015; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita, 2008). Seeking an opportunity to "live out" may also influence some BGBSM to choose institutions that are geographically distant from their parents or communities within which they were raised (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita, 2008). Regardless of factors influencing college choice, BGBSM communicate

commitment to and affinity for the pursuit of higher education (Squire & Mobley, 2015). Considering the motivating factors for BGBSM choosing to attend PWIs, it is imperative to understand how PWI environments impact their experiences negotiating their racial and sexual identities.

**Resilience among BGBSM**

Given the challenges that BGBSM may face in college with navigating compounded stigma and possible trauma from sociohistorical experiences prior to attending college, it is important to understand how they thrive (or flourish) in the face of adversity (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014; Whitley, Childs, & Collins 2010). However, limited contemporary empirical scholarship explores resilience in Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014). Herrenkohl (2013) argues that the concept of resilience is complex, greatly impacted by researcher subjectivities, and responsive to the social environment. However, many scholars agree that resilience is a dynamic process whereby individuals bounce back after encountering adversity within their social environment (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014; Herrenkohl, 2013). Furthermore, some researchers posit that those carrying multiple subordinated identities are uniquely positioned to exhibit resilience, given their experiences with adversity due to their social location (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014).

Though few scholars exploring BGBSM experiences in college intentionally inquire about strategies that facilitate resilience, many studies highlight coping mechanisms exhibited by these students in the face of oppression (Bartone, 2015; Caton, 2015; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). Some coping mechanisms include, exhibiting caution when discussing their sexual identity (Goode-Cross & Good,

2009), negotiating feasibility and safety of responding to homophobic and racist experiences (Caton, 2015), and utilizing negative situations as learning experiences to equip them to encounter future challenges (Bartone, 2015). However, in describing these coping strategies, some researchers tend to highlight and center their psychological detriments without considering campus policies and practices that may be more deleterious to BGBSM student mental well-being (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009). Colpitts and Gahagan (2016) argue for a shift away from deficit approaches toward strengths-based inquiries through explorations of resilience in LGBT individuals to guide future scholarship with this community. However, there is limited contemporary literature that highlights how socialization factors and personality traits impact the utilization of individual coping skills that facilitate resilience among LGBT individuals (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014). Therefore, it is important for future scholarship on Black gay, bisexual, and same-gender-loving male college students extend beyond their unique experiences with sexual identity development at the intersection of their multiple subordinated identities. Scholars should highlight the unique lived experiences of BGBSM college students within their social environment and focus on how they identify sources of resilience during their college career.

Research about the experiences of BGBSM focuses heavily on identity development and their coming out experiences, health behavior, and religion and spirituality. Emerging literature about BGBSM in higher education highlight challenges they face attributed to their navigation of compounded stigma, feelings of isolation, and challenges attributed to gender role expectations. Contemporary scholars who explore resilience as an anti-deficit framework for describing the experience of historically

minoritized students in higher education, emphasize the importance of exploring resilience among queer students of color. As such, this study utilized Quare Theory to examine the resiliency experiences of BGBSM.

## Conceptual Framework

While relevant literature situates the proposed study in the context of discourse about Black, gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) in higher education, the conceptual framework provides the philosophical position that undergirds my approach to the proposed study (Crotty, 1998). The theoretical perspectives that make up the conceptual framework for this study highlights how I understand and present the narratives of the research participants. For this study, I used conceptualizations of resilience and applied Quare theoretical perspectives to inform how I interpret the life histories of BGBSM. I also examined how they operationalize resiliency in the context of predominantly white institutions (PWI) of higher education. In this section, I discuss resilience and Quare Theory, providing context for what informs my conceptualization of these perspectives as frameworks for the proposed study. I highlight how scholars have applied perspectives on resiliency among Black students and Quare Theory among BGBSM in higher education, and I conclude with a discussion on Quaring resilience theory.

### Resilience Theory

To propose an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of historically minoritized student groups, an emerging body of scholarship highlights the stories and experiences of the academically and socially resilient among those holding subordinated identities (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2010; Morales, 2014). Resilience refers to

the ability to excel or sustain a positive state of well-being despite exposure to factors that would otherwise prevent one from succeeding (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Moreover, resiliency is conceptualized as socially constructed and a dynamic interaction among strengths, resources, and risk factors within context, across space and time (APA, 2008; Linda, 2013). However, researchers tend to operationalize varying understandings of resilience when applying it to scholarship among historically minoritized student groups (Herrenkohl, 2013). Consequently, while this shift has the potential to provide practitioners and researchers with an innovative framework for enhancing the compensatory strategies that historically minoritized students use to be successful despite all odds, there are several limitations to how this concept has been applied in research and practice (APA, 2008).

Some scholars treat resilience as a static state of being that is demarcated from the rest of an individual's existence highlighting an instance at which they have overcome a particularly trying time or situation (Morales, 2010). Some take it a step further to describe it as a process and a goal to contextualize life stories among historically minoritized groups (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Nicolazzo, 2016). For example, in a study exploring resilience and resistance among trans* college students, participants framed resiliency as a practice as opposed to a static state of being (Nicolazzo, 2016). With a more active conceptualization of resilience, historically minoritized students must be able to do resilience as opposed to simply being resilient (Nicolazzo, 2016). In a sense, practicing resiliency is an approach to resisting or pushing back against systemic oppression among historically minoritized students (Nicolazzo, 2016). In its most complex iterations, researchers incorporate the environmental context as a major factor

that influences the extent to which an individual will be resilient (APA, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Linda, 2013).

Moreover, scholars focus on success stories among exceptionally resilient individuals sharing a subordinated social identity or highlight and isolate specific protective factors when conducting resilience research (Morales, 2010). This approach of highlighting the experiences of the statistically elite or academically resilient fails to acknowledge the environmental and structural influences that are considered an imperative component of resilience theory (Herrenkhol, 2013; Morales, 2014). For example, focusing on strategies that the statistically elite employ to be academically and socially resilient in predominantly White spaces does not interrogate systems of oppression such as racism, homophobia, and classism that are perpetuate a need for historically minoritized groups to be resilient. While identifying how individuals who share a subordinated identity exhibit protective factors and adopt compensatory strategies to be resilient, this approach does not consider the potential compounded effects of holding multiple subordinated identities (APA, 2008). Crenshaw (1991) emphasizes the importance of addressing the intersection of identities when examining how a person's social location may impact their lived experiences. Resilience theorists have purported that resilience may be more appropriately framed as a complex and dynamic process that is influenced by interactions between person and environment (Buttram, 2015; Linda, 2013). Therefore, research should consider the dynamism of these interactions between identities and the environment to better understand the processes that those holding subordinated identities undergo to identify sources of resilience.

**Resiliency among Black students.** Despite limitations in approaches to applying of resilience theory to academic and social experiences among historically minoritized students, some recent scholars have shifted rhetoric about the experiences of Black college students away from a deficit perspective. In so doing, researchers emphasize strategies and capital that academically and socially resiliently Black students leverage to navigate oppressive spaces (Harper 2009; Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Linda, 2013). While environmental factors may impact the way Black students access sources of resilience, scholars tend to focus on their individual efforts. Specifically, I highlighted individual efforts, such as seeking support resources when needed or performing excellence, while discussing contextual factors and socialization experiences that contribute to resiliency among Black students.

Racial socialization is a key component to building resilience among Black students, which is founded upon strong family ties, spirituality, and individual effort (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). However, focusing on racialization fails to interrogate aspects of socialization processes that perpetuate systems of oppression by reifying internalized racism. For instance, Brown (2008) describes racial socialization as a set of behaviors, communications, and interactions among African American parents and their offspring that teach them how to navigate within their environment without disrupting it. As such, high achieving Black students utilize strategies such as self-regulation and managing expectations among other individual strengths and protective factors to be academically and socially resilient within a context where being Black has negative connotations (Brown, 2008; Linda, 2013; Morales, 2014). While individual level protective factors and strengths may foster self-preservation, there are potentially strong implications for

developing psychological well-being among Black students. Finally, given the preeminence of racial socialization's influence on the extent to which Black students are resilient, researchers fail to consider the intersections of other social identities such as sexuality and gender identities that have a profound impact on the ways in which an individual experiences their racial identity.

**Intersectionality and resilience.** Intersectionality emerged as critical in framing the Black feminist movement, given its utility in critiquing both feminist and civil rights movements (Willis, 2015). Crenshaw (1991), one of several foundational scholars of intersectionality theory, provides a framework for how intersectionality impacts the experiences of marginalized individuals. Specifically, her description of representational intersectionality highlights how master narratives of race and gender consistently perpetuate cycles of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Contemporary higher education scholars emphasize the importance of utilizing multiple theoretical perspectives to interrogate frameworks that do not tend to intersectionality and perpetuate systems that fail to disrupt "inequitable power structures" (Abes, 2009 p. 141; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Though scholars have historically applied intersectionality theory to center the experiences of Black women, the framework has also been useful in understanding the experiences of Black gay men at the intersection of their racial and sexual identities (Means et al., 2017).

Black gay, bisexual, and same-gender-loving male (BGBSM) students navigate compounded stigma attributable to their subordinated racial and sexual identities (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). For example, BGBSM tend to feel isolated or further marginalized due to challenges with finding community and spaces

where they feel comfortable and safe in all of their identities (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). In addition to BGBSM experiencing homophobia among their peers of various racial identities, including their Black peers, they face racism among their White peers, particularly when attending predominately white institutions (PWI) (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). However, many scholars isolate and highlight risk and protective factors experienced by those sharing a similar subordinated social identity without considering intersections with other identities (Morales, 2010). Given that resilience exhibited by successful Black students is often attributed to racial socialization, extending individual protective factors and strengths to BGBSM fails to consider the impact of the interplay of racial, sexual, and gender identities on their experiences.

### ***Quare* Theory**

Contemporary scholars in higher education have begun to apply Quare Theory to explorations of the experiences of Black gay and bisexual men in higher education (Bartone, 2015; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Means, 2017). Johnson (2005) posits Quare Studies as a theoretical perspective that prioritizes gays and lesbians of color. In the proposed study, I use Quare Studies as a theory to understand resiliency among Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) attending PWIs. Quare studies resists the tendency of queer studies to provide a homogenous formulization of identity (Johnson, 2005). Instead, Quare Studies centers and prioritizes "the racialized bodies, experiences, and knowledges of transgendered (sic) people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals of color" (Johnson, 2005, p. 136). In essence, Quare Studies highlights the existence of Black sexual minority people and creates space for "Black sexual minorities within discussions of Blackness" (Bartone, 2015, p.20; Johnson, 2005). This notion to examine

racialized experiences is particularly important among BGBSM, because of the challenges they face negotiating their racial and sexual identities while navigating life. Moreover, considering the unique experiences of those navigating PWIs, scholars would be remiss in lumping BGBSM experiences with their heterosexual or White, Asian, Latino, and/or indigenous peers (Johnson, 2005).

Quare studies also explores ideas of performance and adopts constructs of performance theory (Johnson, 2005). As such, Quare Studies allows me to examine how BGBSM attending PWIs present themselves, while considering contextual factors and social norms (Johnson, 2005). Specifically, by exploring the life histories of BGBSM, examining how they perform and navigate significant life experiences attributable to their racial and sexual identities, I intend to situate resiliency strategies they discuss in the context of the institutions in which they were socialized. Ultimately, by considering the performances of BGBSM across their life span, I can contribute to discourse about how they construct their identities and how their life experiences have influenced how they present themselves and negotiate their identities while attending college.

*Quare* theory provides a conceptualization of sexual identity development among Black men (Harris, 2016). It affirms Black male lived experiences as valid forms of meaning making in an effort to facilitate critical self-consciousness raising (Harris, 2016). While many queer theories assume a more generalist position on sexual identity development, Quare theory appropriately recognizes the role that ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and gender identities play in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) People of Color (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Harris, 2016). Furthermore, Quare theory combines ideologies

of Black Studies and Queer Studies to extend service of exclusive rhetoric found in Queer Studies to the experiences of Black queer individuals (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Given its acknowledgement of intersectionality and emphasis on centering the margins it is a strong conceptual framework to guide the exploration of accessibility and availability of elements of resilience to BGBSM students.

**Quare theory in higher education.** In a previous study, Means and Jaeger (2013) used Quare theory to explore the experiences of Black gay male students at Historically Black Universities. A particularly salient finding in Means' and Jaeger's (2013) study were the participants' understandings about coming out. While many sexual identity development models present an identity pride phase or emphasize queer visibility, the participants disrupted this narrative by framing the experience of 'coming out' as more of the ability to be comfortable in their own skin (Means & Jaeger, 2013). Similarly, Bartone (2015) applied Quare Theory to explore experiences of Black gay youth in the in a city heavily populated by Black gay men and found an imperative practice of learning from past experiences to evolve and face future challenges and experiences among their participants. When exploring spirituality among Black gay and male college students, Means (2017) highlighted the ways in which participants identified spiritual counterspaces to resist oppression and reconcile their sexual and spiritual identities. While previous studies applying Quare in higher education have focused on spirituality, finding community in urban settings, and navigating racial and sexual identity among BGBSM attending HBCUs, this study examines resiliency among BGBSM attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

In this study, I explored the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs. I specifically focused on their lived experiences, and their approaches to accessing elements of resilience, while navigating multiple subordinated identities. Given that Quare theory emphasizes intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual identity; in the proposed study, I disrupt the tendency of resiliency theorists to essentialize the experiences of Black students through the lens of their racial identity and isolating individual risk and protective factors (APA, 2008). To this end, I capture nuances portended by differences at the intersection of race, gender, and sexual identity.

**Quaring Resilience Theory**

Abes (2009) emphasizes the importance of utilizing critical theories to disrupt power structures embedded within dominant understandings of conceptual frameworks that perpetuate systems of oppression. Integrating *Quare* Theory (QT) and Resilience Theory (RT) to explore how BGBSM students access sources of resilience ensuredd that the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender was considered to contextualize conceptualizations of resilience among BGBSM students (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Furthermore, the dynamic interplay among strengths, resources, and risk factors within context across space and time that is characteristic of resilience can be highlighted through the integration of QT and RT (APA, 2008; Johnson & Henderson, 2005). QT strengthens the application of RT, because QT places an emphasis on intersectionality, while RT acknowledges the interaction between person and environment in understanding resilience (APA, 2008; Johnson & Henderson, 2005).

To inform this study, I applied a nuanced conceptualization of RT that considers environmental and contextual factors that influence resiliency. I also utilized Quare

Studies to acknowledge the racialized embodiment and performative experiences of BGBSM. Through my attempts to Quare resilience theory, I explored how their self-presentations inform their approaches to negotiating their sexual and racial identities while navigating PWIs. Taking a critical approach to explore resiliency among BGBSM, RT and QT guide the methodology of the study including the approaches to data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of findings.

## Conclusion

Scholars exploring the experiences of BGBSM in higher education have highlighted challenges they have faced and the ways BGBSM resist homophobia and racism to be academically and socially resilient (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). While there is emerging discourse about resiliency among Black students, much of the literature focuses on how racial socialization across the life course position them to be resilient in the face of environmental challenges and stressors (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Linda, 2013). To this end researchers, highlight the experiences of exceptionally academic and socially resilient Black students in an effort to provide an anti-deficit framework that highlights factors that enable success and achievement among Black students (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). However, to provide a perspective that illuminates the resiliency experiences of Black students who navigate multiple subordinated identities (i.e. BGBSM), it is imperative for future scholarship to consider the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender to enhance discourse about resiliency (Brockenbrough, 2015). Moreover, future research needs to move beyond examining individual level strategies to resist oppressive systems and incorporate

interrogation of environmental risk factors that may exacerbate BGBSM vulnerability areas while attending PWIs (Brockenbrough, 2015; Buttram, 2015).

# CHAPTER 3

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*"Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love." – World Health Organization*

I used a critical lens to explore resiliency among Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving (BGBSM) men attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs). To this end, I developed a composite counterstory with BGBSM, which is considered a critical approach to narrative inquiry, to capture their resiliency experiences while they attend PWIs (Harper, 2009). Narrative inquiry is a methodological and analytical equalizer in critical research. The relationship between the researcher and research participants shifts from one in which the researcher has sole responsibility and agency in framing and explaining the experiences of research participants (Mertens, 2010). Instead, a dynamic intrapersonal and interpersonal co-creative relationship emerges between inquirers and participants as they co-construct a potentially liberatory and discursive perspective of the experiences of those holding subordinated identities (Wertz et al, 2011). Given the need to examine the nuanced understandings and experiences of resilience among Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men in college at the intersection of their subordinated identities, I explain how I used a narrative inquiry approach to extend resilience theory to their experiences using a *Quare* studies lens after revisiting the purpose of this inquiry.

To provide an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of historically minoritized student groups attending universities, researchers examine different forms of

social and cultural capital and wealth that students bring to their collegiate experiences (Harper, 2009; Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Specifically, emerging literature highlights strategies and efforts academically and socially resilient students with subordinated identities employ to navigate their institutions to persist. For instance, recent scholarship exploring the experiences of high achieving Black male students highlights their tendency to leverage social networks, mentoring relationships, and student leadership roles to support their persistence through college (Harper, 2009; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Presenting counter-narratives of Black male students and other historically minoritized student groups who have successfully navigated institutions of higher education provides an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to disrupt dominant rhetoric that would otherwise paint them as deficient or ill-equipped to succeed in college.

While contemporary researchers in higher education and student affairs call for a focus on resiliency and cultural assets, scholars tend to overgeneralize the experiences of a specific group sharing a single subordinated identity (i.e. Black men), without considering nuanced experiences attributable to intersecting identities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to extend service of resilience theory to the experiences of Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) through an intentional consideration of their social location at the intersection of their racial, sexual, and gender identities. *Quare* theory served as a conceptual framework and lens through which I interrogated dominant discourse about resilience among historically minoritized groups. Specifically, I explored elements of resilience that are available and accessible to

BGBSM attending predominantly white institutions (PWI), considering multiple subordinated racial and sexual identities, using the following research questions:

**RQ 1.** What sources of resilience do Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving male undergraduate students identify during their college career?

**RQ 2.** How do PWIs influence the ways in which Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving male undergraduate students access elements of resilience during their undergraduate experience?

## Research Paradigm

In examining resilience among BGBSM attending a PWI, I applied several distinct features of qualitative research and the critical paradigm, including utilizing a critical lens to co-construct a composite counterstory of resiliency with the research participants (Harper, 2009; Mertens, 2010). Specifically, I *Quared* resilience theory utilizing a critical lens to affirm and center the narratives participants shared about their lived experiences being queer Black men. Considering the imperative to center counter-narratives in this inquiry, I acknowledged that participants shared multiple realities, indicating that there is no absolute truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Prasad, 2005). This qualitative research study examined the lived-experiences of the participants and how they made meaning of their existence through the lens of their intersecting identities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2013; Prasad, 2005).

My values as a researcher and my understanding of how knowledge is created reflect the nature of the critical research paradigm. Knowledge is created; therefore, my epistemological stance assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through a dynamic partnership between the researcher and the participants. This epistemological stance is

conducive to critical approaches to research, because it emphasizes the important role that participants play in the knowledge construction process (Prasad, 2005). Moreover, in leveraging the experiences and knowledges of the participants in this study, I highlighted the racialized and queer knowledges that BGBSM bring to scholarly discourse about resiliency in higher education (Mertens, 2010). By positioning the research participant as a partner, the inquiry process became an emancipatory process in which the participant was directly involved in affecting positive social or political change (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010; Mertens, 2010). In essence, the research process became a tool for social change as opposed to a simple inquiry process to contribute to scholarly discourse. Moreover, as I intended to authentically highlight participant narratives, my axiological stance assumed that my values and those of the research participants informed and influenced the inquiry process from research question development to data collection, through the analytical process. Authentic representation of participant ideas and opinions aligns with the values of critical scholars in that, a goal of this study was to center and highlight the experiences of a historically minoritized group, BGBSM in higher education (Fals Borda, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). By providing a safer space for the discussion of their opinions and ideas, I aligned the approaches to this inquiry with my values for advocating for historically silenced voices.

Aligning with critical approaches to scholarship, qualitative research is an iterative undertaking, which requires researchers to be flexible and responsive to design and methodological issues and novel concepts that may emerge throughout the data collection process (Mertens, 2010; Ruona, 2005). This flexibility allows participants to have a more active role in the knowledge construction process, because the racialized and

queer knowledges that BGBSM bring to the inquiry process are imperative to the development of narratives that effectively represent their experiences (Mertens, 2010). By relying heavily on the data and narratives shared by the participants to guide the scholarly process, I positioned the research participants as partners, sharing power in our efforts to interrogate existing discourse about the experiences of BGBSM (Mertens, 2010). As such, as the researcher, I had a substantial interpretive role and I made informed and cautious decisions about data collection and analysis while conducting a critical qualitative inquiry that prioritized the voices of the participants (Mertens, 2010). To this end, I provided an authentic representation of the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs. Ruona (2005) further explains that the researcher must fully immerse themselves in the inquiry process, constantly interrogating themselves, their influence on data interpretation and presentation, and the extent to which they are able to situate findings in context with relevant and, at times, discursive literature.

In the remainder of chapter three, I provide an overview of narrative approaches to inquiry, Quare Theory and counterstory approaches, the research site selection, the sampling approach, data collection, data analysis, and my positionality as the researcher. Specifically, I discuss how the connections and enhancing divergences between resilience theory and *Quare* theory informed my research decisions through a critical lens. Finally, I discuss how I established trustworthiness for the research study.

## Co-constructing Narratives

To acknowledge the dynamic co-creative relationship between researcher and participants, I utilized narrative research. Social science, literary, and historical scholars are the foundational champions for narrative research (Grbich, 2013; Wertz et al., 2011).

Narratives are important and useful tools in qualitative research, because they reflect the complex and nuanced ways in which people explain their lives, experiences they have had throughout their life course, and how they have made meaning of those experiences (Wertz et al., 2011). Presenting an opportunity to examine multiple realities and perspectives that individuals have about their lived experiences, narrative inquiry allows for researchers and participants to construct a more comprehensive account of the essence of human experience (Wertz et al., 2011). Affirming the critical perspectives assertion that there are complex multiple realities, narrative research does not focus on seeking or understanding absolute truth (Wertz et al., 2011). Instead, "narrative research offers the possibility of exploring nuances and interrelationships among aspects of experience that the reader might apply to better understand other related situations" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 238). While there are several types of narrative data to analyze and interpret, data are typically elicited from interviews and written documents (Wertz et al., 2011).

Grbich (2013) goes on further to describe two different approaches to narrative analysis; sociolinguistic and sociocultural. Sociolinguistic approaches focus on plots or structure of narratives aiming to understand how meaning is communicated, while sociocultural approaches prioritize broader interpretive frameworks that individuals use to make meaning of their experiences (Grbich, 2013). I explored how BGBSM attending PWIs exhibit resiliency while navigating multiple subordinated identities, which warrants a sociocultural approach. An underlying assumption of the sociocultural approach to narrative analysis is that "stories reflect not only culture, ideology, and socialization, they also provide insights to the political and historical climates impacting the storyteller's lives" (Grbich, 2013, p. 22). Given that resilience considers the interaction among

individual strengths, resources, and risk factors within context across space and time, the sociocultural approach's treatment of context called for a deeper interrogation of how the environment impacts participants' stories about their social location as BGBSM (APA, 2008). This study explored the multiple realties of BGBSM attending PWIs through a critical lens incorporating elements of the sociocultural approach to narrative analysis proposed by Grbich (2013) to understand how this population exhibits resiliency at the intersection of their multiple subordinated identities.

## Centering the Margins through Counterstorytelling

While the sociocultural analytical approach situated the participants' narratives in the context of their environment, presenting their counterstories provided an opportunity to disrupt majoritarian perspectives of BGBSM that may perpetuate the homophobia and racism that they experience attending PWIs (Grbich, 2013, Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Therefore, in using a critical approach to understand how BGBSM make meaning of their experiences navigating multiple subordinated identities at a PWI, I used the counterstorytelling approach to co-construct a composite counterstory. As many scholars in higher education are exploring resiliency among historically minoritized groups to provide an anti-deficit perspective of their experiences, counterstorytelling is a critical narrative approach to disrupt dominant discourse about the lives of those who hold historically minoritized identities (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Typically, master narratives are expressed through the lens of those holding dominant identities, and their stories about the experiences of those holding subordinated identities generally differ from the perspectives of those from marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1993; hooks, 1989; Patton et al., 2007). The power of centering the

margins is that the approach presents an empowering space of radical openness (hooks, 1989). As such, capturing and presenting how BGBSM explain resiliency at PWIs highlighted how they resist and, at times, combat barriers and environmental risk factors they may face as they matriculate through college. Offering counterstories from the perspectives of marginalized people is imperative, because master narratives often rely on stereotypes to describe their experiences (Patton et al., 2007; Stanley, 2007). In essence, counterstories add to incomplete and often biased majoritarian perspectives (Abes, 2009; Patton et al., 2007). Therefore, affirming stories and knowledges of BGBSM attending PWIs as valid forms of data challenge dominant discourse about their experiences that typically leave out and misrepresent their realities.

Scholars examining resiliency, particularly among Black men in higher education, have focused on the experiences of high achieving Black men (Harper, 2009; Herbert, 2002; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). While highlighting their narratives that contest majoritarian deficit perspectives of their experiences are imperative, it is important to examine multiple realities, particularly emphasizing the nuances attributable to intersecting identities. Therefore, in presenting the counterstories, a type of narrative, of BGBSM attending PWIs, I utilized what Solorzano and Yosso (2002) calls a composite counterstory. Composite stories reflect the presentation of data that reflects the experiences of those with shared social identities who experience a particular situation, in this case BGBSM attending PWIs (Harper, 2009). Harper (2009) applied this approach in his exploration on academic achievement among Black men in college. The composite story approach was useful in exploring resiliency among BGBSM attending PWIs, because the approach relies on data collected from people with the same social identities

who have experienced a particular situation within a given context (Harper, 2009). While the perspectives they share may not reflect the experiences of everyone who share their identities, the participants served as members from within the group who shed light on the often-omitted experiences of a larger marginalized group. Moreover, similar to narrative research, composite stories situate counterstories in the context of existing literature on historically minoritized groups. Given the need to provide a more comprehensive account of resiliency among Black men in higher education, I examined resiliency among BGBSM attending PWIs to identify contrasts and offer omitted insights about their realities.

This study contributes resiliency literature about Black students in higher education, by including the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs, through the application of a *Quare* lens. In exploring elements of resilience that are accessible and available to BGBSM I centered the stories of BGBSM attending PWIs and existing research about their experiences, while acknowledging my personal positionality related to this topic. As a Black same gender loving cisgender man and researcher, I believe that it is imperative to center the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs from their perspective. This is particularly important, given that BGBSM are a historically minoritized student group, and there are dominant, yet often incomplete and biased, narratives that pervade existing discourse about their experiences. This inquiry disrupts majoritarian perspectives that perpetuate stereotypes about BGBSM in higher education.

## Participant Selection

Higher education scholars note that often Black gay men choose not to disclose their sexual identities, which poses a challenge recruiting participants for inquiries about

the experiences of BGBSM in college (Mount, Amponsah, Graham, & Lamber, 2014; Patton, 2011). Consequently, I employed a variety of participant selection methods to identify participants for this study. Moreover, given that the term ‘gay’ may serve as a barrier for Black students, I solicited participation by individuals who identified as cisgender and transgender Black men who identify as gay, bisexual, same gender loving, queer, or non-heterosexual to ensure a more comprehensive perspective of their *Quare* resiliency counterstories. However, all participants in this study identified as gay. I recruited seven participants who shared their stories and experiences, which was close to a typical participant pool size for studies on BGBSM in college (Table 1).

Table 1.
*Study Participant Demographics*

| Name | Major | School | Sexual Orientation | Involvement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | Graphic Design and Spanish | Northeast Mid-Sized Public University | Gay | Spanish Club, Latino Fraternity, Residence Life, Black Student Union |
| Alex | Biology | Southeast Large Public University | Gay | LGBT Center |
| Alvin | Fine Arts and Performing Arts | Southeast Small Private University | Gay | Special events planning |
| Austin | Fashion | Southeast Urban University | Gay | Choir |
| Devon | Musical Theatre and Arts | Southeast Private University | Gay | Black Greek Letter Organization, Dance, Theatre |
| Dustin | Kinesiology | Northeast Urban University | Gay | Track & Field, Black Student |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Union, Men of Value and Excellence |
| Larone | Human Health | Southeast Mid-Sized Suburban Private University | Gay | Scholars Program, Health Promotion, Undergraduate Research |

To recruit participants for the study, I distributed study information through a variety of social media groups of which I am a part that include a variety of professionals in higher education that have entre into student populations on their respective campuses across the United States (U.S.). Groups included, but were not limited to Student Affairs Professionals, LGBTQIA + Affinity Higher Education Professionals, SAPros Dismantling White Privilege, LGBTQ Research and Researchers in Higher Education, Black Student Affairs Professionals, and QTPOC Student Affairs Professionals. Additionally, I sought permission to disseminate study information and flyers through relevant student affairs and higher education professional listservs (i.e. NASPA Knowledge Communities on Gender and Sexuality, Men and Masculinities, and African American). Utilizing multiple recruitment approaches allowed for the inclusion of the perspectives of students who may not typically affiliate with LGBT and/or multicultural programs, services, and/or student organizations.

To identify study participants, I used criterion sampling as described by deMarrais (2004). In this participant selection approach, I constructed a list of characteristics that study participants had to possess (deMarrais, 2004). Then, I located participants who fit these criteria and used their social networks to identify additional participants, through

the snowball method, which is an approach typically utilized for hard to reach populations (deMarrais, 2004; Johnson & Christensen, 2013). Criterion sampling is the method Harper (2009) used in his study to examine academic achievement among Black men in college. I utilized this approach to explore resiliency among BGBSM attending PWIs. As previously mentioned, narrative research does not typically result in generalizable information. Therefore, this study provides a depth of rich information about resiliency for a specific population, BGBSM attending PWIs. Consequently, criterion and network sampling allowed me to focus on a very specific hard to reach population while exploring how they access elements of resilience, considering their multiple subordinated identities. For this study, there were four criteria guiding my sampling and recruitment procedures: (a) identify as Black or African American, (b) identify as gay, bisexual, same gender loving, non-heterosexual, or queer, (c) identify as a cisgender or transgender man, and (d) be an undergraduate student attending a PWI. These criteria were inclusive of Black gay men, while ensuring that I had the opportunity to explore resiliency through the lens of their sexual, gender, and racial identities. There was no incentive for participation in this study, but considering the emancipatory nature of critical and transformative scholarship, participating in the interviews gave BGBSM a space to share narratives about their experiences navigating PWIs (Fals Borda, 2001).

## In-depth Interviews and Life Histories

Though there are several approaches to data collection in qualitative research, a popular method is facilitating in-depth interviews (Roulston, 2010). Moreover, given the flexibility and iterative nature of qualitative research, scholars employ multiple methods to fit the context of their particular inquiry and allow for authenticity in the emerging

narrative they co-construct with research participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2013; Prasad, 2005). As such, I employed in-depth and life history approaches to conducting interviews and visual elicitation methods with participants (Roulston, 2010). In-depth interviews are typically guided by semi-structured interview protocols consisting of predominantly open-ended questions to garner responses that are both explanatory and descriptive (Johnson & Christensen, 2013). While in-depth interviews elicit rich descriptions of phenomena to shed light on the essence of human experiences, many qualitative researchers conduct multiple interviews with each participant to allow time for reflection and solicit a more comprehensive perspective from each participant (Roulston, 2010). For this study, I conducted two in-depth interviews with each participant. The first interview used life-story and visual elicitation approaches and the second was a more focused in-depth interview that was guided by an interview protocol that focused on the participants' experiences at their institution (Roulston, 2010).

**Visual Elicitation**

Exploring resilience involves examining intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental protective and risk factors that impact the extent to which an individual is able to thrive or sustain despite all odds. As such, discussing resiliency in relation to subordinated sexual and racial identities may elicit negative or potentially re-traumatizing feelings. To facilitate a conversation about a sensitive topic, Prosser (2011) suggests visual elicitation, a participatory visual method through which participants utilize visual artifacts to respond to research interview questions. In constructing visual artifacts, Johnson (2001) suggests that "people have a need to exercise control over the production of their images so that they feel empowered" (p. 11). As such, this method reflects the

critical paradigm, because it takes into consideration the power dynamic that exists between researcher and research participants, by providing an opportunity for the research participants to communicate their perspective utilizing an approach that is not strictly governed by the researcher (Mertens, 2010). Moreover, the diagram allowed participants to reflect on their social location and provide a visual depiction of how their racial, sexual, and gender identities have shaped their realities and how they have made meaning of their experiences across their life span (Mertens, 2010). For the purposes of guiding research participants through potentially sensitive or painful memories from their life stories, I asked participants to draw a life history timeline diagram that captures significant events in their lives to guide the development of the life story interview, prior to their first interview. While constructing a life history timeline diagram is a visual elicitation method to facilitate discussion around a sensitive topic, visual data is also a strong data source that can shed light on the research participants' experiences (Prosser, 2011). As such, I used data from the life history timeline to inform the development of the initial interview and to guide temporal coding for the construction of the resiliency composite counterstory. Once the timeline diagrams were received, I used the timelines to guide an open discussion with participants about their life story.

**Life Story**

Scholars exploring resilience among Black students in higher education constantly reflect on the effects of racialization and how these effects may impact their experiences navigating institutions of higher education (Brown, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Linda, 2013). Through this socialization process, Black students are taught strategies and develop knowledges that help them navigate through oppressive systems

(Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Racialization occurs across the life course, which warrants the application of a life story interviewing approach to examine strategies and knowledges BGBSM employ to navigate challenges attributable to their multiple subordinated identities (Buttramm, 2015; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Moreover, Roulston (2010) describes the life story as "the account given by an individual about his or her life" (p. 25). Since counterstories affirm the validity of personal narratives as knowledge resisting majoritarian perspectives from which historically minoritized individual voices have been omitted, life stories provide an opportunity to prioritize their accounts (Roulston, 2010; Solorzano & Yosso, 2004). Additionally, a goal of life story interviews is to situate participant perspectives in the context of existing literature and discourse about a given situation or issue (Roulston, 2010). As such, in co-constructing BGBSM narratives about resilience, I enhanced existing resilience literature by considering the nuances of the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs at the intersection of their racial, gender, and sexual identities.

I developed interview questions for the life story interview using relevant literature as a guide (see Appendix A) (Buttram, 2014; Hargrove, 2014). However, the resulting conversation was guided by a protocol that I developed using each of the participants' timeline diagrams. The semi-structured protocol consisted of mostly open-ended questions and allowed for participants to guide the conversation (Roulston, 2010). Major topics during the first interview included questions about how participants identify themselves, significant experiences throughout their life course, important decisions they have made, general experiences at their institution, and moments they have felt

challenged and/or supported throughout their life course. The first interview lasted about 90 minutes to allow for dialogue and additional conversation about the timeline diagram.

**Focused In-Depth Interview**

Prior to the second interview, a transcriptionist transcribed the first interview, and then I reviewed it to highlight any information that needed further clarification during the second interview. At the beginning of the second interview, I reminded participants of the purpose of the study and the second interview. I re-emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation in the study.

The second interview took place as soon as the participant was available to schedule the interview with the researcher to allow time for participants to reflect on their first interview without leaving too much temporal space that could negatively impact the connection between the two conversations (Roulston, 2010). Since I was interested in the lived experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs, I used a semi-structured protocol to guide the second interview to explore resiliency considering their subordinated racial and sexual social locations (Roulston, 2010). This interview approach allowed for the co-construction of rich *Quare* resilience counterstories among BGBSM attending PWIs. Roulston (2010) suggests that researchers take a neutral yet interested stance during in-depth interviews. In this instance a pedagogical relationship developed in which participants had the opportunity to teach researchers as much as possible through loosely guided questioning about a particular situation they experienced (Roulston, 2010). As such, during the second interview, I asked questions that focused on the social environment of their institution and their self-perception of risks, assets, and resources

that impact their experiences at their institution (see appendix B for the in-depth interview protocol).

The guide consists primarily of open-ended questions and is semi-structured to allow for adaptability and responsiveness during the conversation (Roulston, 2010). At the conclusion, of the second interview, the transcriptionist transcribed the audio recording for analysis. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. Therefore, total participant burden was 120-180 minutes across two interviews in addition to any time they dedicated to enhancing their life history timelines.

I recorded all interviews and they took place in January, February, and March 2018 through Skype or Google Hangout. While many qualitative researchers utilizing in-depth interviews prefer in-person conversations to capture nuances in the ways participants respond to interview questions, Deakin and Wakefield (2014) assert the viability of conducting online interviews as it reduces participant burden and may enhance participant anonymity. Given the specificity of this study's focus on a hard to reach population, BGBSM attending PWIs, the added logistical convenience to reach participants who may be geographically dispersed from the primary research location had the potential to increase participation (Squire, 2015). Additionally, video conferencing through Skype or Google Hangout provided an added layer of anonymity for research participants, while still providing visual interaction with research participants to capture non-verbal behaviors during the in-depth interviews (Squire, 2015).

## Data Analysis

Johnson and Christensen (2013) highlight the iterative nature of qualitative research. As such the analytical process co-occurs with data collection from literature

review, through data collection and analysis, to presentation of findings. Applying a *Quare* lens I used Grbich's (2013) sociocultural approach to narrative analysis and a combination of Prosser's (2011) and Hodder's (2000) approach to visual data analysis to co-construct a resiliency composite counterstory among BGBSM attending PWIs.

**Quare Narrative Analysis of Interviews**

In line with critical traditions, scholars use Quare Theory to examine social phenomena through the lens of power, domination, and conflict (Means & Jaeger, 2013; Means & Jaeger, 2015; Means, 2017; Prasad, 2010). Applying a critical lens to analyzing the narratives of BGBSM attending PWIs, takes the critical approach to a level beyond simple co-construction between researcher and participants. Instead, this approach, intentionally and actively seeks to disrupt systems that perpetuate power and privilege. Moreover, researchers guided by the critical traditions seek to interrogate dominant social perspectives in an effort to emancipate historically minoritized groups (Prasad, 2005). Highlighting and centering emancipatory knowledges disrupts existing systemic and power structures that sustain dominance of one group over another (Prasad, 2005). To this end, Quare theory goes a step further than Queer studies in its efforts to disrupt notions that privilege heteronormativity and Whiteness (Johnson, 2001). As previous scholars exploring the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs have noted, Quare theory considers the nuance of intersections of their intersecting racial, gender, and sexual identities to contextualize their journeys attending PWIs (Johnson, 2001; Means & Jaeger, 2015).

Grbich (2013) explains a multi-step process to narrative analysis that implores researchers to not only situate stories in sociopolitical contexts, but to consider

researchers' positionalities and reactions in doing so. The narrative analysis process outlined by Grbich (2013) includes (1) bounding the narrative, (2) framing the context of the narratives, (3) comparing accounts, (4) contextualization and interpretation.

First, I identified the boundaries of the narratives shared by each participant (Grbich, 2013). Participants had an opportunity to share their life histories and focus on their experiences at their institution. Therefore, the first interview transcript had broader boundaries, allowing me to explore their socialization process across their life course. I used the life history timeline to further bound the narrative by reviewing the salient experiences that the participants highlighted across their life course as primary topics of discussion for the life history interview. To analyze the life history timelines, I utilized an interpretivist approach that started with the acknowledgement that participants were given limited instructions to inform the construction of the life history timelines (Hodder, 2000). Given the provision of limited instructions, I was able to allow the unique experiences of each participant to inform the flow of their respective interviews (Hodder, 2000). While there were similarities in the ways in which BGBSM presented their life history timelines, their unique journeys allowed for the customization of each life history interview. As, such, I was able to mirror language used to frame questions during the life history interview to the text that each participant utilized on their life history timelines to describe their experiences (Hodder, 2000). Consequently, I was able to examine how BGBSM explain significant moments in their life and how they conceptualize challenges and supports they experience overtime navigating their multiple subordinated identities, during their life history interview. The second interview focused more on their experiences in college and was bound by their college years.

The second step in Grbich's (2013) analytical approach focuses on content and context. To draw a connection between interview one and interview two, I framed content elicited from the first interview in such a way that it informed the interpretation and understandings of data elicited from the second interview. This process is imperative given that scholars exploring resilience among Black students focus on their racialization process to inform how they navigate and excel at their institutions. Next, I compared and explored contradistinctions between each of the participants' life stories and collegiate experiences to co-construct a more comprehensive resiliency composite counterstory among BGBSM attending PWIs (Grbich, 2013).

The final analytical steps involved contextualization and interpretation of the participants' stories (Grbich, 2013). Quare theory aims to disrupt heteronormativity and privileging of Whiteness (Johnson, 2001). As such using a *Quare* lens to examine the participants' stories in the context of their institution, sociopolitical locations, and positionalities as BGBSM attending a PWI allowed for a more nuanced resiliency composite counterstory. Moreover, considering my positionality as a Black same gender loving scholar, I examined my story and authentically relayed how my positionality shaped the final narrative presented through this inquiry (Grbich, 2013). I used Microsoft Office to manage all textual data throughout data collection, analysis, and data reporting. After exploring the content of each narrative and how the accounts compare and contrast across accounts, I constructed a composite narrative. This narrative described the context of the PWI and how it impacted their experiences with resiliency, and it provided a composite story of the experiences of the participants.

**Developing the Composite Counterstory**

The composite counterstory (CCS) is a critical race methodology that draws from interview transcripts, memos, field notes, and other research data to develop a fictionalized narrative (Harper, 2009; Cook & Dixson, 2013). While the CCS characters are fictionalized, their stories and narratives are grounded in real-life experiences and empirical data (Harper, 2009). Moreover, utilizing fictional characters not only protects the identity of an otherwise minoritized identity group, but supports the intent of critical studies to disrupt oppressive systems by shifting the focus from individual participants to larger issues that BGBSM face as a collective group (Cook & Dixson, 2013).

To construct the composite resiliency counterstory, during the analytical process, I applied Cook's and Dixson's (2013) approach to writing composite counterstories. As I listened to interviews and read transcripts, I took notes to document emerging themes from the interviews regarding the participant's experiences before and during college. I relied heavily on Braune's and Clarke's (2006) description of thematic analysis to guide the coding process. Given that the critical paradigm guided my approach to this inquiry, identifying latent themes aligned with the study's goal to uncover and disrupt underlying assumptions related to the resiliency experiences of BGBSM (Braune & Clark, 2006). As such, through the coding process, I focused on examining the data for deeper ideas and assumptions about resiliency that may not have literally showed up in the data itself, but could be interpreted through the ways in which participants described their resiliency experiences. Moreover, using the constant comparative method, as I discovered new codes and data through the data analysis process, I reread each transcript to determine whether each code applied to earlier chunks of data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). To

organize and code data, I used Excel and codes in Word. I tagged chunks of text in word, then, I immediately started populating the Excel document with the code, the definition, and an example from the data. In Excel, I tagged and organized codes with larger or broader themes, using the software's sort function. As I continued the process of reviewing and refining themes, I examined how the grouped codes were related (Braune & Clark, 2006). Additionally, during the initial coding process, I added elements of Morales' (2010) resiliency framework and Johnson's (2005) *Quare* Studies to the codebook in Excel as a priori codes to identify chunks of texts that related to theoretically informed codes in the data. This approach provided a starting point for analysis and ensured that I centered the studies guiding conceptual framework throughout the analytical process.

While identifying the salient instances that participants shared related to their racial, sexual, and gender identities and the challenges that they faced throughout their life course, I mined the data to ensure that research questions were addressed or answered in the data. Once, I identified major themes, I overlaid themes over temporal codes that reflected their application to the participants' life courses before college exclusively, during college exclusively, and across their life course. As I applied these temporal codes, I started to develop a thematic story, within in which I would situate the characters of the composite counterstory (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Additionally, I analyzed themes to determine how they corresponded to *Quare Theory*.

Once the thematic story was created to contextualize the composite counterstory, I focused on the development of the characters of the story (Cook & Dixson, 2013). I took salient elements from each of the participants' narratives to create the foundation for each

character in the composite counterstory. Specifically, I explored the participants' narratives in their social, historical, and political situations to discuss resiliency and the importance of institutional support using a *Quare* theoretical understanding of the intersections of their race, gender, and sexuality (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Moreover, I paid particular attention to the ways in which the participants discussed and understood their experiences and the supports provided to them during their upbringing and while they attended their schools. As I coded the narratives of the participants, I used the codes to capture the essence of each individual to inform the story of each character in the composite counterstory.

I used a *Quare* theoretical lens to analyze the narratives that the seven participants in this study shared. Using the critical race methodological approach of the composite counterstory, I developed a thematic story in which I positioned fictionalized characters to portray the narratives of the research participants. Shifting the focus from the individual participants of the study to the developed fictionalized characters in the composite counterstory places the emphasis of the story on larger issues that BGBSM face while attending PWIs as opposed to their individual identities (Harper, 2009; Cook & Dixson, 2013).

## Subjectivity Statement

As an active participant in the knowledge construction process with research participants, it is important for me to reveal and discuss how my positionalities and social location shaped my approach to this inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2013). I am a Black same gender loving cisgender man who attends, and has attended, for the entirety of my academic career a predominantly white institution (PWI). I

consider my experiences attending PWIs as a student, working at PWIs as a professional, and my experience growing up in a Black Christian household in the southeast have informed by my personal development and my approach to scholarship and practice in education.

Throughout my childhood and early adulthood, my life was heavily immersed in the church. The lines between nuclear and church family were blurred. This is particularly relevant, given the fact that the majority of my religious leaders were my aunts, uncles, and cousins. Several of the messages I received from family were informed by sermons and colloquial understandings of religious doctrine steeped in fundamentalist Pentecostal traditions. Spiritual leaders communicated about the reality of struggles in life and the dependence on God to carry us through those struggles. I, however, felt barred from many protections, because of my identity as a same gender loving man. Therefore, messages that could have facilitated resilience, at times seemed to contradict a salient aspect of my identity. Consequently, I decided to refrain from disclosing my sexual identity, until I went to college.

Attending a PWI to continue my education introduced additional challenges, as I embarked on a journey to reconcile my sexual and spiritual identities. Until college, my racial and religious socialization happened concurrently. I did not understand my Blackness without religious teachings and vice versa. In college, I was able to explore religion and spirituality in a different setting, which introduced an opportunity to interrogate the messages I had received during my childhood and adolescents. However, as I sought to find community and a sense of belonging as a Black same gender loving

man, I encountered racism among my White peers and homophobia among my Black peers.

I was further challenged in my attempts to develop a sense of belonging when seeking support from the resources offered to me in college. Multicultural programs and services tended to prioritize the experiences of Black cisgender heteronormative men. Even as a professional I have participated in initiatives intended to improve the experiences of Black men that seem to perpetuate singular, and often times toxic, notions of Black masculinity. Moreover, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender resource centers tended to prioritize the needs of White gay cisgender men. It was hard to find spaces that fully affirmed identity as Black same gender loving man. Consequently, I often had to negotiate which identity would be most salient in certain spaces.

Since college, I have continued my efforts to facilitate capacity building for resilience and reconciliation among peers and students exploring their racial, sexual, and spiritual identities. As such, my lens as a critical public health trained student affairs scholar practitioner, shape this study. I believe in utilizing scholarship to affect positive change. Therefore, the validity of the findings of the proposed study is informed by the extent to which it is able to improve the experiences of Black queer men attending PWIs. Moreover, given that my public health practice is steeped in advocacy, I believe it is imperative for research participants to partner with researchers in the construction of knowledge. In addition to collecting data to contribute to discourse about the experiences of Black gay men in higher education, I present this study as an opportunity for participants to safely share their ideas and opinions. Finally, given my positionality as a critical scholar practitioner, this study is an opportunity to interrogate current discourse

about Black gay men to inform ways to extend service of existing university systems to the experiences of Black gay, same gender loving, and bisexual men.

Given my application of a composite counterstory approach to present the findings of this study, I recognize that I was unable to remove myself from my identities as I embarked upon this inquiry. However, I do believe that my identities positively inform this study in many ways. First, my identity and experiences facilitate an easier rapport building processes with research participants. They may feel safer engaging in dialogue about a particularly sensitive topic with someone who shares many of their social identities. Additionally, given my experiences navigating a PWI as a Black same gender loving man, I had a deeper understanding of the data I collected, and I had the opportunity to solicit richer and thicker descriptions and make more meaning of the information I obtained from the research participants. I also recognize that each person, despite shared identities, have different experiences and that my identities do not supersede nor equate to the experiences of my research participants. Therefore, I utilized many strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the resulting findings and analyses.

## Trustworthiness

Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) posit that critical theorists base validity of scholarly inquiry on the ways in which findings and interpretations are situated in history, disrupt ignorance steeped in majoritarian narratives, and stimulate action. Given my application of *Quare Studies*, a critical framework, to examine resilience among BGBSM, I describe measures I utilized to affect change based on study findings. I also discuss strategies employed to enhance quality of data collection, data analysis, and resulting conclusions.

**Trustworthiness in Critical Studies**

Credibility in critical studies focuses less on internal validity and prioritizes external impact, given critical theorists efforts to disrupt dominant discourse that perpetuate systemic oppression (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Prasad, 2005). Consequently, I employed three strategies for ensuring trustworthiness that adhere to critical theories. First, to situate interpretations in broader discourse about BGBSM in higher education, I wrote memos while analyzing data (Ruona, 2005). As such as I analyzed the data and identified themes, I wrote memos that describe how interpretations are connected to the data collected in the proposed study and how interpretations related to findings from previous studies about BGBSM in higher education. Identifying connections and contradistinctions between the narratives of the participants in the present study and findings from relevant literature, allowed me to provide a more comprehensive description of the experiences of BGBSM in higher education.

This study provided a safer space for BGBSM to share their ideas and opinions about navigating institutions of higher education while negotiating multiple subordinated racial and sexual identities. As such, I used member checking to ensure that transcriptions and resulting interpretations were credible to research participants and matched closely with reality (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Ruona, 2005). While each participant had a different lens through which they made meaning of their experiences, I shared themes and their definitions with participants to solicit their feedback about how the interpretations related to their experiences. Three of the seven participants responded to the member checking solicitation. One participant offered a slight edit to the performing masculinity theme to reflect the reality of multiple masculinities. As a result, to capture

the nuanced ways in which the men performed gender identities, I shifted the theme title to performing masculinities. Beyond the critique, the participants who provided feedback communicated that the themes and their definitions aligned with their perspectives and understandings.

Critical scholars aim to affect positive social and political change through research (Prasad, 2005). As such, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) describe how critical scholars prioritize tactical and catalytic authenticity in highlighting the credibility of their studies and findings. Catalytic authenticity refers to validity in the form of social change or emancipatory action as a result of the research (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Therefore, during the interviews with student participants, I inquired about the best outlets to disseminate and apply the findings of the study. This approach illuminated a partnership between me and the participants in moving beyond knowledge construction toward external impact of findings.

**Strategies to Enhance Study Quality**

Beyond employing ways to interrogate dominant discourse about BGBSM and facilitate emancipatory change and social action, I utilized several strategies to enhance credibility and dependability of the proposed study (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Given and Saumure (2008) describe a credible study as “one where the researchers have accurately and richly described the phenomenon in question” (p. 895).

I used two strategies to establish credibility, or to ensure that the data is accurately represented. Peer debriefing is a strategy that involves working with other researchers to affirm consistency between the data, interpretations, and findings (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010). Given the many identities I may share with research

participants; this strategy is important to ensure that my positional lens does not overshadow or discount the perspectives of the research participants. Therefore, my dissertation chair and other researchers familiar with scholarship about BGBSM in higher education were engaged to debrief my findings. As previously mentioned, I also used member checking to ensure that my findings and interpretations aligned with the perceptions of the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2010). While I solicited feedback from participants on findings, I consulted with a peer debriefer prior to making any substantive changes to my study. The peer debriefer was a scholar who had expertise about the experiences of BGBSM in higher education.

Finally, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) emphasize the importance of establishing dependability or confirmability of findings. The terms dependability and confirmability refer to the reliability of the findings of the study. As such, I maintained an audit trail to document decisions made during the research process and procedures I followed to analyze data (Given & Saumure, 2008). This audit trail documented how I made decisions and how I developed analytic codes to identify themes in response to research questions.

## Methodology Summary

Applying a critical lens, I used a narrative inquiry and the composite counterstory approach to explore and present elements of resilience that are available and accessible to BGBSM attending predominantly white institutions (PWI). I used criterion sampling to recruit participants through multicultural programs and services centers, LGBT resource centers, health promotion and student health service offices, and affinity student groups. I collected data through an in-depth life span and phenomenological interview and visual

elicitation methods. I analyzed data using a sociocultural narrative analysis approach applying a critical and Quare lens to the ways research participants make meaning of their experiences. To increase trustworthiness of the study, I used critical theory and qualitative study strategies to enhance study quality and external impact. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge about BGBSM in higher education by examining their challenges, successes, and how institutions of higher education facilitate or inhibit resiliency among historically minoritized student groups with multiple subordinated identities.

# CHAPTER 4

# FINDINGS

*"That was very important to me: that the people I interviewed be able to pick up the book and understand it. For me, that's also a kind of activism." – E. Patrick Johnson*

## Study Summary

Resiliency has emerged as a prominent framework to provide an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of historically minoritized students in higher education (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2010; Morales, 2014). Specifically, some scholars have explored strategies that Black men (particularly high achieving Black men), use to excel in challenging spaces (Harper, 2010) Many of these studies emphasize the roles racial socialization, familial and social support systems, religion and spirituality, and a commitment to a larger goal or purpose may contribute to the success of historically minoritized students (Brown, 2008; Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). However, emerging resiliency studies present an opportunity to address how these elements of resiliency may be operationalized or accessed differently by those who may have intersecting identities within historically minoritized groups. This is a particularly important consideration for those who have multiple subordinated identities, given their additional need to navigate compounded oppressions at the intersection of their social identities (Johnson, 2005; Means, 2014). As such, in the present study, I explored resiliency among Black, Gay, Bisexual, and Same Gender Loving men (BGBSM) attending predominantly White institutions. In previous studies, researchers highlight the

double jeopardy that BGBSM face as they navigate institutions of higher education (Henry, Fuerth, & Richards, 2011; Means, 2014; Means & Jaeger, 2014). By examining how BGBSM describe the challenges they face and how they respond to those challenges, I aim to enhance scholarly discourse that posits resiliency as a viable framework to provide an anti-deficit perspective of historically minoritized groups. Moreover, by applying a *Quare* lens to the analysis of the participants' life stories and present realities, I aim to situate their coping strategies and intrinsic protective factors in the context of their life histories and socialization experiences.

To solicit data for this study, I engaged with the participants in two distinct ways. I asked each of the seven participants to provide a visual representation of their life history. Then, I used the life history timeline that they produced to guide an initial conversation about their life history, highlighting salient moments for them across their life course. The final phase of each participants' involvement in the study was an in-depth interview, during which we discussed their current experiences at their present institution. During each interview, we discussed the roles race, gender, and sexuality played in their past life experiences and how they navigate challenges they face. Each participant self-identified as a BGBSM who was currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the United States (US). Seven BGBSM participated in the study. I use a composite counterstory (CCS) to present the study's key findings. In the CCS, characters engage in dialogue that highlights key risk factors and vulnerability areas that they faced throughout their life history and while in college. The narratives portrayed through the characters' conversation emphasize strategies participants use to respond to challenges associated with their nuanced

relationships with religion and spirituality, racial socialization, and expectations of masculinity and excellence, given their identities as Black gay men. Following the CCS, I provide a *Quare* analysis of the CCS to describe how the participants identify sources of resiliency, highlighting the ways in which their institutions have impacted their resiliency during their undergraduate experience.

## Reading a Composite Counterstory

The composite counterstory (CCS) is a critical race methodology that draws from interview transcripts, memos, field notes, and other research data to develop a fictionalized narrative (Harper, 2009; Cook & Dixson, 2013). While the CCS characters are fictionalized, their stories and narratives are grounded in real-life experiences and empirical data (Harper, 2009). Moreover, utilizing fictional characters not only protects the identity of an otherwise minoritized identity group, but supports the intent of critical studies to disrupt oppressive systems by shifting the focus from individual participants to larger issues that BGBSM face as a collective group (Cook & Dixson, 2013). While I aim to illustrate the perspectives of the participants in a creative and coherent way, the content of the CCS draws heavily from the interview transcripts of the research participants. Additionally, to highlight how the participants think through their experiences and illustrate themes elicited from the interviews, the actions and thought processes of the individuals in the CCS draw upon the interview data. Cook and Dixson (2013) provide the following guidelines for reading the composite counterstory:

(1) the dialogue, setting, and thoughts of the composite characters come directly from the interviews, field notes, and other data sources but are edited to maintain the flow of the narrative;

(2) the analysis of the counterstories appears later in the paper; and

(3) footnotes provide background and factual information for clarity (p. 1246).

(4) To reflect Cook's and Dixon's (2013) approach to constructing a composite counterstory, I use the term character as opposed to participant in the analysis of the counterstory.

Additionally, the characters of the CCS use Black gay vernacular terms or slang throughout the narrative. I use the vernacular to reflect authenticity in the tone and the character of the seven participants on which the CCS is based. While the origin of several of the vernacular terms the characters use is difficult to trace, centering an authentic portrayal of the ways in which the participants engage in dialogue is an act of resistance that adds credibility to the CCS (Johnson, 2012).

The following narrative takes place at a national conference that focuses on building capacity among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals and their allies to be change agents in their communities. The majority of the conversation among the participants takes place at a brunch immediately following the conference. During brunch, the characters highlight nuanced relationship with religion and spirituality, pressures to perform perfectionism and masculinity, an imperative to resist silencing through advocating for social change, learned aspects of imposter syndrome, nuanced experiences with racial socialization, and a need for more culturally-relevant support resources.

# The Composite Counterstory: Brothers Who Brunch

## First Course: A Great Foundation

The International LGBTQIA Coalition hosts *Revolutionizing Advocacy*, an annual conference to build capacity among LGBTQ individuals and allies to advocate for and contribute to change in their respective communities. A diverse collective of professionals, community members, students, and political activists convene to learn, connect, and identify ways to resist dehumanization and systemic oppression of LGBTQ people.[3] During a recent *Revolutionizing Advocacy* conference, seven Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM), enrolled as undergraduate students at various institutions across the United States (US) connected after visiting the conference's *People of Color (POC) Suite.* Each of the men attended a predominantly White institution (PWI), and administrators at their schools encouraged them to attend *Revolutionizing Advocacy*, noting the transformative experience of students who attended previous meetings. Given the challenge of finding and sustaining Black queer spaces at their respective institutions, the men were excited to find a space designated for People of Color at a LGTBQ conference. It wasn't hard for the men to find each other at the *POC* suite, as their happened to be very few BGBSM in attendance at the conference. They gravitated towards each other and exchanged stories about who they were, where they were from, and what brought them to the conference.

Dustin was a student athlete from an urban university in the northeast, who ran track. He was in his final year at Grayson College, after he had taken time off and

[3] Based on an actual conference hosted by an organization that advocates for the rights and experiences of LGBTQ individuals and communities. It is important to note that the participants did not actually attend the conference.

returned.[4] He shared that as an athlete he was interested in understanding how other people found community among their peers, particularly as it relates to expectations around masculinity and gender expression in athletic spaces. Austin was in his final year at his third undergraduate institution, which was located in a suburban area in the southeast.[5] Dustin's mention of masculinity piqued his interest, given the ways in which he sometimes used his stature to protect or assert himself when he or a peer was challenged, because of his identity as a gay man. Austin described how he came from an extremely religious background and continues to explore the dynamics of religion and spirituality as it relates to his sexual identity. Devon chimed in to mention his family's deep involvement with religious traditions. He was in his third year at a mid-sized selective private institution in the southeast. In addition to his interest in religion and spirituality, he was particularly drawn to the conference's focus on social change. As a member of a Black Greek Letter organization (BGLO), he expressed his constant balancing between advocating for change for Black students and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT) students.

When Devon shared his interest in social justice work, the other men gave collective affirming nods to express their interest in this topic as well. Like, Devon, Larone was a member of a BGLO. He was completing his third year at a highly selective suburban institution in the southeast. Larone described the constant doubt he experienced

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[4] Dustin withdrew from school twice before starting his final year to complete his degree due to financial hardships and losing support from his family.

[5] Austin transferred three times before attending his current institution. First, he attended a bible college, then left because of his interest in the arts. At his second institution, the price became too daunting. He settled on his final institution because the programs and support available aligned with his interests and needs.

from family and some administrators as he sought to pursue higher education. He was hoping he would be able to learn ways to resist this systemic oppression while attending the conference. Connecting to this idea of resisting oppression, Alvin talked about a pressure to be a perfectionist in everything he did. He believed that he had to consistently perform perfection in order to temper reactions to his identity as a gay man. Moreover, he described the need to perform expected behaviors in various spaces and how that challenged his ability to be authentic and make meaningful connections with people. This was a particularly salient challenge for Alvin, given his enrollment at a small private liberal arts college in the southeast where her perceived meaningful relationships to be imperative to facilitate academic and social success. Alex, a senior at a large public flagship institution in the southeast was excited to know the men he met had so many similar interests. He added a unique topic to the mix that focused on how being socialized in White spaces had somehow contributed to a distancing from his Black peers. He shared how this was particularly troubling for him given his tendency to seek connection among his Black peers, who shared his visible racial identity. After quietly listening to everyone's interests, Aaron, a part-time first year student at mid-sized public institution in the northeast, described his interest in finding more relevant mental health and well-being related support to navigate the complexities of existing as a BGBSM at a PWI.

While they were excited to connect in the *POC suite*, the men wanted to take full advantage of the learning and capacity building opportunities at the conference. So, they decided to reconvene at the conference's close to learn more about each other, exchange stories about experiences at their respective institutions, and discuss how they might take

what they have learned from the conference back to their respective communities. On the final day of the conference, the men decided to have their own brunch at a local restaurant, during the closing plenary of *Revolutionizing Advocacy.*

**Main Course: The Tea[6]**

**Reconsidering relationship with religion and spirituality.** When the men reconvened for brunch, Alvin was the first to comment on how his family's religious affiliation influenced his upbringing:

> My family was deep in the church. We went to church on Sundays and any other time there was an opportunity to be there. My grandmother was the matriarch of the family and ensured that we all were involved in the church. I personally was in the choir. In fact, the first college I attended was a religious school.

Devon asked how Alvin's strong affiliation with religion impacted his coming out experience, if he came out at all. Alvin said that his family and leaders in the church would constantly use scripture and colloquial religious sayings to talk about how being gay would send him straight to hell. He added:

> I felt that people were using religion as a weapon, and because of that I decided to move away from religious doctrine and focus on spirituality. However, one thing religion and attending church did teach me was discipline. Because of that, I am very disciplined in all of my pursuits: professional, personal, and academic.

Austin shared a slightly different experience:

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[6] The tea is a vernacular phrase used among Black gay men to describe an instance when someone is about to share a juicy bit of gossip.

> With me being so trained on the Bible and me being so into the Bible, I just knew God would come to me through the Bible. Like, God will lead me to different scriptures that would empower me to tell my story, and it's because of these scriptures that I am out now.

He explained that he currently believes that God comes to you through what and who you see Him come through. Given his perspective, Austin told Alvin that he has a personal relationship with God that is not influenced by others' ideas. Austin went on to share how his family positioned religion as a liberating personal journey and the Bible as a guide for that journey. As such when he is looking for answers or guidance to any of his emergent life challenges, Austin explained that he took the opportunity to pause and listen to hear God either through the Bible or through another sign. So, while Alvin experienced family and religious leaders using religious doctrines to dehumanize or demoralize his existence as a gay man, Austin had a different experience. Consequently, Alvin veered away from some of the religious teachings to which he was exposed, while Austin had a deeper connection to religious doctrine in his adult life.

Devon listened to Alvin's and Austin's perspectives, and had an opportunity to reflect on how religion and spirituality impacted his coming out experience. For Devon's family, religion had a connection to social class status. Devon described his family's deep ties to religion and the church:

> My parents and grandparents were very involved in the church…My grandmother founded the usher board and integrated the church that we went to. My father was a deacon and my mother was a deaconess. My grandfather and his father both built a church in North Southern State.

From Devon's perspective, his family's record of engagement with the church was deeper than a spiritual imperative and that it extended to a foundational connection that was interwoven with their church's history. Devon went on to discuss his family's financial contributions to the church:

> My parents actually bought the building that my church is in now. So, when my church decided to move to a new location, no one in the church had a high enough credit score or enough funds to purchase the building. My parents own the church building and the property that our church is on. So, my parents and family are and always have been very committed to the church.

Devon's family's history and financial investment in the church made his family's social class status a salient aspect of how religion and spirituality was treated and showed up in their lives. Devon shared, "When I came out, my family was disappointed in me, as they viewed my being gay as a blemish on the family name. I had veered away from what they expected and what was expected of my family as leaders and models in the church." Devon internalized the disappointment his family expressed and has since focused on finding ways to prove himself to his family by being a high achiever in his studies and involvement in activities beyond school.

The men agreed that religion and spirituality had some influence on how they navigated the world as BGBSM, but their nuanced experiences resulted in varying approaches to how they reconciled their religion and/or spirituality with their sexual identity in college. Alvin took the discipline he learned from religion to motivate him to excel, while Devon's internalization of his parents' disappointment led him to focus on being excellent in other things to make up for the perceived blemish his sexuality made

on the family's status. Austin's still reads and references the bible to guide his life when he experiences hardship, given the way religion was incorporated in this upbringing as a liberating personal experience.

**Perfectionism to temper reactions to sexual identity.** Devon's mention of pursuing excellence prompted Austin to steer the discussion to a deeper dive into factors that contribute to perfectionism.

> I grew up in an urban area, where everything was very close. Everyone was very familiar with everyone. With everyone being so familiar with everyone and it being such a small city, a lot of things spread fast, you know, so there was always that pressure on being extra perfect

Austin shared. He added, "I'm going to perform you know, especially with me being gay. At the end of the day you can say whatever you want to say about me, but know that I came, I performed, and I looked good doing it." Devon nodded in affirmation of Austin's perspective.

> Academic excellence is an expectation of my family and it was celebrated. So, while, I may have disappointed them when I came out, I made sure that I did everything I could to excel in other areas.

Devon said. Dustin quickly jumped in and agreed with Devon and Austin. He also felt that having a gay identity should not be the only thing people perceive about him when he enters spaces. "As an athlete," he added, "there is this added pressure to be perfect, but I know that if I am a really good athlete, no one can say anything to me about my sexual identity." Austin jumped in and asked Dustin to say more about why he believed athleticism made his sexual identity less of a salient conversation among others.

**Performing masculinities.** While Dustin took a moment to think on the inquiry, Alvin went on to share, "As a bigger Black man, I have this experience where people won't mess with me, you know. Like, because I look 'masculine' people are scared of me or won't bother me." Dustin admitted that he felt that athleticism was an expectation of masculinity and by performing a more masculine gender expression, he felt that he did not have a hard time as other gay men when it came to his sexual identity, because it was less apparent. Alvin laughed saying:

> There is a certain expectation for a certain level of masculinity that I don't have or aspire to have. There are certain expectations, there's a way that a man is expected to be. There are things that you're expected to do that just don't fit me. For example, I just wasn't really rough and rugged. I wasn't the little boy that's tearing stuff up or going to be great in sports. It just wasn't me. However, I know I am a big Black guy, and I do kind of just use my stature to create a buffer.

He went on to describe a specific situation when a college classmate shared that he was tired of seeing and being around so many gay people. Given the fact that he was facing a situation where a college classmate attempted to silence and erase his peers, because of their sexual identity, Alvin knew they he had the intrinsic ability given his stature and his peer's perception of his identity as a Black man to stand up for himself and make a statement. "Me kind of being huge and fearless, I admittedly could have done better, but I slid his desk, physically moved it over. They asked why I did it, and I said, 'He tired of us, so I moved him'," Alvin shared. The guys all collectively laughed at Alvin's story. Alvin concluded sharing, "I'm a big guy. I'm six foot three. I look like I should be playing football. On the flip side, my stature makes me realize that for whatever reason that they

might decide to make any accusation against me. I am an easy target; it builds this alertness in me that makes me be more conscious of my proximity to White people." Alvin described a situation where his presence as a larger Black man presented a racialized issue that portrayed him as violent:

> There was an incident when a White girl accused me of assaulting her. That was one of those things that alerted me to racism, but it still hadn't completely woken me up. It was kind of confusing for me because I was like 13 or 14 years old. It was like I wasn't even on the bus. 13 people standing there telling you, 'he wasn't even on the bus', and for whatever reason nobody believes me. It was just one of those things where I had to get real with myself and say, 'Why did this happen and how did it happen? How was this allowed to happen' Clearly there's bias, and clearly there's privilege going on.

Despite the ways in which Alvin was able to use his masculine presence to his benefit, he was still wary of the negative tropes associated with being a Black man.

While listening to Dustin and Alvin, Austin was having an internal dialogue about how he expressed his gender in a different way. Devon jumped in and described how he was a dancer growing up and continues to be involved in the arts. He indicated that many of his peers interrogate his connection to the arts as indicative of him being more effeminate, and, consequently, gay. As such, Devon was interested in learning more about what the men thought about those who did not necessarily fit the masculine look or who don't necessarily express themselves in a masculine way. Relieved that he was not alone with this thought, Austin nodded to cosign Devon's inquiry. Devon went on to share, "I am not on the track team, but I am a dancer and danced through middle school

and high school. Now, I am in school to study the arts, and I know that at times when I dance, people question my identity because of the way I move." Devon described how he did not know what being called gay was when he was younger, but, how he remembered situations when people would confront him in middle school. Devon said, "People would be like 'you talk kind of funny' or 'you like dance' and because of that they would be suspicious of my sexuality." Having similar experiences as an art student in fashion, Alvin nodded in agreement with Austin. Austin, finally feeling comfortable to express his thoughts, jumped in and said, "Growing up, I was naturally feminine, okay. I remember my mom would try to adjust how I walked, telling me not to swish so much. My uncle would tell me to put more bass in my voice." Relating to the experience Austin shared, Dustin admitted:

> I struggled finding a sense of belonging in the neighborhood where I grew up. The things that were valued amongst the people inside my neighborhood were the things that made you hard or broke. Those were the things that people built community around. It was about whoever was the toughest person was the person that was in charge and whoever was the hardest. That's what was valued I guess. That's not necessarily what I value. I didn't think fighting was necessary. I was always the one that asked question, 'Oh is this really necessary for us to be doing this right now?' It just didn't make sense.

Austin was intrigued by Dustin's story and asked him where he thought that prioritization of hardness and toughness came from. Dustin shared, "To me, the fighting, the shooting, the gang related activity and other violent things they did were just the perpetuation of

hyper masculinity." Alvin nodded in affirmation to Dustin's story and described a similar perspective:

> There was a conflict between what I naturally felt and who I was expected to be. For example, not only was my family very religious, they're also very sports driven. Even just the small thing like playing sports; that was a constant fight for me because I hated it.

After Alvin and Dustin shared their perspectives and experiences, Austin continued to describe how he understood his parents' imperative to an extent: "While I understand how having a masculine gender expression can be helpful in shifting the focus from your sexual identity, I naturally express myself in a feminine way." Austin concluded:

> The way I express myself is liberating. I appreciate my family for trying to raise me to be the best man I could be, and I don't blame them for trying to alter my natural state, but now that I am comfortable in my own skin, I'm trying to reclaim that flame and rekindle my natural state to be my whole self, if that makes sense.

So, while some of the men felt that performing masculinities was something that protected them from some challenges they may face attributable to their sexual identity, Austin and Devon expressed how they favored the opportunity to be their authentic selves regardless of how their gender expression is perceived. Moreover, Dustin and Alvin discussed how aspects of their upbringing contributed to their performance of masculinities.

**Racial socialization influencing community seeking and social networking efforts.** In an effort to bring everyone into the discussion, Devon asked what the others' thoughts were on the conversation. Alex, Larone, and Aaron had been actively listening

to the conversation, while eating their meals. Alex said that he was intrigued by what everyone had shared at this point, but he wanted to shift the conversation to a different topic. Alex noted that all the other men were currently attending PWIs, but he wanted to have a deeper conversation about the racial makeup of the neighborhoods in which the men grew up. Most of the guys had grown up in predominantly White spaces, but Alex, Austin, and Dustin had a unique experience among them in that their neighborhoods were predominantly Black. Dustin shared, “We had a very close-knit community where we looked out for one another. You know we may have had our internal struggles, but if any outsider tried to do anything to anyone, we had each other’s backs. It was very familial.” He went on to say:

> Admittedly though, I have to say that it was difficult at times. I guess being smart. That was, I was kind of isolated. I was always the only person in my classes. I was always the only Black person in my classes, because of my intelligence or whatever you want to call it.

Devon nodded agreeing with Dustin’s feelings of isolation attributed to his tendency to be a labeled as high-achieving person, and often times being asked to be the spokesperson for all his Black peers. Devon explained:

> At my school people are always wanting me to explain their racism to them. Explain how they can make the school a better environment for me, or how they can be less racist, or less homophobic or a combination of both to people with privileged identities. The weight of that is tiring as it is not my responsibility.

After hearing Devon’s description of pressures associated with being labeled as high-achieving among his peers and a spokesperson for other Black students at his school,

Dustin elaborated his pervious comment about standing out because of his intelligence. He explained:

> Kids that I went to school with didn't even have access to things like guidance counselors. Even though they qualified and met all of the standards, those things weren't even brought to their attention. I think a lot of us, a lot of Black students got brushed off because of us being Black and them not expecting much of us.

Both Dustin's and Devon's descriptions of structures that contributed to their isolation and tokenization highlighted their schools' roles in perpetuating the marginalization of their Black peers. Alex chimed in sharing:

> I was surrounded by Black people all my life until I came to my college. I didn't realize how different it was to not be surrounded by Black people, to kind of be conscious about your race and kind of like your actions so you don't come across a certain way.

Alex explained that he had a hard time finding friends when he got to his college, because there were not as many Black students. He described how he was more openly gay in college and joined the LGBT support center. Through his involvement with the center, he became more social and got more friends. However, his transitioning from a space where most of his peers were Black to a space where there were not as many Black students prompted him to lean on seeking connection upon peers that shared his sexual identity. Alex went on to describe how the saliency of his Blackness impacted his experiences in the classroom in college as well:

> As a biology major, I was like one of two Black people in the classroom. So, it was really hard. I felt like I missed out on any opportunity to form study groups

> that would have potentially been beneficial. I also had to make sure that I was conscious not to present a stereotypical image that they might've had about a Black man. Like, I didn't want to come off as the negative stigma's associated with Black men like coming across as too aggressive or loud or anything. It was really sad that I had to be conscious of that.

Given the stereotypes associated with his identity as a Black man, Alex felt it was necessary to temper his behavior to make it more palatable to his White peers. As such, he found it hard to make genuine connections or have authentic interactions with his White peers.

Alvin jumped in and said that growing up around mostly White people exposed him to microaggressions early on and frequently. By the time he enrolled in college, he had already had time to develop strategies to respond to some of the challenges he faced at a predominantly White institution. Alvin's primary strategy for coping with the challenges he faced while attending a PWI was to develop meaningful connections among Black students in his college. Alvin shared, "I felt that because I had already encountered some racism in the community that I grew up in, I was ready for them when I got to college, and I spent most of my time focusing on developing connections with other Black students." Devon was silently nodding in affirmation, while the other guys were sharing their stories, but he had an experience that was slightly unique among them: "I identify as Black, but I am multiracial. My mom is Black, and my dad is White. So, I grew up around both Black and White people. I am also now aware that my family had a very different socioeconomic status than some of my Black peers' families," Devon shared. He expressed how his identity as a Black person who grew up in an upper-

middle class family seemed to make it harder for him to connect with some of his Black peers. Devon explained:

> No one's really been divorced and so the way my family works, as you know, you find someone very young, you get married, you have children, you pick a home, you stay in the community and that seems to be the tradition going all the way up to my great grandparents. I mean never having moved, you know. It's interesting in terms of being surrounded by friends where a lot of them came from a one parent household or where their parents were not consistently in the same place or battling with homelessness, and then not understanding my own privilege until I got to college.

While the men discussed their various socialization experiences, they shared a collective desire to connect with their Black peers or to find community among them at their respective institutions. For instance, Austin and Dustin said that it was helpful to see people that looked like them and learn how they navigated the university from them. The men felt that it was helpful to learn from those who looked like them, because of the likelihood of them having similar challenges attributable to their shared visible social identities was reasonably high. They agreed that there was a challenge at times when they could not find other Black queer men with whom they'd feel comfortable disclosing their identities to expand their network of support. Additionally, Devon shared how he felt a sense of cultural familiarity and connection when he was surrounded by his Black peers. Devon reflected on a trip that he took Ghana when he was in high school to contextualize his connection to his Black peers in college and described what he felt:

> I remember never feeling closer to my heritage or my ancestry and really feeling the breadth and scope of my ancestry being a part of my own identity and being able to carry them with me. I think that's when I started to recognize that even though, I've never known them, their experience is my experience, and we are united because of the blood that we share.

Devon's reflection on his experience resonated with the men, because it highlighted the importance of seeking community among their Black peers despite their varied experiences attributed to their different sexual, class, and gender identities. While seeking community among Black peers was a compensatory strategy for the men, the ways in which they were able to do so were nuanced by their intersecting social identities, specifically their sexual identity, and for some their class status.

Alex affirmed the men's analyses of their racial socialization experiences and wanted to add an additional component to the discussion. Alex agreed that the varying experiences the men had with finding community among their Black peers were influenced by their upbringing, but he wanted to have a conversation about dating and romantic connections, as well. Alex believed that sometimes developing a deep substantive romantic relationship was another opportunity to cope with challenges they faced. The men collectively sighed and laughed at the thought of discussing dating and relationships. Dustin agreed with Alex's perception and shared how he found community and support with his boyfriend and boyfriend's family when he experienced challenges with his own family when he disclosed his sexual identity to them. Dustin explained:

> After I told my parents that I was gay, they started enforcing rules. I wasn't allowed to leave the house. I didn't have money for books for school. I asked for

> like $11 for like a notebook or something like that and it was like oh you better not be using this money to see him, blah, blah, and all this other stuff. Things got so bad that I ended up leaving and moving inside of my boyfriend's house with his mother. They were welcoming, and we started supporting each other.

While, Dustin described the support he received through his romantic partnership with his boyfriend in lieu of support from his own family, Devon reflected on the challenges of establishing romantic relationships as a Black gay man. Devon jumped in and shared:

> As a Black gay man, I find it hard to establish romantic relationships. I feel like I am excluded from White men who have never had experiences with Black men either sexually or just in terms of community together. They feel like I am off limits to them. As well as Black gay men who don't view me as being Black or don't validate my Black experience. They don't feel like they are approachable to me either.

Devon explained that the city that he grew up in was very diverse racially, and that because of this the men there were more open to dating Black men, regardless of their race. He believed that their exposure to other Black gay men made them more approachable and less of a novelty to try once. He went on to explain his limited romantic experiences among his Black gay peers at his university: "It's really only Black gay men who have come from similar community makeups as mine that I feel like I can even talk to or communicate with." Devon believed that differences in his upbringing as compared to his Black gay peers limited his opportunities to establish romantic relationships with them. Several of the men enthusiastically agreed. Alex agreeing with Devon, shared his perspective:

> I think, as a Black gay man, coming to my school, it was terrible in terms of dating. Joining apps like Tinder, and of course Grindr and Jack'd, I kind of got a sense of a kind of like hierarchy of gay men you know. I found out that I was at the end of the totem pole.[7]

The men were fascinated by Alex's perspective and agreed with this idea of some form of dating hierarchy present in virtual spaces. Devon explained:

> We've been socialized to believe that European features are considered more attractive. I find that to especially be true here at my school where it is predominantly white. Anyone who gets the most attention has to meet severely Eurocentric standards of beauty. We never really discussed how racist this hierarchy is. Like, I literally have guys who pretty much would not like me or talk to me because of my race. I would say that kind of disappointed me. Even some Black men specifically preferred White men.

Alex explained how his experience discouraged his dating. Like Devon, he found dating challenging, and he went on to explain that even some Black gay men preferred White men, while, for Devon, Black men seemed to be disinterested in him because of his socialization experiences and upbringing. The men not only described some challenges in solidifying connections among their peers, but they continued to discuss how their racial socialization experiences influenced their approaches to dating and potential partners' perceptions of them, which was salient given the value of the substantive

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[7] Tinder is a mobile dating app that has a broader audience focus, while Grindr and Jack'd are mobile dating apps that are used specifically by gay men.

relationships they were able to develop with a romantic partner when they had the opportunity.

**Resisting silencing and erasure through advocacy and social change.** Engaging in dialogue about racial identity and racism prompted Devon to steer the conversation to another topic: “I am studying musical theatre, but often times I find myself distant from the course content, because my heart is constantly focused on the injustices experienced by Black people, and specifically, gay Black men. He continued, “Like the career path presents opportunities to perform on Broadway or go on national tours and I am really good at it because I have trained all my life to perform, but I can’t focus on the craft when they constantly focus on being in plays like ‘Hello Dolly’.” Devon was highlighting a conflict with his major, given the curriculum’s lack of focus on culturally relevant, content and the ways in which the coursework contended with a passion for affecting change to enhance the lives of historically minoritized groups. Devon asked the group if the conflict he experienced resonated with the group. Alvin explained how he felt a similar imperative to use his voice to advocate for change. Aaron, who had been pretty quiet up until this point, jumped in and asked the group where they thought this imperative for affecting change came from. Alvin reflected on his upbringing and how his parents had strong opinions on certain topics, and how he was silenced when his opinion contended with his parents’ perspectives. “You could literally get into an argument with my father about anything, because whatever he decides that he feels about something, that becomes the truth,” Alvin shared. Given his history of being silenced, he felt that he needed to speak up to fully use his voice:

> Matter of fact, I remember my dad, we were an hour and a half late for church because my dad insisted for some odd reason that my sister who was wearing jeans was supposed to have a slip on. I was just like, 'What is wrong with you? She has on pants.'

Similar to Alvin, Devon attributed his commitment to social change to historically not having a voice. Additionally, given the social positionality of his family and the access he had to social and academic capital, he felt that it was his duty to pay it forward. Larone agreed with Devon's and Alvin's analysis, but introduced an alternative perspective.

"Advocating for positive transformation and supporting social change to enhance the experiences of historically minoritized student groups is important, but there are times when you have to negotiate the risks associated with speaking up," Larone argued. He went on to describe an experience when he led a protest when his university cut funding and faculty for an academic program that coincidentally had mostly Black faculty, staff, and students. "I started protesting. The day of the big protest of course only a few people showed up. It's very easy to get singled out. I ended up being placed on probation at the school," Larone shared.

> While that was a traumatizing experience that placed a damper on both my academic and social experience at the school, I still walked away with my voice, even more committed to affecting social change on campus. I just believe it is important to be aware of the consequences.

Larone concluded. Learning of the challenges Larone experienced as a result of his involvement in activism on campus, prompted Devon to describe how he used writing and virtual platforms to affect positive change and resist silencing:

> I've been kind of having a lot of thoughts and have been wanting to write them out and share things that I have been thinking with other people. So, I wrote an article about dealing with microaggressions and microassaults. It was the first article I've ever written and published in *Race & Culture*. I faced some pushback from students at my college. People commented hurtful things about my article, invalidating my experiences, but in the end being motivated to write more and share about those experiences is kind of where I am at right now.

Similar to Larone, Devon faced pushback from his community, but was motivated to continue utilizing writing as a medium to resist. While Devon and Larone explained their experiences resisting silencing through writing or public protest, Austin reflected on his experiences challenging racist and homophobic assumptions of some of his peers and professors in the classroom. Austin explained:

> One day one of my professors was talking about sexual behavior and explaining that the reason HIV rates were higher among Black gay men was that they were engaged in riskier sexual behavior. I had to put the class on pause and gave the class the facts about the study that the professor was referencing. Public health has moved beyond this simplistic understanding of risk. We have moved beyond treating identity as synonymous to disease. I had to push the envelope further, even though I am not getting paid to teach any courses here. It's very annoying.

The men collectively agreed that they shared a commitment to advocating for positive social change, and that this commitment to resistance was one that they were socialized to have given historical moments when they were silenced.

**Developing imposter syndrome through socialization and its systemic perpetuation.** The conversation about families and their profound influences on the men's lives, prompted Larone to initiate a discussion about how some of their experiences connecting with respected adults impacted their self-perceptions. "I recall my father constantly telling me that I would not be good enough to get into anything better than a local state school," Larone shared. He started emotionally describing his relationship with his father to the men:

> My father was an emotionally abusive alcoholic. There were so many things that I had to deal with regarding him. Like he was a football coach and would devote his time to supporting his teammates but did not really want to spend time with me. It was pretty degrading. I remember telling my dad that I wanted to go to Johns Hopkins, because I wanted to be a doctor. He told me that that would not work for me in my life. He was demeaning and told me that I'd be better off going to community college. He even made fun of me for my science fair project. It was little jabs from him like that that were so demeaning.

He felt that a lot of his father's disinterest in his academic goals was attributed to his alcoholism and Larone's lack of interest in playing sports. While the constant reminder was demoralizing and introduced self-doubt, Larone was motivated to prove his father wrong. However, there were times in his current institution when the doubt re-emerges. Larone reflected, "There was this one time when I proposed an independent study for my

honors thesis, and my department rejected me without giving me a full reason, I felt that I for some reason wasn't smart enough to be at my school and that my dad was right." He described that for his research project he wanted to conduct a study that explored racial health disparities in infant mortalities among middle class Black mothers. While the push back for his study made him feel less adequate to conduct an independent study, Larone shared that he felt that his department was hesitant to endorse his research because of its potential implications that could uncover systemic racism as a perpetuator of the disparity. Dustin explained that he had a similar experience. As early as grade school and to the present in college, Dustin explained how there were times when teachers, counselors, and other administrators questioned his academic ability or accused him of cheating because he was doing so well academically. "Those times when my ability was challenged or questioned gave me pause at times, but definitely motivated me to continue to prove the administrators wrong."

Alvin chimed in agreeing with the analysis of Larone and Dustin. "Because people constantly questioned my ability growing up, and my parents did not leave room for debate on certain topics, I constantly feel the need to come prepared with receipts to show that I know what I am talking about," Alvin shared. The entire table laughed, and echoed, "Show me the receipts[8]." Alvin expressed how he enters spaces ready to defend himself, because he has already done the research and anticipated as many

[8] "Show me the receipts" is a vernacular phrase used often among Gay Black men that means to show or have proof of something. Several of the participants used this phrase during their interview related to the topic of coming prepared to respond to potential challenges.

counterarguments possible. Alvin went on to describe a particular situation with one of his professors in college:

> Listen, every Monday it was a three-hour fight with one professor in particular and I didn't care. I fact-checked you. We can do it. You're not going to tell me anything other than what's right. She was the kind of person who imagines that Egypt is a part of Great Britain or some shit like that, so I would have to remind her. 'Ma'am, I just need you to come back down to the map. Thank you'

Alvin described how he would not stand down to what was presented to him in classes if it was inaccurate or if there was an alternative viewpoint. The men described how their parents, school administrators, teachers, and other respected adults contributed to the development of imposter syndrome. They also described how they would use the challenges, particularly those perpetuated by racist and homophobic rhetoric, as motivation to prove systems wrong or to seek their own understanding to come armed to respond to counterarguments when they were challenged

**Highlighting a need for culturally relevant mental well-being and support resources**. Aaron, having been fairly quiet for the majority of the conversation had listened attentively to all that everyone had shared. He had experienced many of the challenges that the men discussed, and emphatically affirmed the fact that many of the men had shared experiences navigating some pretty substantial challenges. He went on to say he heard the men sharing that they had found their own personal ways to respond to the challenges they faced, but he was interested in learning more about what the men did when their internal coping strategies were not enough. There was a collective pause as everyone reflected on what supports existed for them throughout their life and at their

schools. It became very clear that the men had successfully navigated challenges on their own but had not necessarily had the opportunity to consider what types of resources external to their own efforts would have been beneficial to them as they navigated the challenges they faced related to their sexual, racial, and gender identities. While everyone reflected, Aaron went on to share how there were times when things really got hard and he struggled with imposter syndrome, body image, and depression. “When I was finally ready to work through the issues I was experiencing, I finally sought counseling on campus,” Aaron shared. Dustin asked whether Aaron’s experience with counseling helpful. Dustin’s inquiry was reflective of his own negative experience that he had when he pursued counseling on campus. Aaron confirmed that his experience with counseling was very helpful.

Leading with curiosity, Dustin invited Aaron to elaborate. Aaron confessed that he was skeptical at first:

> When I sought counseling, everyone at the counseling center was White and so I had to choose either a White man or women and I ended up with a White woman and she was a really good counselor and all, but she just couldn't understand what it was like to be a Black gay man. She was a cisgender heterosexual, married woman. Despite our different social identities, she was a great listener, and she helped me work on developing a lot of coping skills, a lot of identifying my issues, and working with me to develop solutions. Not just a one size fits all real quick fix, but long- term real solutions to problems through skills building, identity development, and professional development, and those sorts of things.

Dustin was amazed by the extent to which the counselor invested time in understanding Aaron's unique situation, despite their not having shared identities. Alvin expressed that he had a similar experience with counselors at his institution and felt that it was a resource that more people should take advantage of while they are in school, if it is available to them. He elaborated:

> One of the things that I love about my school is that they have a network of counselors, psychiatrists, and therapists that if you are actively enrolled in school that you can access at no charge. You call a number, give your school's access code, and whatever kind of help you need, there's somebody there. That's one of the things I really appreciate about my school. They genuinely care about the students there.

Alvin's positive experience with counseling at his school was its accessibility and the variety of support types that were available to him depending on his needs.

Dustin described how he sought more informal support from his coach. "When I got to my school, my track coach ended up being not heterosexual and we became very good friends," Dustin shared. He continued, "I mean there's counseling services, but I don't think that my school understands the role that being able to identify with your counselor plays inside of the therapy experience or someone who has some type of understanding of their own and your experiences. There was no one who was even, that was available." Given his lack of connection with the counseling service on campus, Dustin found a support system in his coach and some members of his track team. Dustin shared that he connected with his coach because he tried to make himself a source of support. He elaborated:

> He made himself a source of support. He sat me down and we had a conversation about my sexuality. Then, in negative situations that he saw happening on campus he made an effort to remove me from those situations. If I didn't want to sleep inside of my room with my roommate, then he'd let me stay at his place if I wanted to. He told me that I did not have to be there and that I don't have to deal with those struggles every single day. He made himself a source of support. He volunteered himself for whatever reason.

Dustin described that beyond having shared identities among some of his teammates and his coach, the fact that they took the initiative to understand his identities and create spaces of refuge when challenges arose made them viable sources of support to navigate their PWI. Like Dustin, Devon appreciated his institution's investment in his personal academic and professional goals as an individual as critical to the ways in which they provided support. Devon explained:

> It seems like my school is very invested academic success and career. I am able to make important connections at my school. They have supported my attendance at conferences. Additionally, I have the opportunity to serve on various student councils and task forces that actually influence the community.

Devon felt that having access to opportunities to inform change within his school's community presented him with a mechanism for advocating for the enhancement of available support resources for his peers. Dustin was interested in what other sources of support the men found at their schools.

Like Dustin, Alex had a mentor at his school who was a Black gay man. Beyond the shared identities, he appreciated the accessibility of his mentor, which was what

Alvin described was so crucial to the mental health support services that were available to him at his school. Alex explained:

> My mentor provided a lot of accessibility. He gave me his number just in case I needed to know about anything. So, using him as a resource was very helpful. I can text them at any hour. They would text me. I felt like I could always go to them if I needed them for sure.

Larone agreed with the perceived accessibility of resources described by Dustin, Alex, and Devon. He added that he viewed the resources available at his school as viable when he could benefit from and relate to the lived experiences of those providing the support. Moreover, he appreciated when the support resources were able to invoke some form of systemic change to positively affect the situation he was presenting. Larone explained:

> For different situations I benefited from different types of support. Some people like a complex director, an administrator in the scholarship office, or a professor were helpful if they had the ability to really listen, understand and like make things change or like use what they can to like do something about different situations.

Larone went on to describe how he was able to find support at all different levels within the structure of the university:

> I was also able to find support from custodial staff and people who work in the dining halls. It's like they're humans too. They have lived experiences and often they can give just as good advice. I could relate to many of them, because of our shared experiences navigating a predominantly White space as Black people.

Austin chimed in to share that he was able to find support within in his school as well. Specifically, the support resources to which he was most drawn were those that allowed him to share his story about sexual identity. Austin explained, "We do have resources here for LGBTQ students. I have gone to the meet and great groups and sat in a circle to share my story. The people were there to talk, and it was really good you know." Austin found the space to be very cathartic. He went on to share that his motivation for utilizing the resource was quite similar to what Devon and Larone found useful about the support resources available to them at their institutions:

> I use the LGBTQ resources, because support, support, support, support. I want to support, because I want to support the community. I want people to feel like there is support and that they have a voice. We should be engaged and be involved in these things, you know because there are people coming in the future. These things, these resources need to exist for LGBT students that come behind me.

The opportunity to share his story and contribute to organizations and support resources that benefited the experiences of LGBT students drove Austin to continue his utilization of the resource. Moreover, like Devon he felt a sense of duty to advocate for his lived experience and those who might share his experience in those spaces.

While each of the men described the support resources that they sought beyond themselves, they shared a similar sentiment that the service or resource had to be culturally-relevant and accessible. Moreover, they recognized that it may not be feasible to always find support from someone that looked like them or shared their identities, but they emphasized the importance of having a genuine interest in helping and trying to individualize the support to their respective experiences.

**Final Course: Satisfy Your Sweet Tooth**

"Look at the time, my flight will be getting here soon," Devon said in a panic. "I guess time flies when we're having fun and kiki-ing,[9]" said, Austin. The men agreed that the conversation was both enlightening and empowering, and that it was refreshing connecting with so many BGBSM in higher education who had some similar experiences. They were even more appreciative of the opportunity to reflect on their experiences through a different lens as they heard the stories that each of them shared. Devon said he wanted to continue the dialogue after the conference and invited the men to follow his Blog he started where first talked about the complexities of having a multi-racial identity. Additionally, the men exchanged social media information and committed to stay engaged to check in on how they took what they learned from *Revolutionizing Advocacy* and the brunch to affect change in their communities.

## The *Quare* Analysis of the Composite Counterstory

In contrast to the emerging resiliency narrative for Black students, the composite counterstory (CCS) captured the ways in which BGBSM responded to challenges, with a particular emphasis on their navigational strategies' contextual antecedents. Additionally, the CCS illuminates some of the individual and environmental risk factors that BGBSM face across the life course and how they describe their compensatory strategies. The CCS juxtaposed against the emerging resiliency discourse about Black students presents a larger perspective of the nuanced experiences of BGBSM students in higher education and reveals some of the systemic issues that perpetuate environmental

[9] A Kiki is a vernacular term used among Black gay men that means getting overly excited catching up with your friends. A participant used this term to show comradery the men feel when engaging with other Black gay men.

factors that warrant a need for BGBSM to be exceptionally resilient while attending PWIs. I describe the risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies illuminated by the CCS through a *Quare* analytical lens.

**Quare Theory**

Quare studies allowed me to explore how BGBSM attending PWIs present themselves while considering contextual factors and social norms. Specifically, I situated the strategies that the BGBSM discussed in the context of the institutions in which they were socialized across their life course.

**Risk factors.** Similar to the majoritarian story, the CCS captured several risk factors among BGBSM that their peers face throughout their life course and while attending PWIs. For example, the characters of the CCS highlight how disinterested or uninvested teachers, administrators, or respected adults contributed to their development of imposter syndrome. In the CCS, the characters went on to share how systems of oppression, such as racism and homophobia, perpetuated their imposter syndrome at their institution. Additionally, the CCS highlighted the ever-present need to fight to matter, because of their identities as BGBSM, and being one of a very few on campus.

In contrast to the majoritarian story about religion and spirituality serving as a protective factor for many Black students attending PWIs, the CCS highlights a more nuanced relationship with religion and spirituality for BGBSM that positions religious doctrine as a risk factor for some of the men. Given some of their previous experiences being exposed to parents or respected adults who used religion as a way to vilify them for their sexual identity, several of the men discussed the need to reconsider their relationship with religion and spirituality. Contra distinctly, the CCS did highlight how some of the

men viewed some of the religious teachings as imperative to their development of discipline and as a guide for them when they were facing challenges in life.

The CCS highlighted expectations of gender performance as a risk factor for some BGBSM. Several of the characters described how their parents would often try to correct their behaviors at a young age to make them perform a more masculine gender expression. As such, as adults they perceived that performing a more masculine gender expression as protective for them. By performing masculinity people would focus less on their identities as gay men. The CCS also highlighted how some of the men used their masculinity to stand up in the face of microinsults and macroinsults to their sexual identities. However, there were some men who shared that expectations of Black masculinity inhibited their ability to be their authentic selves. As such, they found it challenging to make meaningful and substantive connections among their peers. One participant in the CCS even highlighted how liberating it was to express themselves in a more effeminate manner, because it was more natural for them to do so.

While, the CCS portrays risk factors among BGBSM that are similar to their Black peers, it also highlights more nuanced explanations of some of the risk factors attributing the complication to the intersection of their racial, sexual, and gender identities. Moreover, the CCS presents additional risk factors that may be unique to BGBSM given their sexual identities.

**Protective factors.** The CCS highlights several protective factors for BGBSM that mirror factors among their Black peers. The characters in the CCS describe their socialization experiences across their life course as Black individuals. They specifically highlight how their exposure to racialized challenges in grade school and in their

neighborhoods prepared them for the challenges they would potentially face while navigating a PWI. In addition to challenges they faced attributed to their race, the characters in the CCS emphasize the connection they felt to those who shared their racial identity. The cultural familiarity among Black peers and the opportunity to learn from those that shared their racial identity made it important for BGBSM to have access to Black spaces while in college.

However, in contrast to the majoritarian narrative, the characters in the CCS provided an expanded perspective of their racial socialization experiences that accounts for their class, gender, and sexual identities. For instance, one character in the CCS described how his experience as a middle-class multiracial third generation college student described how his upbringing made it challenging to develop connections among his Black peers in college, who were not from the same class status. While his class status was a protective factor for him, in terms of ensuring that he had access to resources that contributed to his academic and social success, he felt that his class status estranged him from some of his Black peers. However, he valued having connections with his Black peers and chose to join a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) and become deeply involved in social justice work on campus.

Some of the characters in the CCS highlighted additional environmental factors that were protective at their institutions of higher education. One salient protective factor was the accessibility of counseling and support resources. If they had access to those resources, participants felt like they had a space to seek support when they were facing challenges on campus. Additionally, some characters highlighted the presence of LGBT resource centers as protective. One character from the CCS described how he was able to

make some of his initial social connections at his institution through his involvement in the LGBT resource center. While the characters appreciated the presence of accessible counseling and support resources, and the opportunities to engage in LGBT resource center programs and services, the CCS did highlight the need for the resources to provide culturally relevant services.

The CCS illuminates the presence of several protective factors including the presence of identity-based resources, such as LGBT resource centers, accessibility of counseling centers, and access to Black spaces. The CCS emphasized a call for culturally relevant services and resources that have a genuine interest in understanding the unique experiences of BGBSM in their efforts to providing relevant support. Moreover, the CCS highlights the importance of having access to support resources that had the capital and capacity to affect substantive systemic change among BGBSM.

**Vulnerability areas.** The CCS portrays vulnerability areas experienced by BGBSM or factors that could pose as a vulnerability in a given situation. For instance, many of the characters described being perceived as the token among their Black peers, because of their academic excellence. As such they were often selected for honors and other opportunities that were not afforded to their peers. This was perceived as a vulnerability by several of the BGBSM, because it left them isolated from their peers and contributed to the exhaustion of having the carry the burden of representing an entire identity group.

Another vulnerability area that the CCS highlights relates to family dynamics and parenting. Several of the participants describe how their parents surveilled their behavior to encourage more masculine gender expression or had strict rules that were reaffirmed

by the religious doctrines that they taught. While some of the dynamics were protective, some of the participants felt that their opportunity to develop and express themselves in a way that was natural or authentic to them was delayed until they left home. Additionally, some of the parents' strict codes for behavior contributed to the characters feeling that they had to be perfect or always on point. This was particularly true when the CCS highlighted their need to be excellent to mitigate reactions to their sexual identity.

Another vulnerability area that emerged among the characters in the CCS was related to support resources. Several participants discussed positive experience when accessing support resources such as counselors, mentors, and identity based administrative units. However, some participants described barriers to the effectiveness of those resources when they did not perceive the person or unit delivering them as paying attention to their positionalities as BGBSM in a predominantly White space. As such, they did not feel that the resource providers understood their experience or cared to take the time to learn more about their experience to better inform the support that they were providing. Consequently, some of the characters described choosing more informal social support systems, when the campus provided resources were not adequate in terms of cultural relevance.

While there are several factors that could on the service be perceived as protective, in certain situations, such factors can be perceived as a vulnerability. The CCS highlights the ways in which restrictive parenting styles, accessibility of support resources that are not the most culturally expansive, and tokenization contribute to challenges BGBSM face while navigating PWIs.

**Compensatory strategies.** While the characters in the CCS describe similar challenges that they faced across their life course and while attending their respective schools, the CCS highlights the diversity of compensatory strategies that BGBSM employ to respond to the challenges they face. Some of the characters described performing masculinity as a way to mitigate reactions to their sexual identities. For example, one character described how using his stature and racialized expectations of Black masculinity he was able to confidently respond to slights against his sexuality. Another participant highlighted his athleticism as an aspect of his identity that steered focus away from his sexual identity. While the performance of masculinity was a strategy employed by several of the characters, the CCS also provided an alternative perspective where some characters actively resisted gender role strain as a liberatory practice. It felt more natural for some of the characters to express themselves in a naturally more effeminate way.

In the CCS, characters describe seeking culturally specific organizations, such as BGLOs and LGBT resource centers, to enhance their efforts to seek community and social connection. One character even contextualized his drive to find spaces where individuals shared his identity as a Black person, by describing the connection he experienced when taking a trip to a West African country. Through his eyes the sense of community that one could experience among their Black peers had the potential to transcend the effects of their other social identities. In his case, the connection to Black peers was one that he longed for despite variations in sexual identity or even class status. The CCS highlights the ways in which BGBSM work to sustain access to the Black

community to benefit from developing social connections with those that share their racial identity in a predominantly White space.

The CCS describes the importance of affecting change and resisting silencing among BGBSM as a compensatory strategy. For instance, one character describes the importance communicating issues related to his experiences as BGBSM to administrators or other resources on campus that have the capital or capacity to contribute to some form of change to address the issue. Another character described the importance of engaging in social justice work and activism for Black students, and particularly Black queer students to affect systemic change. While characters described the imperative to advocate for change, the CCS also describes the risks that one may experience when being involved in social justice work or activism. Some may view these risks as motivating, and others may view the same risks as a deterrent to speak up. As such, it is important for institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for students to contribute to change, as one character described as an important factor in his assessment of the viability of support from his school. The CCS highlights this drive to advocate and affect change as a response to some BGBSM being silenced for a variety of reasons, including their sexual identities, across their life course.

Another compensatory strategy that the CCS highlights is the drive to perform excellence and to stay informed in order to anticipate counter arguments. For example, one character in the CCS described the importance of showing up to an argument equipped with information. His imperative to study to seek his own understanding came from his need to anticipate arguments or challenges that he faced when he disagreed with messages he received from parents or other respected adults when he was growing up. In

terms of performing excellence, the CCS highlights the ways in which characters described the importance of being the best at what they did in order to temper reactions to their identities as BGBSM. They continuously communicated a "I may be gay, but no one can question whether I put my best effort forward," rhetoric.

The CCS also highlights the proactive nature of the BGBSM in seeking support. One character described seeking therapy when an issue rose beyond the scope of their ability to address it. Having the reflexivity to know when he needed help was important. Another character described seeking and developing informal support structures among accessible administrators or mentors that took the time to try to understand their situation and support them.

Though BGBSM may face several challenges throughout their life course and while attending PWIs, they utilize several compensatory strategies to successfully navigate their schools. Some may utilize support resource that are available to them or they may explore more informal sources of support. Several may engage in work to be a part of improving the environment for themselves and those who may attend their school after them. The CCS also highlights the nuanced ways in which BGBSM perform their gender expressions to respond to challenges they may face attributable to their sexual identities.

## Chapter Summary

The composite counterstory is a critical race methodology that allows for creative representation of participant narratives. In this chapter, I developed a composite counterstory to describe the resiliency experiences of BGBSM. Then, I provided a *Quare* analysis of the composite counterstory to describe how the participants racial, gender, and

sexual identities informed their perceptions of risk factors and protective factors. Moreover, I used the *Quare* lens to situate the ways in which BGBSM responded to challenges they faced in context, using descriptions of their life histories. BGBSM described a nuanced relationship with religion and spirituality in comparison to their Black peers. They also highlighted a need to perform perfectionism to temper reactions to their queer identity. Additionally, participants shared a contradistinction between performing masculinity as a compensatory strategy and having a more feminine gender expression as a liberating experience. Some participants described a commitment to social change as a resistance to silencing and erasure. Others discussed compensatory strategies in response to impostor syndrome. The CCS concluded with characteristics and qualities that positioned support resources to be perceived as viable by the BGBSM participants in the present study. The results present a more nuanced understanding of resiliency among Black students that considers the multiple subordinated identities of BGBSM, and the results situate the ways in which BGBSM respond to challenges in context of their life histories.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

*"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." – Audre Lorde*

This study employed the composite counternarrative approach to explore two research areas: (a) the resiliency experiences of Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and (b) the roles institutions of higher education in influencing resiliency among BGBSM. Data collected about seven BGBSM attending various PWIs across the east cost of the United States (US) offer these insights to the research areas: (1) BGBSM access mental health services, their connection to spirituality or a higher power, mentors, social support networks, community among their Black peers, and leadership of advocacy and social change efforts as sources of resilience; (2) While BGBSM utilize compensatory strategies that are both distinct and similar to those employed by their peers, their experiences of risk factors and protective factors while in college are influenced by environmental and structural factors within in their institutional context that may perpetuate systems of oppression such as racism, homophobia, and limiting expectations of gender performance; (3) BGBSM racial, gender, and sexual identity socialization experiences across their life course influence the ways in which they access sources of resilience while in college; and (4) While resources and services are available to support BGBSM in their efforts to navigate their multiple subordinated identities at PWIs, some

found that available resources were not culturally relevant or did not offer strategies that contributed to systemic change or that were realistic to apply, given their individual situations. In this chapter, I situate the findings of the study in the context of literature about BGBSM and resiliency among historically minoritized students in higher education. I conclude the chapter with implications for practice, theory and research.

## Discussion

There are Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men (BGBSM) like Austin, Alvin, Larone, Devon, Dustin, Aaron, and Alex attending many predominantly White institutions (PWIs) across the United States (US). Resiliency continues to emerge as a strong framework to present an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of historically minoritized students in higher education, specifically Black students. Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from hardship (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014; Herrenkohl, 2013). Additionally, when presenting an anti-deficit perspective of the experiences of historically minoritized students, scholars present narratives of the exceptionally socially and academically resilient, noting their grit (or strength of character and/or courage) when experiencing challenges (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Moreover, when scholars explore resiliency among Black students in higher education, they often emphasize factors such as racial socialization, religious affiliation or connection to a higher power, and a focus on a greater purpose (Brown, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). However, resilience is a complex concept that considers individual and environmental risk factors, vulnerability areas, protective factors, and the compensatory strategies individuals use to navigate challenges (Herrenkohl, 2013; Morales, 2014). When exploring resiliency among historically minoritized groups we must consider the

dynamic interplay of these factors, and we must consider the nuanced experiences of individuals at the intersection of their multiple social identities. This is particularly necessary when exploring resilience among those with multiple subordinated identities, such as BGBSM (Bowleg, 2013; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Means, 2014; Miller, 2007, Mitchell & Means, 2017).

The presented counternarrative expands discourse about resiliency among historically minoritized students by centering the resiliency experiences of BGBSM, a group that often faces double jeopardy attributable to their multiple subordinated identities. To this end, utilizing *Quare* as an analytical lens emphasizes a nuanced experience of resilience that takes into consideration the unique social locations of BGBSM at the intersection of their racial, gender, and sexual identities. More over the counternarrative situates the participant's compensatory strategies in the context of their live histories. Continuing to focus on risk factors attributed to a single social identity when engaging in discourse about resiliency among Black students is limiting and narrow. It runs the risk of essentializing the experiences of Black students, silencing the narratives of an often dehumanized and vilified sub-group (BGBSM), and not interrogating environmental factors that influence resiliency. Each of the seven participants represented through the characters shared similar and distinct perspectives of threats to their academic and social success. They provided an alternative perspective of the role religion played, when accessing this source of resiliency to which many of their Black peers cling. There was an overwhelmingly shared perspective of the antecedents of perfectionism, performativity, and a commitment to resistance among the participants of the study, despite the hardships they faced. The study participants made it clear that

there were differences in their approaches to expressing their gender and that accessing viable mental health services and support resources within their institutions and beyond involved more than simply connecting to a person that shared their social identities.

In contrast to emerging literature about resiliency among Black students in higher education, the CCS captured the nuanced experiences BGBSM have with religion in spirituality in comparison to some of their Black peers (Follins et al., 2014; Kim & Hargrove, 2014). Scholars highlight being affiliated with a religious tradition, being spiritual, or having a connection to a higher power as a compensatory strategy or protective factor for Black students when they face challenges in PWIs (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). The CCS highlighted ways in which religion could be treated as a risk factor or vulnerability area that may prompt the need for BGBSM to reconcile their religion or spirituality with their sexual identity. For instance, one participant described how his family members weaponized religious doctrine to demonize and vilify him for being gay. Another participant described how his family viewed his being gay as an insult their social status among their peers and religious leaders or a blemish on their family name. Religion had the capacity to contribute to discipline and even protect some of the participants from trying situations during their upbringing, but, when disclosing their sexual identity, religion became a risk factor that they had to navigate. A salient strategy among the BGBSM in this study involved reimagining their relationship to religion and spirituality to contribute to reconciling their sexual identity with their faith.

The CCS also addresses perfectionism among BGBSM. Current resiliency discourse highlights exceptionally socially and academically resilient Black students, by describing the activities that they engage in to succeed in the context of their PWI

(Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Strategies that scholars describe include an extensive record of involvement in extracurricular activities and developing relationships with faculty beyond the classroom (Harper, 2010). The CCS participants describe how parental expectations and the population make up of their neighbors contributed to their performance of perfectionism. One participant described growing up in a small town where everyone knew everybody, so he felt like he always had to be on. Overwhelmingly the CCS describes how participants used perfectionism as a compensatory strategy to temper reactions to their sexual identity. One participant described his perfectionism being steeped in his reaction to his parent's perception of his sexual identity as a blemish on his family's name. Another participant describes how he felt the need to excel in everything that he did to avoid anyone challenging him beyond his sexual identity.

In addition to performing perfectionism to temper reactions from others toward their sexual identities, some of the BGBSM in the CCS discuss how they performed masculinity in an effort to temper reactions to their gay identity. One CCS participant described his athleticism as a protective factor that allowed him to navigate his institution freely without having to think or be confronted about his sexual identity. Another CCS participant described how he use his masculine gender expression as compensatory strategy to respond to challenges that he faced related to his sexual identity. In contrast to majoritarian narratives that describe BGBSM avoiding femininity, the participants in the CCS discussed how exhibiting a more feminine gender expression was liberating and authentic. After being constantly told to act more masculine or to talk more like a man, an

opportunity to express themselves naturally was a compensatory strategy that contributed to their ability to be authentic.

Scholars exploring resiliency among Black students in higher education emphasize racial socializations role in contributing to the resilience of Black students (Brown, 2008; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). The CCS presents a narrative that nuances this assertion. The BGBSM participants in the CCS, like their Black peers, sought community among other Black students in an effort to navigate their PWI. However, depending on their upbringing their approaches to seeking community and connection among their Black peers varied greatly. For instance, one man described how his class status made it difficult to connect with some of his Black peers despite his desire to find community among them. Additionally, several of the men in the CCS described how their tendency to excel and focus on their future sometimes caused them to be singled out among their peers, and at times distanced them from the community for which they longed. Still more, another participant described how his socialization in a predominantly White neighborhood and school contributed to his ability to be ready and responsive to microagressions he experienced in college while attending a PWI. While racial socialization is a factor that contextualizes the resiliency experiences of BGBSM, the CCS complicates this narrative by highlighting how various intersecting identities influence how BGBSM approach seeking community among their Black peers.

The CCS describes the ways in which BGBSM prioritize efforts to advocate for social change to enhance the experiences of Black gay men as a compensatory strategy. Distinct from current literature about resiliency among Black students in higher education, is the participants explication of the antecedents of this imperative and the

expressed vulnerability areas associated with engagement in social justice works as students (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). One described the imperative to leverage the academic and social capital they had attributed to their social class status, to advocate for change. Another character described how his commitment to resistance stemmed from the constant silencing he experienced growing up. As an adult he found his voice and he intended to use it. Despite this commitment to social change as a compensatory strategy, the characters admitted to some of the systemic risks that they had to negotiate as a result of their engagement in social justice work.

Several studies highlight imposter syndrome as a risk factor or vulnerability area that Black students in higher education have to overcome to excel socially and academically (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Harper, 2010). While the CCS highlights impostor syndrome as a risk factor among BGBSM, the participants describe how repeated exposure to doubtful parents, teachers, school counselors and administrators contributed to their developing and sustaining this risk factor. A primary compensatory strategy that they described to respond to this risk factor was leading with curiosity and researching to seek their own understanding and anticipate potential counterarguments. The participants felt that they needed to be “on” and one step ahead whenever there was a potential for them to enter a space in which their minoritized identities would be challenged, undermined, or silenced.

A final area that the CCS addresses, is access to culturally relevant mental health and support resources. Often, researchers describe the need for students to have support systems with individuals who look like them or share students’ social identities for counselors and administrators to understand the unique situations of students and provide

them with relevant support (Brown, 2008; Harper, 2009; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). While having a diverse support system available to students is extremely important, the CCS highlights that culturally responsive or relevant support transcends beyond having access to a resource that shares their social identities. In fact, receiving support from someone that makes a genuine effort to help, takes the time to get to know the unique situation that the student is sharing, recognizes their own identities and biases, and works with the student to develop a plan that is long-term and feasible contributed to a more positive perspective of the available resources among BGBSM.

While BGBSM have experience similar risk factors and vulnerability areas as their Black peers, the ways in which they navigate the challenges the face vary a great deal. Moreover, the compensatory strategies that BGBSM choose to employ when facing challenges and hardship are contextualized by the environment in which they were socialized and are negotiated as they face new challenges while attending college. There are also several environmental factors that contribute to the introduction of new risk factors and the perception of factors as risky or protective among BGBSM.

## Implications

Critical scholars prioritize tactical and catalytic authenticity in highlighting the credibility of their studies and findings. Catalytic authenticity refers to validity in the form of social change or emancipatory action as a result of the research (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). As such, this study has implications for practice, theory, and future research.

## Implications for Practice

For practice, there is a need for the development and implementation of more culturally expansive resources that support BGBSM at the intersection of their identities. While it is important to note that broader institutional politics and systemic changes are necessary to affect substantive long-term change, universities have opportunities to adjust existing offices that support minoritized students to increase access and viability for BGBSM. I discuss the ways in which existing institutions resources including LGBT campus resource center, Black cultural centers, and campus health services can be enhanced to facilitate access for BGBSM and historically minoritized students with multiple subordinated identities.

**Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) campus resource centers**. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Campus Resource centers (LGBT CRC) emerged in response to a need to provide resources and support for sexually minoritized faculty, staff, and students at institutions of higher education (IHE) (Sanlo, 2000; Zhang, 2011). Like many identity-based programs, services, and student organizations within student affairs, LGBT CRCs were fueled by larger human rights and social justice movements (Sanlo, 2015). While they have made strides to impact the campus climate and enhance sense of belonging among sexually minoritized students, they have also been guilty of perpetuating systems of oppression through the essentialization of identity among their constituents through their practices and operations (Sanlo, 2015). For example, participants discussed the utility of LGBT CRCs in supporting their efforts to develop community among peers who shared their sexual identity. While they appreciated access to a resource that facilitated their social connections, other participants

highlighted their desire to identify support resources that allowed for them to actively contribute to change. To this end, some participants described tensions that they had in terms of choosing to support efforts to affect change for Black students versus LGBT students. Creating a space for BGBSM to contribute to and/or lead advocacy work that addresses issues that impact both communities, could be an opportunity for LGBT CRCs to enhance their programs and services. As such recent scholars have interrogated the foundations and theoretical underpinnings of LGBT CRCs, highlighting the ways in which LGBT CRC administrators continue to treat sexually minoritized students as a monolithic group, discounting the impacts of other subordinated identities students hold (Sanlo, 2015). Prioritizing oppression related to sexual identity while not considering the intersections of race, gender, class, and ability status, reproduces and privileges the White, cisgender, male normative rhetoric that fueled and sustains the Gay Rights Movement (Cannick, 2005; Sanlo, 2015).

Therefore, when considering the experiences of Black gay, bisexual, queer, and/or same gender loving men at colleges and universities, using a critical lens to explore the theorization and sociohistorical foundations of LGBT CRCs is imperative. Black queer male students carry multiple subordinated identities. If identity-based center administrators build their operations on limiting notions of identity-based politics and multiculturalism, without disrupting dominant understandings of identity, they will fail to provide adequate support to students navigating their sexual identity development processes. While participants highlighted the viability of LGBT CRCs in facilitating social connections and providing spaces for them to share their stories, LGBT CRCs could take this a step further. Specifically, LGBT CRCs could create resource teams and

student advisory boards to provide a conduit for continuous feedback about the programs and services offered from a diverse group of constituents, including BGBSM. Additionally, participants discussed their tendency to find a particular resource more viable if it had the capacity to affect a substantial systemic change to address the issue. As such, institutions of higher education could empower LGBT resource centers with enhanced organizational capital to advocate for change at broader levels in the institution's hierarchical structure.

**Black cultural centers**. Similar to the emergence of LGBT CRCs, colleges and universities instituted racial and ethnic cultural centers (RECC) in response to new laws emanating from the Civil Rights movement (Zhang, 2011). During the same time, university administrators developed Black Cultural Centers (BCC) in response to Black student protests (Patton, 2005). While BCCs improve the experiences of Black students attending PWIs by providing a "home away from home," facilitating transition to campus, and affirming identity through educational initiatives, it is important to consider ways that BCCs can support diversity within Black communities at colleges and universities (Patton, 2005; Sanders, 2016). Participants in this study described the importance of having access to community among their Black peers. They described the sense of connection that they have with those who have a shared visible identity. As such, it is imperative for BCCS to consider and implement ways to support a diversity of experiences among Black students.

Reflecting on the fact that the Civil Rights movement had several religious leaders as advocates, Bagby and Lee (2004) highlighted how anti-gay "spiritual violence" was used by religious leaders in the movement to exclude queer People of Color on the

notion that sexual identity is a choice one can overcome. While scholars consistently affirm the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Black students, contemporary researchers, and the participants in this study, emphasize the nuanced relationship that BGBSM have with religion, when negotiating their spiritual or religious and sexual identities (Means & Jaeger, 2014; Means, 2014; Means, 2017). Therefore, BCCs must exhibit caution to avoid practices, such as the overt use of religion in programming, without considering spiritual diversity among Black students (Marsh et al., 2016). Similar to implications for enhancing support for BGBSM within LGBT CRCs, BCCs could benefit from additional institutional support in the form of expanded organizational capital to allow for BCCs to contribute to systemic change at broader levels of the institution. Additionally, if BCCS created student advisory boards and resource teams that reflected a diversity of perspectives among Black students at their institution, including the perspectives of BGBSM, they could ensure that they create an open space for the exchange of ideas between students and administrators to inform practice. Finally, both BCC's and LGBT CRCs could work together to develop and implement joint programming that reflects the diversity of experiences among students who seek support from them.

**Campus mental health and well-being services.** Students are arriving at universities expecting to seek mental health services or having previously received a mental health diagnosis for which they expect to receive ongoing treatment (Eagan et al., 2017). In response, many universities have invested in counseling center personnel to respond to the increase in demand. While the increase in the number of available counselors and psychologists may be one response to the individual mental health needs

of students, it does not respond to efforts to change the environment to facilitate well-being. These efforts can be supported by an investment in efforts led by health promotion professionals who work to increase access to relevant resources, mitigate barriers to access, and support students, faculty, and staff in their efforts to build capacity for changing the institutional environment.

Relatedly, an emerging demand among student activist to support mental well-being among students of color is to diversify racial representation among clinical psychologists and providers in campus health centers. While this is a viable approach to facilitate cultural relevance of health-related services on campuses, the presented counterstory highlights a need among BGBSM that transcends representation. Participants called for providers and support resources that make the effort to individualize coping strategies, emphasizing skills and capacity building that can be employed long-term across the life course. Moreover, participants emphasized a need for support resources to recognize their own limitations and how they may influence service provision. As such, I propose more trauma informed and equity minded approaches to both service provision and program design (Cutcliffe, Travale, &Green, 2018; Valente, Battle, & Clay, 2017). Both frameworks emphasize the importance of empowering students in the process of responding to their challenges by working with them and understanding their individual needs. Additionally, in the development of broader strategies to provoke environmental change, the frameworks emphasize the importance of centering the margins in the development of new efforts. They challenge faculty, staff, and administrators to ask critical questions such as: (1) who is being served by existing

services; (2) how does power and privilege factor into the development and implementation of an existing resource; and (3) who are we missing.

**Implications for Theory**

This study has theoretical implications, specifically around the use and application of Quare Theory and resiliency as a framework to present an anti-deficit perspective of the lived experiences of historically minoritized students in higher education. While resiliency has made substantial strides as a concept to disrupt majoritarian narratives about Black students in higher education that are masked in White privilege, there are opportunities to consider more complex conceptualizations of resiliency that examine individuals' perceptions of risk and protective factors that would present a need to be resilient. Moreover, future applications of resiliency as a framework must interrogate environmental factors that impact resilience among historically minoritized students and situate the compensatory strategies that they employ in the context of their socialization experiences across the life course to provide a more thorough understanding of how resiliency is developed over time.

Quare theory is emerging as a framework in higher education that has the capacity to capture the lived experiences of LGBT People of Color. Specifically, scholars have applied Quare Theory to explorations of spirituality experiences attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) among BGBSM (Means & Jaeger, 2013). Like the present application of Quare Theory to explorations of resilience among BGBSM, Quare challenges higher education scholars to consider the lived experiences of historically minoritized populations among Black students, presenting an expansive narrative that further disrupts a tendency to essentialize Black student experiences.

Moreover, Quare Theory emphasizes the importance of working with minoritized communities, centering their voices and experiences, to translate scholarship into practice that facilitates positive change to enhance their experiences. As such, Quare should be applied in future scholarship and practice as we interrogate the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Scholars should apply Quare Theory to other topics related to BGBSM in higher education. While the participants in the present study discuss challenges they face and how they respond to those challenges, their narratives illuminated a variety of areas that warrant more in-depth investigations. For example, a Quare analysis of the provision of campus-based support resources including: (1) Black cultural centers; (2) LGBT resource centers; and (3) mental health and well-being services is warranted. Quare's emphasis on praxis and disrupting systemic oppression could lead to substantive transformation of existing service centers, and present opportunities for the implementation of innovative strategies to respond to the needs of BGBSM.

Quare theory can also be applied to deepen our understanding of performativity both among BGBSM and more broadly among historically minoritized groups. For instance, resiliency literature highlights racialization or racial socialization as an antecedent for the development of compensatory strategies among Black students in adolescents and adulthood (Brown, 2008). A participant in this study highlighted the pressure to temper their behavior to resist people making negative assumptions about their ability given their identity as a Black man. Additionally, participants discuss the need to constantly shift their performance contingent upon their social location limited their ability to develop substantial and authentic connections with their peers. A deeper

investigation into how socialization informs the development of resiliency could shed light on how universities can work with BGBSM to develop and implement compensatory strategies that are both effective and allows them to preserve their authenticity in their efforts to seek community and connection.

**Implications for Research**

For the life history interviews, I used visual artifacts to guide the flow of the conversation. This approach allowed for participants to highlight salient moments during their life course, and at times offered an alternative approach to highlight some challenging moments or experiences that they had during their life histories. Centering the visual artifacts in the initial conversations, empowered the participants to have more ownership in the data collection process. Utilizing visual artifacts could be a key data collection method in future critical scholarship, as it aligns with the emancipatory goals of critical research. This would be particularly useful tool for research among BGBSM, given that many participants in this study discussed their desire to resist silencing and appreciate the opportunity to have their voices heard to advocate for change.

Additionally, the composite counterstory was a creative way to present the findings of this study. This approach allowed for more anonymity to protect the identities of the participants. Moreover, the approach emphasizes the importance of creating a fictionalized narrative that is rooted in real life experiences and data collected about the research participants. By reading a composite narrative, readers are encouraged to consider the larger systemic issues that are influencing the experiences of the participants and challenges readers to consider ways to address those larger issues. Given that participants described appreciating support resources that had the capacity to affect

positive systemic change, future research on the experiences of historically minoritized students in higher education could consider the application of the composite counterstory method to present findings.

Finally, several of the participants in this study described distinct ways in which they conceptualized risk and protective factors as aspects of resiliency. Moreover, participants described ways that they practiced resiliency. Similar to Nicolazzo's (2016) work exploring resiliency among Trans* students in higher education, future research should be conducted to explore how BGSBM practice and conceptualize aspects of resilience. This information could further expand discourse about resiliency among Black students in higher education.

## Conclusion

While campus resources like, BCCs and LGBT CRCs, have made substantial progress in improving the experiences of Black and LGBT students attending universities and colleges, like Shakur (2016) suggests, they must continue to grow and change with the times to sustain momentum. To this end scholars and practitioners must critically examine their histories to inform the advancement of their work. Similarly, positioning research as social justice work, contemporary scholars interested in exploring the experiences of Black students in higher education, must consider ways to leverage the full and equal participation of the diversity of perspectives within to avoid erasing the experiences of those with multiple subordinated identities (Bell, 2016). This is particularly important when examining the experiences of BGBSM attending PWIs, given the tendency of resiliency literature about Black students in higher education to

focus on how racialization (without considering the intersection of sexual identity) contributes to their resilience.

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# APPENDIX A

## Life Span Interview

### Introduction and Rapport Building

The purpose of this study is to explore resilience among Black gay, bisexual, and same gender loving men attending predominantly white institutions. In my experience, I believe it is important to get to know people in the context of their experiences. This first interview is to get to know more about you and your experiences leading up to college and should last approximately 90 minutes. Your next interview will focus more deeply on your experiences in college and should take no longer than 60 minutes.

- Explain the human subjects protections and obtained informed consent from the participant
- Remind participant of the requirements for participation.

### Brief History and Environment Discussion

The purpose of this section is to gather information is to build rapport with the research participant.

1. How long have you attended your college or university?
2. What types of things are you involved in at your school?

### Timeline activity

On a sheet of paper, please share with me significant life experiences. You can describe these experiences based on what is significant to you. If you could, please depict those experiences on a timeline. Some experiences may relate directly to your racial and

sexual identity and others may not. To reframe, please tell me your story, highlighting major milestones, decisions, or events that highlight your life.

Once you have completed the timeline we are going to have a conversation about it. I will be taking notes throughout the conversation. At the end of the conversation, I will take your timeline, and use it as I analyze the notes. If you could please include your pseudonym on the sheet. The timeline will be kept confidential in a locked office. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Brief History and Environment Discussion**

The purpose of this section is to gain information about the participant's life prior to enrolling in college. The goal is to understand how significant life experiences have impacted their behaviors in college.

1) Please describe your timeline. Probing questions:
   a) Tell me more about where you come from.
   b) What was it like growing up in your neighborhood?
   c) Tell me a little bit about your family? School? Church? Activities you were involved in?
   d) What kinds of things were most challenging growing up there? (Homophobia, Stigma, Racism, etc.)
   e) Tell me about the best parts about growing up there.
   f) What type of student were you prior to college?
   g) What was your mindset about college prior to enrolling?
   h) Why did you decide to attend your school?

i) What are the earliest memories you have of hardships (if any) experienced by you and/or family? How did you navigate these hardships?

j) What were your earliest experiences with race, gender, and sexuality? Describe any negative and/or positive experiences you had.

**Conclusion**

The next interview will focus specifically on your time in college. There may be follow up questions about today's conversation.

APPENDIX B

Focused In-Depth Interview

**Introduction**

Thank you for your continued participation in the study. This discussion will focus on your experiences in college and should take 60 minutes. Before we get started (what if any) questions or thoughts do you have about our last conversation?

**General College Experiences**

1. Describe your experience in college?
    a. How does your identity as a Black man impact your experience?
    b. How does your identity as a nonheterosexual man influence your experience in college?

**Risk and Vulnerability Assessment**

1. What major challenges have you faced as a BGBSM at your school from your first year until now? *Possible Probes:*
    a. What type of immediate challenges did you face when you started college (if any)?
    b. What issued would you describe as major barriers that may have posed a threat to your success?
    c. Tell me about a time in college when you felt like quitting or were afraid you could not finish?

d. What would you describe as the most significant threat to your success in college? Was there a role, if any, that your school played in contributing to this issue?

e. What influence, if any, do you believe your race, gender, or sexuality had on the situation?

**Responses to Challenges**

1. Explain how you responded to the problems you described? *Possible Probes:*
    a. What was your strategy?
    b. Describe any additional strategies you considered or used.
    c. Tell us about the first person(s) you went to for help or support, if any.
    d. Describe how you sought support or help.
    e. Tell me about programs, services, or resources your school provided you.
    f. Do you believe that your race, gender, or sexuality influenced your response to this issue? How so?

**Assets and Resources Assessment**

1. What other things do you think caused you to act in the way you did in response to the challenges you faced?
2. What things helped? *Possible Probe:* Tell me about resources outside of yourself such as a supportive friend, administrator, mentor, etc.
3. What external resources have been available to you in the time of challenge?
4. How easy has it been to access these resources if you wanted to?

**Understandings of Resiliency**

1. How do you describe people do well or succeed in school despite the problems they face?
2. What do you do when you face challenges in your life?
3. What does it mean to be well to you?
4. What do you and others you know do to be well (physically, emotionally, mentally, etc.)

**Closing Questions**

1. What are your suggestions for sharing the results of this study?
2. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss that we did not cover during the interview?

Thank you for your participation in this study.