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Undergraduate Latino Men Speak ‘Out’

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Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter’s (2004) study of 145 lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth (ages 14-21) revealed, “Latino youths reported similar levels of comfort with others knowing about their homosexuality as did White youths. However, like the Black youths, Latino youths had disclosed to fewer individuals than had White youths” (p. 226). In Latino communities, respect for authority often keeps young LGB-identified people from coming out of the closet about their sexuality to parents or other respected individuals (Rosario et al., 2004). However, these individuals also rely heavily on family and place a high value on those relationships, knowing “they will not be abandoned” for being gay should they come out of the closet (p. 226).

Some research already exists to explore identity as a Latino gay man (Almaguer, 1993; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; McDonald, 1982) *or* the generalized “coming out process” (Adams, 2011; Coleman, 1982; Savin-Williams, 2001), but little exists to explore the intersection of these two topics (Almaguer, 1993; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). My research revealed no existing literature on how that intersection relates to an individual’s educational experiences. A lack of this type of research may contribute to the perpetuation of problems related to gender and orientation in Spanish-speaking ethnic communities.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to bring together two concepts not previously discussed relationally in the literature (Latino, gay male identity and the “coming out” process) within a framework of queer, learning, and gay identity development theory. The results provided insights to educators who deal with issues related to the LGBT community. These educators, upon considering the results of this study, may wish to examine current resources or develop new ones to match the needs of Latino gay men.

The research question explored in this study was: “How do Latino gay men use the resources and education of a gender and orientation organization, as well as their own educational experiences, to inform the ways in which they navigate the continual coming out process, specifically in relation to parents or family?” This question was examined for the explicit purpose of contributing to the conversation about how education may shape a Latino gay man’s choices when coming out to family members.

Research Site: The Yes Institute

The YES Institute’s mission “is to prevent suicide and ensure the healthy development of all youth through powerful communication and education on gender and orientation” (YES Institute, n.d.). The YES Institute, based in Miami, Florida, has educated communities across the United States and Latin America. The organization conducts over 100 presentations each year with parents and students, nurses and medical personnel, school teachers and administrators, counselors and psychologists, business executives, police departments, and other non-profits and human service organizations. As a community-based initiative founded in 1996, Project YES existed to address teenage suicide impacting young people who identified or were label as gay. The organization has since expanded to include innovative education on gender and orientation. The YES Institute, as an organization, neither encourages or discourages individuals to come out, but aims, rather, solely to educate.

The signature, two-day Communication Solutions™ course is a pioneering effort based on a communication model designed to engage all stakeholders in conversations by being inclusive of every viewpoint that is represented. The model of communication utilized by the YES Institute emphasizes authenticity and the open sharing of beliefs and fears. The model has been successful in producing results, even in the face of disagreements that continue to exist after the conversations have ended. Each of the three participants had been through this course.

Method

Data Collection

I conducted in-depth, conversational interviews (one-hour) (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) with three Latino gay men who received education from the YES Institute. I also acted as a participant-observer (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) during the YES Institute's signature Communication Solutions™ course in October 2011.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was used as a loose guide for data analysis. Drawing from queer theory (Seidman, 1994; Butler, 1990), experiential learning process theory (Jarvis 1987; Jarvis 2004; Jarvis 2006), and homosexual identity formation theory (Cass, 1979), this framework attempts to lay a foundation for understanding how Latino gay men might make informed and educated choices about coming out to family with the help of an organization designed for the purpose of educating about gender and orientation.

Queer Theory. If we can understand how it is that constructed ideals of sexuality serve to subordinate gay identities, we can understand how it is that homophobia, or perhaps to put it better—heterosexual privilege—minoritizes gay perspectives (Seidman, 1994). Butler (1990) was one of the first scholars to contend that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (p. 7). As queer theorists look to subvert patriarchy and theorize about how developmental experiences may work to influence the choice to come out, it is important to consider how past experiences may shape the learning choices and process of gay individuals.

Experiential Learning Process. Jarvis (2006) posited that adults learn contextually and tend to gain the most from developmental experiences with the potential to impact their immediate world and surroundings. Individual learning outcomes are foundationalized by past relationships and events, in which the adult was influenced—either positively or negatively—to think, communicate, respond, behave, or understand in particular way. The experiential learning process is often characterized by confusion when the learner is presented with a new or different situation in which past experiences are no longer sufficient to predict, create, or enact responses (Jarvis, 2004). The process is further characterized as taking place “in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives” (Jarvis, 1987, p. 11). Adult learners must be ready and willing to enter an experiential learning process before it can be effective because the process begins with personal recognition of inadequacy in some way.

Homosexual Identity Development. The Cass (1979) Homosexual Identity Formation Model proposes that gays and lesbians go through six stages of development in the process of coming to terms with homosexual identities. The first of these stages is characterized by confusion (not knowing what gay is); the second, by comparison (finding a label); the third, by tolerance (interacting with other gay people); the fourth, by acceptance (allowing friendships to develop with other gay people); the fifth, by pride (positive self-concept because of being gay);

and the last, by synthesis (being a proud gay person and seeing sexuality as being fluid in nature).

Participants (Pseudonyms Used)

Angel was a 20-year-old waiter with a contagious exuberance for life and a tremendous passion for acting, dancing, and having a good time. He identified as a native of South Florida, and his parents moved to the United States from Nicaragua when they were young. He had finished one semester of moderate acting school, but was not enrolled in college at the time of our interview, though he planned to go back to school in the near future. Reinaldo was a 22-year-old Spanish literature and gender studies major at a public university in South Florida. He was articulate, intelligent, and spoke to me with purpose. Reinaldo said he identifies as Latino. He moved from Cuba with his parents when he was nine years old and lived in Spain before relocating to the United States. He was in his final semester of undergraduate school and said he was interested in pursuing advanced degrees at some point after his graduation. Carlos was a 26-year-old graduate of a public university in South Florida. He worked in law enforcement for three years before deciding to go back to school again to get a degree in fashion design. He identified as Cuban and Puerto Rican, and noted that he is proud of his heritage.

Findings

All of the participant experiences seemed to be characterized by (1) questioning and categorizing the self, based on what outside forces (e.g. society, family, church, and friends) mandated as unquestionable truth about male behavior; (2) how the individuals perceived themselves compared to other people of all genders and orientations and the relationship of those perceptions to the development of attitudes, both conscious and unconscious, toward other gay people; (3) coping with their own identities and coming to terms with reality, while turning to further education to help them deal with the aftermath of familial disclosures; (4) recognition of a personal need for counsel on gender and orientation and by a genuine readiness and eagerness to learn more on the part of the participant; and (5) mastery over certain aspects of education administered by the YES Institute related to gender and orientation.

Each of the three Latino gay men seemed to talk about their identities, coming out, and familial communication about gayness in three categorical stages. First, participants wrestled and came to terms with *identifying* as a same-sex attracted individual. Second, participants—having identified their attractions for the same sex—synthesized *coping* strategies for dealing with and talking about gay identity; seeking education through both formal and informal outlets was a commonly shared experience among the participants as they moved through the coping stage. Last, participants reached a state of *being* comfortable with outness, even if their families were not comfortable with it; the YES Institute may have helped play an integral role in helping them reach that place of understanding regarding their own gender and orientation. The sections below contain one example of the strongest data supporting for these three stages. Readers may note that in each stage, only the perspective of one participant is represented. However, it should be iterated that this is the case because of space limitations, and data does exist for each participant in all three stages.

Identifying. From a young age, Angel identified with other people who were attracted to the same sex, and though at the time he did not have the language to describe what those attractions meant personally, he reflected, “I always knew that I liked—that I was just different.” Angel said, “I used to see, like, a girl kissing a girl, and I would be like, ‘What’s that? That’s so cool! I didn’t know that was possible.’” Though Angel recognized this difference, he did not

ascribe negative meaning to his own gender expression in relation to his *perceived* sexual orientation until he was further socialized within his masculine ethnic culture:

[Now my parents] tell me to stop [dancing “feminine”] because I am kind of a man, and I shouldn’t act that way, and I’m like, “What do you mean?” It’s just so natural to me to have both masculine and feminine qualities.

I think everyone [has both masculine and feminine qualities]. Honestly, there’s just different levels and balances. Like, for example, I like video games and zombies and guns, and, like, I’m not a violent person, you know, I’m not crazy like that, but I just like those things because they’re entertaining ... I like scary movies, rated-R films that have gore, and stuff that guys like, but then again, I like girl stuff, too. I like drag queens and make up and heels and music by girl singers.

Angel learned from a young age that gender expression was a clear marker that others in his family and community used to identify boys and men they believed to be gay. Being gay was, therefore, seen as an unacceptable fate because it was believed that being gay also meant being feminine and then by definition, somehow less of a man. As evidenced in the final quote from above, growing up in such an environment potentially made Angel continue to think in terms of strict, gendered dichotomy. Though he accepted that he demonstrates both masculine and feminine qualities, he labeled certain activities and behaviors as being attributable to “boys” and others to “girls.”

Coping. Reinaldo sought to create dissonance between himself and an identity as gay in his early teenage years. For Reinaldo, though he did not like feeling isolated for his more feminine gender expression, the embodiment of homophobic attitudes was a way to cope with being gay while also protecting himself from the pain he perceived would result if he were to come out:

I used to not even be able to sit in the same room as a gay person. And I just look back on that and I think, “How sad.” Just how sad. It’s like absolutely horrifying that in 7th grade I was saying I was homophobic. And that was my way of saying that I’m not gay under any conditions, like, you can’t tell me I’m gay: I’m homophobic. I remember my mom telling me, like, “Are you gay?” and me being, like, horribly insulted that she would say that to me. Like, how could you say that to your own son? And there was always this dissonance because I knew the desires that I had and I knew that this was a way of suppressing those desires, but I also knew that I really didn’t want to have them.

Reinaldo reflected that for a time he internalized some of the negative attitudes and perceptions that others had of gay people and used them as protection from reality. Though Reinaldo was out as gay to most of his high school a few years later, he was not out to his mother until shortly before his graduation. But after finding the YES Institute—Angel at 17 years old, Carlos at around 24 years old, and Reinaldo at 20 years old—each of the participants indicated some sort of shift in mindset related to communicating with family members about gender and orientation.

Being. Since becoming involved with the YES Institute, Carlos has taken several of the courses through the organization, quit his job as a police officer in favor of going back to school

for fashion design, come to understand how he can identify with his ethnic culture though he does not always feel accepted within it, and learned how to communicate with his family in a productive manner—as well as deal with their negative reactions to his orientation. Carlos noted of his career change, culture, and potential future with his family:

I've always been creatively attuned; I've always been artistic in some way. I played the saxophone, alto and tenor. I was in the marching band. I sang throughout my whole church career. I always enjoyed the arts ... I don't get bored with [fashion]. I find it needs to be interesting enough to keep my attention or I'm a gonner. I need to be challenged in some way, so for me to learn how to cut and produce and manufacture something start to finish is a whole gamut that I enjoy.

Part of setting up boundaries is getting to the point where I understand if I don't have the validation [from my parents], what next? Actually, one of my best friends was one of the guys I used to work with at the police department. He's still at the department, straight, but we were [work] partners together. We would go to calls together; we go to rides together, and through that three-year span you build a lot of camaraderie. You spend a lot of time with this individual, so I spilled my guts to him, and he spilled his guts to me, and so, it kind of—family takes a different turn. It's no longer so much blood as it is those who genuinely love you and want the best for you.

Carlos indicated several instances in which he had recently sought continued direction for his life and becoming who he wanted to be. Carlos' understanding of gender and orientation has manifested itself in a variety of ways, but he attributed the start to many of his most positive life changes to a point in time near when he began his involvement with the YES Institute.

Implications and Conclusion

In the *cultural* sense, this study may provide insight for community leaders and organizations sympathetic to the issues raised by the participants and seeking information that might enable the development of more effective resources and education about communicating about gender and orientation across gaps in cultural or social understandings of “what it means” to be gay. This study contributes three descriptive narratives detailing the individual, lived experience of oppression and stigma related to being gay in a hyper-masculine ethnic culture. In *theory*, these narratives, used in combination with other already-existing narratives and data collected in future studies may be used to develop theories or models to help explain the unique needs of Latino gay men. These narratives may also fuel additional *research* to explore how Latino gay men develop within their gay identities and what educational choices they make, if any, in the continual process of coming out to and communicating with their families. In *practice* and in *policy*, this research provides insight into how these men have used the resources at a gender and orientation education organization and how that organization has worked to aid lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning individuals, as well as their families and community. Identifying “best practices” may enable organizations to create and sustain resources and programs that will be most beneficial the gay Latino population as they continue to navigate coming out and their own gay identities. Overcoming cultural obstacles and maintaining the strong sense of community, beyond differences, within Latino families begins

with the development of education to help them unlearn what has always been believed and to accept the reality that there are other ways of viewing the world.

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