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Exploring Complexities of Multiple Identities of Lesbians in a Black College Environment

Lori D. Patton¹
Symone L. Simmons
Iowa State University

Abstract

Experiences of first year female Black students who self-identified themselves as lesbian and attended a historically Black university are examined. A reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and the Multidimensional Identity Model were used to establish the framework for this study. Overall the study provided a current identity status for participants which included race, gender, and sexual orientation. Participants were five students who self-identified themselves as lesbian and Black. Each of the five participated individually in a semi-structured interview. Results of data from the interviews revealed coming in, triple consciousness, and sister/outsider as three themes for discussion. Findings revealed how the participants made sense of their identity internally and in relation to external expectations and influences as well as how they negotiated the complexities of their multiple identities in college.

Introduction

In recent years, and mostly from predominately White Institutions (PWIs), the research literature pertaining to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students has steadily increased with much of it focusing on leadership development (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005) and facilitating campus awareness (Wall, Washington, Evans, & Papish, 2000) as well as student experiences at catholic institutions (Love, 1997) and student retention in college (Sanlo, 2004). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students often feel marginalized in higher education. College represents a major developmental transition for all students and may be a time of personal growth and stress (Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006). In addition to college adjustment, balancing academic responsibilities and grappling with the developmental concerns that all students encounter, LGBT students must also navigate the development of their sexual identities. In doing so, they face challenges such as revealing this aspect of their identity to family and friends, establishing romantic relationships and coping with difference (Evans & Wall, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1998). Noted activist, scholar, and self-proclaimed lesbian feminist, Audre Lorde

¹ Address correspondence to Lori D. Patton, Assistant Professor, Iowa State University, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, N243 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, IA 50011-3195 or lpatton@iastate.edu.

Complexities of Multiple Identities

(1983) wrote *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* as the coming-of-age story of a young Black woman who explores and ultimately attains resolve with her lesbian sexual identity. Lorde's story in many ways is reminiscent of the experiences that many college women endure. Lorde often wrote about the plights of Black women while exploring racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. She discussed how the manifestations of multiple identities are interpreted by society and how they affect the lives of Black women. When Lorde wrote about Black women she acknowledged that they "have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). She further contended that "[Black women] have too often been expected to be all things to all people and speak everyone else's position but [their] very own (Lorde, 1984, p. 62). This is not always easy, especially in college campus environments that are not prepared to meet the needs of LGBT students and have not initiated efforts toward assisting them. Such is further compounded by acts of violence and intolerance directed at these students. As Evans (2000) stated, "the negative forces of discrimination and victimization directed toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people often create roadblocks to successful self-development" (p. 83). Thus, in some college environments LGBT students face an invisible existence or one filled with the threat of violence and fear of persistent prejudice that can lead to a great deal of confusion and feelings of rejection. The consequences of this invisible existence include: student failure, challenges with managing emotions, and retreat from dealing with one's own holistic development.

Considering the aforementioned challenges that these students undergo in general, there are even greater complications when racial identity development is considered. This may be particularly true for LGBT Black students who must come to terms with multiple oppressed identities. Wall and Washington (1991) asserted that students who are racial, gender, and sexual minorities often feel forced to select which identity they will recognize above all others, thus placing students in an "either-or" versus "both-all" dilemma. Receiving acceptance of their sexual identities within their racial group may be difficult, particularly if they are expected to deny or hide their sexual orientation. Personal acceptance of their sexual identities may prompt those in their racial group to label them as "race traitors." Conversely, their racial identities may be dismissed in circles where their sexual orientation holds greater value (Herek & Capitano, 1995). The conflicting nature of racial and sexual identities is even more difficult when the issue of gender subordination is also present.

Loiacano (1989) noted the difficulties that Black lesbians face in finding a community that offers simultaneous acceptance in all the salient aspects of their identity. The women that Loiacano described struggled with acceptance in both the White gay community and in the heterosexual Black community and Greene and Boyd-Franklin (1996) contended that these women experience "triple" jeopardy" in dealing with multiple forms of oppression (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation). Ultimately, the women exist within a society that unjustly discriminates against them because of their racial, gender, and sexual status. Clarke (1995) stated that, "there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship ... no one kind of response to the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians (p. 243). Fingerhut, Peplau, and Ghavami (2005) further noted that, "developing a strong lesbian identity, for ethnic lesbians, may jeopardize important sources of support, i.e., family of origin and cultural community" (p. 137).

While it is clear that the campus environment plays a significant role in how LGBT students experience college (Evans & Broido, 1999), little is known about this population at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). HBCUs have a long, accomplished history of educating,

caring, and supporting Black students. Moreover, research (Allen, 1992; Roebuck & Murty, 1993) indicates that Black students often have more positive experiences at HBCUs than their counterparts at predominantly White colleges and universities. Despite the great work of these institutions, insufficient research is available to understand the developmental experiences of LGBT populations on these campuses. Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) explained that the climate of a campus plays a role in the psychosocial development of lesbian students because of the pervasiveness of homophobia and heterosexism on campus. They stated, "Due to the presence of oppressive forces, the challenges of any psychosocial task faced by college students may be more daunting for the student who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual" (Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003, p. 847). For these reasons, lesbians at HBCUs may not face racial microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2000), which are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual), but rather gender or sexual orientation microaggressions, directed towards LGBT individuals.

We suggest that the college issue relates to the ideology of respectability, a larger discussion introduced by White (2001). Specifically, she notes that "the homophobic tendency to exclude gay and lesbian African Americans from the Black community weakens the entire community" (p. 15). Hence, HBCUs, in their efforts to educate might also promote the ideology of respectability, without necessarily considering the experiences of students on their campuses who are gendered and sexualized because they do not conform to the university's ideals of who their students should be. An example is the notion of the "Morehouse Man" (the typical student at the all-male HBCU) or the "Spelman Woman" (the typical student at the all-female HBCU) both of which may be automatically presumed to be heterosexual, rather than a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person.

Many HBCUs do not have campus LGBT services as safe-zone projects (Evans, 2002) or support centers and offices (Ritchie & Banning, 2001; Sanlo, 2000) to address oppressive sexualized forces. According to an Associated Press (2007) article republished in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, approximately 20 HBCUs have begun to implement efforts through the Human Rights Campaign, a national organization committed to providing education, support, and equal rights to address LGBT issues. However, there is no indication that such support is a priority or will continue as a long-term commitment at these institutions.

Several authors (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1998) have discussed anti-gay sentiments suggesting that same-sex relationships in Black communities are tolerated and accepted as "open secrets" as long as they are not labeled "homosexual" or given too much public attention. According to Cole and Guy-Sheftall, "there is considerable evidence ... of negative attitudes toward homosexuality within ... communities that have complex origins and manifestations" (p.168). Although limited, a number of scholars have reported negative attitudes regarding same-sex relationships (Brandt, 1999; Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Kennamer, Honnold, Bradford & Hendricks, 2000; Morales & Fullilove, 1992). Thus, a decision to reveal one's lesbian identity could lead to loss of support, both social and economic, and loss of community buffers against racism (Bridges, Selvidge, & Matthews, 2003). These scholars suggested that homophobia exists due to religious conservatism, which condemns same-sex relationships, and ill-constructed ideas that equate these relationships with deviant and unnatural behavior. Furthermore, they purported that the unwillingness of some to address homophobia coupled with LGBT fear of abandonment and ostracism often forces people to live a compartmentalized existence (Greene, 2000). Through tackling the denial and silence of this issue, Cole and Guy-Sheftall asserted that Blacks could gain a broader perspective of the LGBT community and move toward courage, acceptance, and empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

While there are theories that deal specifically with individual aspects of identity development, our framework is based on Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualization of the MMDI, and Reynolds and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model (MIM). According to Jones and McEwen, the MMDI "is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development" (p. 408). The authors suggested that the model depicts one's current identity status within a particular timeframe and represents how individuals experience their various identities. The MMDI is comprised of aspects that form both the core identity and external identities. The core identity represents an internal sense of self that is "somewhat protected from view" (p. 408) and includes personal characteristics, values, and attributes. The external identities include socially constructed labels that are defined by others, such as race, gender, and religion. External identities are considered to be less meaningful in comparison to the core identity and vary in terms of their importance and complexity to the individual.

Within the model, intersecting circles represent various external dimensions of identity that surround a person's core identity. The intersecting nature of the circles suggests that, "no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to the other dimensions" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). Each circle represents one dimension of the external identity. A dot on each circle signifies the relative importance of the external identity to the core identity. Thus, an intersecting ring designated as a racial dimension would suggest that race is salient to an individual if the dot rests close to the core identity. Similarly, a ring designated as a gender dimension would mean that gender is not as important to a person if the dot rests furthest from the core. Ultimately, the placement of the dots on each of the intersecting rings demonstrates the level of salience that external identities have in relation to the core identity.

Surrounding the intersecting circles is a large circle that represents the context within which multiple dimensions of identity, core and external, are experienced. "These dimensions become more or less salient as they interact with contextual influences such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current life experiences, and career decisions and life planning," according to Jones and McEwen (2000, p. 410). This model represents identity as a dynamic process that is constantly changing. Therefore the salience of different identity aspects may change or remain the same over time given the nature of the context in which identity is occurring.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) reconceptualized the MMDI to account for the role of meaning making in the identity process. The revised model not only accounts for how individuals perceive their identity, it also demonstrates how contextual influences are filtered through meaning-making to determine how identity is perceived. The level of complexity in individuals' meaning making determines the manner in which contextual influences are filtered. Abes et al. (2007) identified formulaic,² transitional,³ and

² Formulaic meaning-making is used to describe more simplistic filtering, where individuals rarely make connections between the various dimensions of their identity and are highly influenced by contextual factors.

³ Transitional meaning-making occurs as individuals move from formulaic to foundational meaning-making. Individuals who experience dissonance and disequilibrium in how they understand their identity experience transitional meaning-making that can move them toward more complex ways of viewing their multiple identities. While individuals may be in the process of developing foundational meaning-making capacities, their actions might suggest that they are still using a formulaic filter.

foundational⁴ as three meaning-making capacities in the reconceptualized MMDI.

Reynolds and Pope's (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model (MIM) depicts how people attempt to resolve the complexities of having multiple oppressed identities. They presented internal,⁵ external,⁶ fragmented,⁷ and integrated⁸ as ways in which identity resolution occurs and represented the choices on a quadrant graph. Additionally, they explained that, "all options are acceptable and create opportunities for positive self-esteem and pride as well as challenges to maintain an integrated sense of self" (1991, p. 179). Similar to the MMDI, they view identity as fluid and dynamic where individuals transition between the identity resolution options.

Given the nature of this study, these models are particularly relevant. The multiple identities of our participants, which we discuss later in greater detail, include race, gender, and sexual orientation within the context of a historically Black college setting. Not only were we interested in how the participants perceived themselves, we also sought to understand how they understood the intersection between their various identities, and how they understood their oppressed identities. As Abes et al. (2007) stated, "Incorporating meaning-making capacity into the model provides a richer portrayal of not only *what* relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also *how* they come to perceive them as they do" (p. 13).

Method

This study was designed to explore the developmental experiences of Black women who identify as lesbian and attend a historically Black university. The data described herein derives from a more extensive study, which examined the experiences of LGBT students at HBCUs. Given the qualitative nature of the study, phenomenology was used as a methodological approach to grasp the "lived experiences" of the study participants and how they made meaning of multiple aspects of their development while attending college (Rossmann & Rallis, 2003), in particular, the phenomenon of interest is being a Black lesbian at an HBCU. As Merriam and Associates (2002) noted, "a phenomenological study seeks to understand the *essence* or *structure* of a phenomenon" (p. 93). Thus, our goal was to learn about the essence of the participants' experiences from their unique perspectives. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the developmental experiences of women who identify as lesbians at HBCUs? What role does the environment at HBCUs play in facilitating this development? How do the women perceive their own identity? How do they negotiate multiple aspects of their oppressed identities?

⁴ Foundational meaning-making is reflective of more complexity in individuals' understanding of the relationship between how they view their multiple identities and the context in which this takes place. As a result, they are more capable of defining their own identity through an internal process, while also understanding how their multiple identities are connected.

⁵ Here individuals may actively select one specific identity with which they choose to identify.

⁶ Individuals may passively allow external forces such as family to determine their primary identity.

⁷ Individuals may identify with multiple aspects of their identity but do so in a one-dimensional or fragmented way. Here context determines how people shift between their identities; they are lived separately and in a disconnected manner.

⁸ Individuals may view all of their identities in a comprehensive style that has integrated every aspect, including oppressed identities. This view is considerably less segmented and individuals understand the intersecting nature of their identities.

Site

The participants involved with this study attended an HBCU in the Southeast, which we refer to as Alpha College; it is a private, church-affiliated institution, located in an urban area. The institution is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a Research University (High Research Activity). Approximately 4,000 students comprise the undergraduate and graduate population at Alpha College. The student population is nearly 70% women and 30% men.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of individual semi-structured interviews in which participants were asked to share their perspectives on how they identified themselves, how they negotiated multiple aspects of their identities, and what experiences prompted them to perceive their identities in a particular way. Interviews are a major source of data collection in phenomenological studies (Merriam and Associates, 2002) and were central to this process because they provided the participants an opportunity to reflect upon and share their perspectives. Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenological interviews involve open-ended questions that elicit comments from participants. Phenomenological researchers may create a structured interview protocol, with an understanding that the pulse of the interview will be guided by the emphasis that the participant places on aspects that are central to their experiences. Each participant agreed to participate in an interview as described above and a follow-up interview. Interviews lasted from one to two hours. All participants signed an informed consent document and received a copy for their own records.

The interviews occurred at Alpha College. Five participants from this institution participated in a face-to-face interview. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). The lead author of this article attended homecoming festivities at Alpha College in the fall semester of 2006 and had the opportunity to interact with a host of diverse students. During one particular event she conversed with a female student who self-identified as lesbian and invited her to participate in the study. Upon learning more about the study and asking questions, the student agreed to be interviewed the following day. After completing the interview, this same participant offered to contact friends who she believed would be interested in participating in the study. The friend of the first participant also agreed to an interview and connected the lead author with three additional students.

Participants

Other than identification as a Black student attending an HBCU and self-identified as lesbian, there were no other specified criteria. All of the participants were Black first-year self-identified lesbian students attending Alpha College. What follows is a brief description of each participant (pseudonyms are used) at the time of the interview.

Sydney was undecided about a major, but was considering pharmacy. She has two younger siblings and is originally from California. Sydney was a member of the school's basketball team. She indicated that she is a Christian and believes in God and that her family is "very much Pentecostal, straight to the Bible."

Lena is the youngest child of four and originally from Louisiana. She was interested in acting and eventually becoming a director. When asked to describe her different identities, she described personality traits that define who she is. She described herself as blunt, outspoken, and very confident and secure with herself.

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Sheila has four siblings and is from Louisiana. She was a pre-med major and was interested in becoming a micro-biologist. Sheila says that she has always liked girls and can remember liking girls as early as ages 9 or 10.

Alexis is from Maryland and has one older sibling. She was a criminal justice major. She remembered her attraction to females began in middle school. In terms of her different identities, Alexis described herself by her outward dress. She explained that people could tell she was a lesbian by the way she dressed. She says she “dresses like a boy.”

Ranita is from Florida and has four siblings. She was a business administration major with plans to start her own real estate company. She described herself as an intelligent, focused woman. She believed that it was important for her to have a passion for whatever she does in the future. She says she has always been attracted to women, but had to hide it because of society.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, the lead researcher began a thorough analysis of field notes. This particular analysis allowed both researchers time to bracket their thoughts, biases, and assumptions prior to and during the review of actual transcripts. Along these lines, Rossman and Rallis (2003) indicated that, “because you construct the study and because you ask the questions, becoming aware of your perspective (your assumptions), with its built-in interests, biases, opinions, and prejudices, is an ongoing task” (p. 36). Once the interviews were transcribed, each researcher reviewed them separately, making sure that any thoughts and ideas that emerged during the process were recorded. Phrases or quotes that addressed research questions were highlighted. Following individual analysis, we participated in a series of meetings where we discussed our interpretations of the interviews. We also challenged one another about whether our interpretations were accurate and the influence of our own experiences on the interpretations. Our frequent and in-depth discussions were necessary in order to ensure that our analysis supported the phenomenological approach, bringing forth the lived experiences of our participants. In addition, we wanted to remain reflexive throughout this process by developing “an acute sensitivity” to the influence of our perspectives in this work (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Our discussions resulted in 36 invariant constituents that were condensed into five thematic categories, three of which we chose to investigate here.⁹ We worked together to write textural and structural summaries for each participant (Patton, 2002). The textural summaries described what the participants experienced regarding the phenomenon under study, while the structural summaries described how the participants experienced their phenomenon of being a lesbian attending this HBCU. The three categories that encapsulate the participants’ experiences include: *Coming In*, *Triple Consciousness*, and *Sister/Outsider*.

Positionality and Role of the Researchers

It is critically important for readers to understand the standpoint of the authors of this article. The first author is a Black heterosexual woman who studies the experiences of Blacks in higher education and has great familiarity with HBCUs. Her goal is to frame this study in words that will help other heterosexuals better understand the experiences of Black women who identify as lesbians, while also allowing this article to serve as a venue through which their voices are heard. The second author of this article identifies as a Black lesbian woman from the Midwest

⁹ Because this research is part of a larger research project, we chose to limit our analysis here to only three categories; the other two will be examined in a later study.

who attended an HBCU as an undergraduate. She views her identities as intertwined and working together. She could relate to the women in this study on many different levels from having multiple oppressed identities to behaving in ways similar to them. As she read through the stories of the participants, she could not help but to reflect on her own life and personal struggles. She connected with the participants' stories and wanted to ensure that their voices, as well as her own were heard through their stories.

Trustworthiness

Before discussing the findings, it should be noted that a number of strategies were implemented to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. First, in order to promote authenticity in the study, member checks with participants were conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Manning 1999). Participants received a full electronic transcript from their interviews. They were asked to review the transcript for accuracy, revise or adjust their comments as they deemed appropriate and then resend the transcript to the researchers.

Two methods of peer-debriefing were also used to obtain trustworthiness in this study. As Manning (1999) stated, "An essential task of peer-debriefing groups is to check the researcher's unacknowledged assumptions" (p. 25). Three peer debriefers were asked to examine the study write-up, provide critical feedback, and look at the study from a different perspective. The first peer-debriefer identifies as HBCU Black lesbian faculty, the second as having had vast administrative experience and familiarity with student populations at HBCUs, and the third as being highly skilled in qualitative research methods. Each peer-debriefer offered feedback and suggestions to the lead researcher for strengthening the study. The lead researcher conducted a constructive and critical dialogue about the findings of the study with trusted colleagues at a professional conference in the spring of 2007. In the conference session, colleagues were solicited for feedback and asked to critique interpretations in the preliminary findings. As a result of the discussion, ideas emerged that were considered for analysis. Colleagues at this particular session were a tremendous resource given that many of them worked with LGBT students on their respective campuses, could identify with being an LGBT, or had extensive experience with working at HBCUs.

The third way in which trustworthiness was ensured was through making the process a collaborative one. The lead author of this study embraced an opportunity to collaborate with the co-author as her presence in this study was central to challenging the lead author's interpretations of the study participants' stories. Moreover, her experiences added greater authenticity to the study because she could view what the participants shared through a lens that reflected a similar perspective. A central aspect of the collaboration between the two authors was the opportunity to analyze the data and reveal the findings using both emic and etic perspectives (Patton, 2002). The co-author in particular could exercise an emic perspective because of her own experiences as a lesbian at an HBCU. Both authors could also relate to the plight of Black women. Given the outsider perspective of the lead researcher, a heterosexual Black woman, it was essential in this study to have a free-flowing and continuous dialogue that allowed us to exchange ideas, thoughts, feelings, and our own personal meaning-making experiences.

Findings

The findings include three themes that represent the identity experiences of the participants in this study. The themes are: (a) *Coming In*—participants' experiences with coming to terms with their internal comfort and understanding of their lesbian identity either in response to or in spite of external sources; (b) *Triple Consciousness*—how participants juggled three oppressed

identities of being a Black, a woman, and a lesbian; and (c) *Sister/Outsider*—participants' specific experiences on the HBCU campus.

Coming In

Earlier, we briefly introduced each of the participants and shared some information about them and their identities. In this theme we highlight some of the experiences that helped the participants to understand their identity and deal with the conflicts in their identity process. "*Coming In*" (as opposed to "coming out") focuses on how participants came to terms with their internal sense of self either in response to or in spite of how others felt about their lesbian identity. Our participants understood themselves in response to external others. The process of coming to terms with their lesbian identity was mediated by external influences. Participants discussed particular instances that brought them to a point where they understood their identity but also grappled with external expectations and influences. Three ways in which this theme was challenged are through identity dichotomy, downplaying identity, and performing.

While all participants mentioned family influences, Sydney spent considerable time discussing how the external influence of family impacted her sense of self. For example, Sydney responded to the *Coming In* process by referring to her identity dichotomously. She noted having a good side and a bad side. She stated:

There's twin Sydney and then there's Sydney. Twin Sydney is the person who is socially accepted by family and everything. Then there's Sydney. She is gay. She's the one that is the bad, evil side. She does all the bad things. She's the rebel. Between the two, there is a split, because of my family, who has not accepted my sexuality. So, I have to be one person at one time.

Sydney struggled because she had to maintain two roles. On campus, she could dress and present herself as she wished by wearing masculine attire. However, when it came to her family, she chose to wear feminine clothing. In terms of sharing her sexual identity with others she noted, "I'm comfortable with saying 'yes' if my family isn't there ... The only reason I would say, 'no' with some family is because it causes problems. It is not because I'm ashamed. I stay away from trying to create problems within the family." In this statement, Sydney is reflecting a form of "*triple-consciousness*," which we address in greater depth in our third theme. She is aware of her personal self-image, yet also painfully aware of the expectations and perceptions of herself as seen by family, because she is a woman.

Instead of responding in a dichotomous fashion, Alexis described herself as having a great deal of comfort in her identity because she had a confidant who was going through the same process. She prided herself on encouraging other people to "come out." According to Alexis, "About two years ago I realized I was happier being out as a lesbian than I was being scared and afraid that the world wouldn't accept me." While she presented herself confidently, subsequent comments suggested that she was grappling with her identity by downplaying that particular aspect. She explained,

I don't wear the flamboyant rainbow stuff ... I think that is just being what you see. I walk just like a heterosexual. I just prefer a different gender. I think I'm the same as everybody else. I don't think I do anything different. We all eat, sleep, and take showers. I really don't know the difference.

Alexis' comments suggested that she identifies with being a lesbian but also grapples with the tension between who she is and who she is not. In order to subdue the tension, she refers to herself in a hetero-normative manner so that the differences between her and "normal" others is not so pronounced. Her behavior typifies the manner in which many groups cope with oppression.

Sheila demonstrated the *Coming In* process by closing herself off to what others felt. She continued in her daily life in spite of how she was perceived. She recognized her lesbian identity but was only able to do so upon convincing herself that the opinions of others did not matter. She shared, "I'm always going to love myself for who I am. I mean I don't really care what people say about me cause I'm gonna be me regardless of whether *you* do or don't ... I'm still gonna be me." She could accept her identity if she believed that she did not care about the opinions of others. She also described situations where she responded to others by sharing that she "puts on shows" for people who stare at her when she is with another woman. As she noted, "If I'm with a girl, [people are] looking but I laugh at them pretty good. I put on shows for them purposely so they can be grossed out, because if you're not gonna, if you can't accept me for who I am, then I can't accept you for who you are."

Triple Consciousness

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, noted scholar W.E.B. DuBois (1903) described the challenge of being a Black person in the United States. According to DuBois,

It is a peculiar, this double-consciousness ... One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (p. 3).

In this study, our participants described what we refer to as *Triple Consciousness*. *Triple Consciousness* should be understood in two ways. First, *Triple Consciousness* does not necessarily suggest a conflict or sense of incongruence. Delgado (1995), in referring to double-consciousness, asserts that to some degree this phenomenon is beneficial in that individuals have the ability to see things in two or more ways, which includes seeing themselves as normal, and seeing how others view them as not normal. However, the ability to see these diverse perspectives does not automatically presuppose conflict and incongruence due to oppression. It simply suggests an awareness of the difference between how people see themselves and an awareness of how others may perceive them. Second, *Triple Consciousness* suggests that the participants' race, gender, and sexual orientation represent three different sites of oppression that *could* manifest themselves at any particular point. Thus, they experienced moments in which they recognized the presence of these three identities and at least two of the three (if not all three) converged for them in their varied experiences. They discussed experiences where they had to negotiate three oppressed identities as Black, lesbian, and women. Ranita described how she experiences these three identities by stating, "I am Black, I'm a woman, and I'm lesbian. I'm at a disadvantage more than the woman next to me. It is harder and it affects me. But, being able to take the criticism makes me stronger."

Three participants in particular, discussed how they felt compelled to succumb to societal pressures that placed their identities in conflict, as a result of their desire to succeed or be accepted. Sydney described an instance where she was crowned homecoming queen at her high school. On one hand, she felt as if she was appreciated and accepted by classmates for being herself noting, "My classmates were the most supportive people I ever met in my life." On the other hand, she was expected to conform to gender standards by wearing a dress during the homecoming events.

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She said, "I would have felt better if I had come as myself, but I knew it wasn't going to happen ... Yeah, they expected me to wear a dress. There was no question about that." Similar to the previous theme, Sydney discussed how societal expectations "creates a split personality type thing" for her. She explained, "It is already hard enough just being Black in society, then to be a woman and to be gay makes it tougher ... So I have to figure out who I want to be today."

Alexis and Ranita both described instances where they would conform to gender expectations to get ahead. For example, Alexis stated:

I have to be selective in different situations, because society is very single-minded. On a job interview, I wouldn't dress like a boy. I would dress like a girl and be frillier to the guys, because sometimes you have to sacrifice to make it on top. You have to know when and where to be who you are. Sometimes you have to put behind your private dignity to get a step further in life.

Ranita's comments were similar in how she would conform to gender norms. She stated:

I don't mind wearing a suit. I would wear a woman's suit. My professor says women have to wear a skirt and closed toe shoes. I'm uncomfortable, but I would do it. Everybody is not going to accept the way I am. But once I get to the top, I can change the world. That is how I see it.

Another example of *Triple Consciousness* occurred when participants dealt with men. They described situations where they were disrespected based upon gender and sexual identity. Alexis discussed how men would get "jealous of their girlfriends hanging" with her. Due to the insecurity of the men, she believed they confronted her and wanted to fight her. Her belief is that these altercations occurred because of her masculine gender representation. In other words, if she presented herself with a more feminine demeanor, men would be more respectful. She later described an incident in which a man disrespected her after she bumped into him. When asked if the man's response would have been different had she appeared more feminine she stated: "Then, there wouldn't have been a problem. He would have been like, 'Sorry sweetheart' and would have kept going. But since I was dressed like a boy, and he could tell I was a girl, he didn't let that go." Ranita discussed the difficulty in having a relationship on campus. She stated:

It is hard, because people look and say different comments. Me and my girlfriend were walking down the street and some guy tried to talk to her. I was like, 'She's okay; she's with me.' He called us names and whatever ... On the campus, guys can't accept the fact that my girlfriend is with me. They just don't get it. You are constantly defending yourself. People are always going to say something.

Lena noted that she and her girlfriend often experience confrontations with men who get angry when she rejects them. She stated, "They like to get mad and try to make it seem like they [are] big and bad, but little do they know she can fight better than them and almost just as much."

Lena and Sheila had similar experiences in how they were perceived by others, which triggered *Triple Consciousness*. Because they presented themselves in a feminine manner, their lesbian identity was often ignored or unacknowledged. For example, Lena noted that when people learn that she is lesbian, they respond saying, "You're too pretty to be gay."

Sister/Outsider

Sister/Outsider describes how being Black, was an accepted identity on campus, but their lesbian identity was outside or considered the “other.” The participants spent time explaining their experiences on campus and how they were treated. Their general consensus was that being an LGBT student on campus was “okay.” They made statements such as “Everybody knows. Everybody’s pretty much cool.” According to Sheila, “Like no one really cares, like I mean they care, but it’s not a problem. You know, you’re accepted.” They asserted that the students on campus were aware of a large presence of LGBT students, so much so that they referred to the college as “a gay school,” but that the faculty rarely acknowledged the presence of LGBT students.

Despite the generally positive comments they made about the campus environment, later comments suggested that participants faced some challenges. There were no campus resources in place to support them in their development. Alexis noted that without the gay club nearby, she would feel “miserable.” Sydney’s comment suggested that she had to walk on eggshells around the women in her residence hall suite because she did not want them to feel uncomfortable. Although she never openly stated that she was a lesbian, her roommates could draw conclusions from her attire and when she introduced them to her girlfriend. She stated, “I felt as if they were a little uneasy around me at times. I just don’t want to offend anybody. I want to be identified as a regular person so I don’t want anyone thinking I’m looking at them.” In addition the women in this study were good friends and used each other as a support system.

The women’s interactions with faculty and administrators offered some additional insights. Alexis described her relationship with faculty and administrators noting, “I don’t really talk to any of them. I’m not close with any of them.” She mentioned only one instance in which a teacher understood her perspective, “In my speech class, I have to wear business clothes. I asked my teacher if it was okay that I dress like a boy, and she said it was fine. I thought that was kind. I know she knows I’m gay.” All of the participants indicated that topics dealing with LGBT issues are mentioned in some of their classes. However, Sydney noted, “We don’t have a center or a special counselor or someone we can call if we feel we have a problem. We don’t have that.”

The notion of being a *Sister/Outsider* also arose in how participants dealt with their identity in the campus environment. All of the participants recognized the presence of their multiple oppressed identities. They each described difficulties that they experienced with finding acceptance of their lesbian identity within the Black community. Therefore, their attendance at an HBCU seemed to place their sexual identity and racial identity in conflict. In order to find a sense of belonging in a campus environment that did not acknowledge or genuinely validate their sexual identity, they also made their sexual identity seem less important. One particular way in which they did this was their refusal to associate themselves with blatant identifiers of being LGBT, such as rainbow symbols. They also stated that they felt no need to “flaunt” or advertise their sexuality. For example, Lena noted along these lines:

I also feel like it’s not that big of a deal. I don’t feel like everybody’s like, “Oh I’m gay” and they wear rainbow shirts that say “I’m gay or I do this or I do that.” I don’t feel like I have to do that. Yeah, it’s a part of me but at the same time I’m not going to say you know, “I’m sleeping with this dude” on my shirt so why should I say “I’m sleeping with this girl on my shirt”? It’s not that big of a deal to me.

Alexis and Sydney described how the college traditions made them feel like outsiders, particularly during orientation or welcome week programming. For example, Alpha College

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hosted an annual induction ceremony where female students were expected to wear a white dress. This expectation was upsetting to Alexis who stated, "I felt so uncomfortable in that. It was something that just disgusted me. I just couldn't do it. So I didn't go to induction. I know I missed out on the experience of inducting myself in the college, but I feel like something had to give. A compromise had to be made." Sydney also described similar challenges that occurred on campus:

On campus you might have a little issue. You might hear every now and then something like "Oh, gay people," or whatever. You might get little comments. Even during orientation, they gave a fashion show and showed how to do things and conduct yourself as a woman. I thought I was in the wrong room or something. At the end of the whole session, the lady that was doing it tried to say something politically correct, but it ended up coming off wrong. She said, "For the girls who try to sneak up guy friends," and then had a little talk about that. And then she said, "And for those who have gay roommates," and then someone asked about seeing girls in other girls' dorms. She said, "Same rules apply to heterosexuals and homosexuals. Don't sneak people into your rooms." She said, "Nobody wants to wake up seeing two girls in bed where a man is supposed to be." That is what she said. That was the only time where I felt like everybody was staring at me. I felt like they kind of beat me down. It is already hard enough to be gay, then you've got people around you that offend you, and then they have higher authorities that agree.

Sydney also discussed an orientation program that occurred in the residence hall on the first night students came to campus. All of the women participated in a special meeting. She stated:

I don't know how we got to my being gay. I guess people assumed I was gay. I told everybody I would talk about it. There was this girl sitting next to me. She was talking to me about it, and they are all asking questions. She looks kind of strange and seemed pretty "iffy." Somebody asked her if she was homophobic, and she said, "No." Then somebody asked her if everybody was to leave the room and left just me and her, would she stay and talk to me. She said, "No." She said she could not do it by herself. She just wouldn't feel comfortable. The funny part about all of this was that someone thought we should be roommates. She asked me what my name was, and I didn't know who my roommate was. When I told her what it was, she got the papers and showed me I was her roommate. After that next day, I talked to her best friend and she told me the girl decided not to come to Alpha College, because she didn't want me as a roommate.

In the interviews, participants were asked to speak about their experiences in an HBCU environment. As they spoke, their responses suggested that in this environment they identified more with their racial identity rather than their sexual or gender identities. What they described was a campus environment that was steeped in tradition with an unwillingness to change. For example, Lena stated, "Everything likes to stay in traditions. Black people don't want change. We don't like change because that's the way it is. That's just the way it is." The traditions to which she referred, like orientation, created an environment where her Black identity remained more important than her lesbian identity.

Discussion

Using the Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity along with the Reynolds and Pope (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model, we explored how undergraduates who identified as lesbians experienced their multiple

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oppressed identities. Moreover, we investigated how experiences in the college environment of one HBCU had influenced their perceptions of their lesbian identity. We also examined how participants viewed their lesbian identity and how they responded to the expectations of others' opinions of who they should be versus who they desired to be.

Abes et al. (2007) identified three meaning-making capacities that individuals use to filter or interpret contextual influences. Individuals' self-perception is contingent upon the complexity in which contextual influences are filtered. In other words, how individuals perceive themselves depends largely on the level of depth in their meaning making. The three meaning-making filters were formulaic, transitional, and foundational. The participants in this study seemed to represent transitional meaning making because "their stories reflected tensions and conflicts within their identity" (Abes et al., 2007, p. 9). Throughout the themes, it was clear that participants were aware of multiple aspects of their identities and could draw connections between them. However, they used formulaic, or more simplistic ways to deal with the tensions that existed among their identities. This was clearly seen in the *Coming In* theme, where participants expressed pride in their lesbian identity internally, but responded in ways that contradicted their pride. One participant expressed a clear feeling of double-consciousness when she responded by describing herself as having an alter ego in which her "bad" side referred to her lesbian self, while her "good" side referred to the heterosexual self that her family needed to believe was still an identity.

Other participants adopted an "I don't care" attitude as a safe space within their internal selves to accept their lesbian identity. Because they had convinced themselves for the time being that they did not care, some participants acted out publicly. If others stared at them or whispered and pointed in public places, they felt compelled to flaunt their lesbianism by behaving in exaggerated stereotypical ways. These performative acts conflicted with their downplaying of their lesbian identity in public. All participants noted that there was no need to behave in this manner, but four of the five described situations where their response to snickers or stares was to "give people something to look at." An alternative explanation for their public displays could be that the current generation of LGBT individuals has decreased feelings of shame when it comes to how others view their sexual identity. They may have instead adopted an attitude of, "We are here, so just deal with it." Thus, their public displays may make others deal with their biases and stereotypes toward them. It may also be the case that there has been greater acceptance in society of lesbians and gay men and knowing that there are openly gay people leading successful public lives provides alternative hopes for the future. Also, Internet access serves to augment or expand a community of support. While we still live in a largely homophobic/heterosexist society, young people have more options to imagine themselves than they did a mere generation ago.

Transitional meaning making was also expressed when the participants dealt with multiple oppressed identities. In the *Triple Consciousness* theme we highlighted the challenges associated with balancing multiple oppressed identities. Furthermore, Wall and Washington (1991) noted that negotiating multiple dimensions of identity is particularly difficult for people who hold a minority status as a result of their race, gender, and sexual identity. They are often forced to choose or rank these identities due to their inability to find a community of people who are accepting of all aspects of their identity. Jones and McEwen (2000) explained that identities further from the core of one's sense of self tend to be less salient, likely because they are privileged in society. However, the participants in this study had awareness of three oppressed identities but at different times these identities moved further away from or closer to their core identity.

The Reynolds and Pope (1991) Multidimensional Identity Model (MIM) best explains the phenomenon of balancing many oppressed identities by depicting four ways in which people

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with multiple oppressed identities seek conflict resolution in their identity. The experiences of the participants in this study reflected their identification with multiple aspects of their identity, wherein their choice about which identity would be most salient was determined by context. As a result, their identity was often presented in a “segmented” fashion (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Whereas Reynolds and Pope suggested that one dimension would be salient at a given time, we found that at least two of the dimensions were salient and at times in conflict in participants’ experiences. For example, the participants described situations in which their lesbian and gender identities were salient. One participant who was crowned homecoming queen typically used a more masculine gender representation in her style of dress. She described this style of dress as consistent with her personal identity as a lesbian. However, it was clear to her that recognition as a homecoming queen meant conforming to norms that conflicted with her own. The same was true for other participants who would “dress like a woman” because she felt that it was necessary to career advancement. In these instances, presenting themselves in a feminine manner not only meant conforming to a gender norm, it also meant being perceived as a woman and “women” are heterosexual, not lesbian. This conflict of dealing with two oppressed identities was representative of transitional meaning making.

Reynolds and Pope (1991) also explained that individuals’ identification with a particular aspect of their identity occurs in a rather passive fashion in which the situation dictates rather than individual choice. In this study, participants were passively influenced by the context of their institutional culture. The experiences that they described led us to conclude that the Alpha College environment was one in which their lesbian identity went unacknowledged. Thus it is possible that *they* treated this aspect of their identity as invisible as well. By this we mean that they were well aware of their lesbian identity, but in the HBCU environment it was “no big deal.” Their responses may have been reflective of the institution. This is consistent with Bridges, Selvidge, and Matthews’ (2003) notion that given multiple oppressed identities, sexual identity is the only identity that can be hidden allowing them (lesbians) to take advantage of their privileged status.

Race and gender were salient factors for these participants. They identified with Blacks on their HBCU campus and were pleased with their decision to attend Alpha College. While they noted issues of homophobia in the Black community, race was expressed as a salient aspect of their identity. Gender became salient for the participants when they had to deal with people, men in particular, who harassed or insulted them. They believed that men would not act in a disrespectful manner toward them if they were feminine looking or if they were not perceived to be in a relationship with another woman. In other words, they believed that men felt less threatened by the participants’ gender because although they looked more masculine than feminine, men could determine that they were women. As a result of knowing that the participants were women, men treated them in a more disrespectful manner. The participants’ stories allude to the notion that because of their gender, men still felt as if they could physically overpower them, a situation that might not be the same had the women been men.

Similarly, had the participants looked feminine and appeared to be in a heterosexual relationship, men would not act this way toward them. Interestingly, participants expressed race and gender as the salient identities on campus, but the majority of the stories and perspectives that they shared were laced with aspects of their lesbian identity. However, they did not portray the stories in this manner we believe, because this aspect of identity was not verbally expressed as extremely important. It was just a part of who they were. This situation provides a more detailed understanding for the *Sister/Outsider* theme. Bridges, Selvidge, and Matthews (2003) contend that

lesbianism is viewed as incongruent with expectations of what Black women should be. Thus, the participants were insiders of the campus environment because of their race. However, when either raced or gendered experiences conflicted with their lesbian identity, they became outsiders where being Black and female translated into being heterosexual. There was no flexibility for a Black woman to also be lesbian. Another explanation is that the participants may have been increasingly gaining a sense of comfort with their lesbian identity, making it unnecessary to place so much attention on it.

Conclusions

Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, and Savage (2002) explained that the intersection of sexuality, race, and gender cannot be separated because they coexist along with other variables that comprise the identity of individuals. Thus, a student who is Black, lesbian, and female, will have to manage three societally oppressed identities in addition to other forms of development. However, it is clear that these participants at this HBCU had positive experiences, but they also had identity challenges and struggles. Given that these participants were first-year students, our sense is that as they continue their matriculation in college they will have experiences that require them to explore and resolve the conflicts in their identity. Administrators at HBCUs, as well as at all institutions, should at least be cognizant of the existence of lesbian students on campus. The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature, which suggests an invisibility of not only lesbian students but also gay, bisexual, and transgender students at HBCUs. The findings are also consistent with literature that indicates that identity is a continuous process, not a series of isolated events. Another point is that peer support is the strongest resource for students given that many HBCUs do not have campus-based support initiatives in place (e.g., offices, counselors). Because participants sometimes did not disclose their sexual orientation to others, but at other times were willing to share may lend itself to the struggles of identifying as a lesbian.

The women in the study expressed symptoms of a back and forth sense of self. Oftentimes these women talked about negative familial situations. Strained familial relationships may lead to less social support for these women during a critical time of development. Any one or a combination of the problems faced by these participants may result in the onset of psychological issues with little or no support systems on campus to assist them.

We believe HBCUs can provide training for faculty and staff to explore their views of sexuality. Jones (2004) indicated that psychoeducational counseling groups have been shown to decrease stress and as such can be used with LGBT students. Also, HBCUs can reexamine their traditions; as such they may find that they exclude certain students unintentionally. In this study, for example, one participant talked about a tradition of wearing white dresses to a traditional ceremony during the first week of school. She did not participate in the activity because she did not feel comfortable wearing a dress. Inclusion is important on any college campus and discovering ways to be more inclusive could lend itself to more student involvement and participation from LGBT students. Students may feel more comfortable on a campus and are likely to be retained through graduation if they feel a sense of inclusion. This assertion is supported by Bridges et al. (2003) who argue that positive, supportive incidents increase comfort in the integration of a sexual minority identity within a college environment.

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