Restricted and Adaptive Masculine Gender Performance in White Gay College Men

Richard Anderson-Martinez, University of New England
Jörg Vianden, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

This article presents the results of a qualitative exploration of the performance of masculine gender identities in six gay male students enrolled at a master's comprehensive public institution in the Midwest. This article builds on the work of Laker and Davis (2011) and Rankin (2005). The findings indicate participants adapted their gender expressions to avoid harassment, discrimination, and physical harm, depending on their environment. Specific recommendations for college educators are offered.

The nation's views toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons have changed dramatically over the past decade. With frequent discussion of marriage equality, nondiscrimination laws, and the recent surge in antibullying campaigns, LGBT people have moved to the forefront of the American conscience (Chauncey, 2013; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Despite significant variation across geographic boundaries, young gay men today have grown up during arguably the most LGBT-friendly era in history, and likely view their sexuality differently than older gay men (Dilley, 2010). The body of literature on college men and masculinities is growing (Capraro, 2004; Harper & Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011), yet it does not specifically focus on the experiences of gay men in college and the process of coming out. In a foundational but now dated book, Rhoads (1994) explored the experiences of gay male students and offered a rare view into gay student culture on campus. Current research on sexual orientation in college men focuses on the experiences of all LGBT people, often failing to account for the differences in lived experiences of gay men (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Poynter & Washington, 2005).

Research on masculinity has not accounted for the experiences of gay men (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Edwards & Jones, 2009). The few studies focusing on gay college men and their on-campus culture use their experiences as parts of a broader model of masculinity that holds heterosexuality as the norm without examining how sexual orientation impacts gender identity (Adams, 2011; Harris & Struve, 2009). Several studies include information about gay men, but do not include them as participants (Pascoe, 2005; Theodore & Basow, 2000). Scholars have identified existing student development theories do not account for the differences of identity development for gay men (Harper & Harris, 2010). Finally, experiences of gay college men at comprehensive institutions are missing...
Gay College Men

entirely from the literature, as most research focuses on students at research institutions.

Three central questions guided the study:

1. How do gay college men view and define masculinity?
2. From the perspective of gay college men, how does the campus environment affect masculine identity development?
3. How do gay men describe how their sexual orientation affects their social interactions on campus?

Related Literature

The review of the literature begins with research on masculine gender norms and campus climates, continues with research on gay student experiences, and provides a theoretical framework using masculinity and LGBT theories.

Traditional Masculinities and Gay Men

Heterosexual men face strict gender confines and are expected to be competitive, emotionally restricted, aggressive, responsible, in a position of authority, rational, strong, and successful (Edwards & Jones, 2009). Men build this masculine identity by drinking excessively, refraining from expressing emotions, using homophobic epithets, and challenging established laws (Pascoe, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of male gender practices that serves to legitimate patriarchy and heterosexuality, guaranteeing the dominant position of men and heterosexuals and the subordination of women and LGBT persons (Brown & Alderson, 2010; Johnson, 2005). Heterosexual men’s sexual identities interact with cultural pressures to produce stress about their gendered selves. A stereotypically feminine man can either alter a gender role to fit his needs or exaggerate those aspects of his personality that more easily conform to hypermasculine societal norms (Brown & Alderson, 2010). Despite traditionally rigid heterosexual male gender norms, more liberal and inclusive forms of masculinity have emerged (Harper & Harris, 2010), leading to greater acceptance of gay men in society.

Since hegemonic masculinity excludes gay men from accessing power in society in ways different than their heterosexual peers, they find themselves in a position directly opposed to the structure. Access to power is nonuniform among gay men, as some men can assume heterosexual privilege by appearing to be heterosexual or by emphasizing their other social identities. The White college men in the present study certainly are afforded a level of racial privilege not given to male Students of Color. By assuming traditionally un-masculine traits or roles, gay college men can challenge and resist the system of hegemonic masculinity. Their existence is required to sustain this hegemony through their own social subordination and may not allow gay men to be authentic (Johnson, 2005). Failure to engage in hegemonic masculine behavior compromises gay men’s attempts at developing a masculine identity of their own, free or separate from hegemonic concepts. A gay and transgender participant in a study by Edwards and Jones (2009) on male gender expression stated “being gay just completely disqualifies you . . . you just have to kind of make it [gay masculinity] up on your own” (p. 216). Without options or examples to present authentically gay masculinities, gay men may defer to stereotypical heterosexual mannerisms or peer expectations.
Gay students have traditionally faced hostile campus climates compared to their heterosexual peers (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Rankin, 2005). Throughout history, higher education institutions have used various strategies to restrict the activities and identities of their gay students. Dilley (2002) traced the change in approach from gay student surveillance and expulsions in the 1960s, to mandating psychological counseling in the 70s, ending with the legal and legislative battles of the 1980s and 90s (e.g., Gay Rights Coalition v. Georgetown Univ., 1987; Romer v. Evans, 1996). This evolution is best summarized as moving from “exclusion to integration” but calls for universities to commit more fully to the success of their gay students (Dilley, 2002).

Gay-positive campus climates may encourage more gay students to come out to peers, faculty, staff, and family members. Stevens (2004) found coming out was difficult for gay men as they struggled to acknowledge their sexual identities were more than a phase, and figuring out how the rest of their identity would develop. Gay-positive environments can help to ease the transition to living as an openly gay man on campus.

Masculinity Theories

Extant gender studies research mostly focuses on the experiences of women due to a boom in gender studies and advocacy for feminism. Harper and Harris (2010) asserted “gender” has become synonymous with “women,” due in part to the assumption that existing student development research used predominantly male samples and reflected exclusively male experiences. This androcentric perspective fails to consider men as gendered beings because male gender identity development was not the focus of historical student development research (Davis & Laker, 2004). To assume contemporary student affairs practitioners and faculty have learned all they can about college men is misguided.

While gender has long been viewed through social constructivist lenses, the literature on college-aged students has only recently begun to view men in this way. Kimmel (1994, 2008) linked masculinity to homophobia, demonstrating how masculine gender identities are developed through men’s performance of masculinity to other men. Asserting masculinity is a homosocial action, one confined specifically to men, Kimmel claimed homophobia is necessary in the development of men’s identities. Heterosexual men hold gay men as the “other,” to prove themselves as strong, fearless, and cool.

LGBT Theories

Because most gay men can conform to the majority heterosexual culture, at least in part, their own masculinities may come into conflict with those of men around them. The 1990s saw a surge in studies on gay and bisexual identity development theory, including Clare (1999), D’Augelli (1994), Fox (1995), and Klein (1993). These models focus primarily on the “coming out” process, the period in which a gay person begins to identify as such. The earliest models hold clear divisions among the stages of coming out, but assert that individuals progress erratically through them, moving both forward and backward. The most renowned model in this category is Cass’s (1979) Homosexual Identity Model, which examines gay men’s development and contains six stages: confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. The theory is considered by many to be dated, but it serves a purpose here through its broad reach. The first stage in this linear model occurs when an individual is conscious of differences to peers and of feelings towards the same sex. The second stage is often isolating, with the individual attempting to rationalize thoughts of same-sex attraction but not expressing them. Stage three allows for the possibility of a nonheterosexual identity, and the fourth stage brings the adoption of this identity. In stage five, individuals may
become angry with the dominant culture, having found a community of like-minded people. In the final stage, individuals have reconciled their sexual identity with other parts of their lives and view society less dichotomously.

D’Augelli’s (1994) model is specific to college students and proposes six lifelong, fluid processes, which may occur simultaneously or individually and inconsistently: exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal LGB identity status, developing an LGB social identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering a LGB community. The first process involves an awareness of difference from the dominant culture, including denial and internalized homophobia. In the second process, a student forms a more stable personal identity, but only after being educated about stereotypes and homophobia. The next process involves connecting with peers and other members of the LGB community for support and knowledge. The fourth process focuses on the disclosure of identity to an individual’s family, which can be stressful or dangerous depending on family dynamics. The fifth aspect centers on relationships and sexual activities. A lack of role models or gay-inclusive sexual education can leave gay students with many questions and engaging in risky sexual behavior. In the sixth process, students find healthy, informed, and politically active communities on campus.

Whereas LGBT theory explores societal structures, queer theory challenges and disrupts them. Queer theorists seek to dismantle dual gender systems and promote greater freedom from gender roles by disrupting the idea that gender and sexuality are the same (Berila, 2011). Similarly, queer theory holds gender to be unfixed and fluid, reinforced culturally through performance (Butler, 1990).

Gay college men must navigate the culture of masculinity on campus, assessing current gender norms and adapting their behavior to avoid physical or emotional harm. While all men are performing masculinity to various degrees (Edwards & Jones, 2009), gay men have to be even more aware of their gender expressions while facing heteronormative and hegemonic masculine ideals.

Methods

This study was conducted using a social constructivist lens. Under this worldview, participants develop subjective, multiple, and varied meanings of their experiences and exploration of the central issue focuses on processes and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2009). The researchers used qualitative methods to explore the central phenomenon of masculine gender identity in gay college men. Gender is viewed in this study in the postmodern context, holding there are multiple ways to be masculine. Masculinities mean different things to different people and vary by context (Berila, 2011). The participants in this study all identified as men, but each used their own conceptualizations of what being a man meant.

Research Site

The research site was a midsized, comprehensive, public university in the upper Midwest. The institution enrolls approximately 10,000 students, about 90% of whom are undergraduates. Approximately 52% of students identify as female, and more than 90% of students identify as White. The institution serves LGBTQA students with a resource center housed in its student union. This center is staffed by a full-time director and a half-time graduate assistant enrolled in the institution’s student affairs preparation program. The center serves approximately 6,000 students per year via classroom presentations and panels, individual consultations, and educational programming. A very active student organization engages 2035 students weekly in LGBTQA issues.
Sampling and Participant Characteristics

The researchers used purposive sampling strategies. At the request of the researchers, the advisor to an on-campus support group for gay and bisexual men sent an e-mail invitation to group members to gauge interest in the study. One of the researchers also recruited participants through Facebook by posting in groups for the campus LGBT resource center and student organization as well as directly contacting openly gay men. The advisor’s email yielded two participants, while the Facebook postings and individual emails recruited one and three participants respectively for a total of six participants (see Table 1). One of the participants was a recent graduate of the institution. All of the participants self-identified as gay or queer, male, and White, between the ages of 18 and 25. The researchers refer to the participants by their self-chosen pseudonyms.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Identifies As</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Academic Class</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status*</th>
<th>Disclosure of Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jamal</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Alumnus</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>Out recently, only to family and close friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Lower-Middle</td>
<td>Out recently, only to peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>Out to family and friends for 7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Out to all family and friends for 6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>Out to everyone for 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>Out to only a few people on campus, but not to any family members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SES categories are defined as such: Lower Class: < $15,000; Working Class: $15,000-$29,999; Lower-Middle Class: $30,000-$49,999; Upper-Middle Class: $50,000-$99,999; Upper Class: $100,000+

Data Collection

The researchers explored participants’ experiences as gay men on campus in two hour-long focus groups. All six men participated in both focus groups. This setting allowed participants to share each other’s experiences and to co-construct meaning of each other’s statements and thoughts. In accordance with the qualitative approach, the researchers asked open-ended questions initially guided by the existing literature, but the discussion also prompted deeper probes. Sample questions included “Please describe what being masculine means to you” and “To whom are you open about your sexual orientation?” Data collection began with an initial set of questions and participants’ responses guided the creation of the second set of questions for the second focus group following transcription of the first focus group. Questions in focus group two included: “Please describe masculinity in your family of origin”, and “How does your masculine presentation change based on where you are or what you're doing?”

Data Analysis

Both focus groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed into more than 70 pages of double-spaced transcripts. The authors used representational and presentational analysis to analyze
the participants’ language (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Representational analysis focuses on what was said during the focus groups and the meaning of words; presentational analysis sought to understand how language was used. These two views complemented each other to clarify meaning and intent of participants’ words (Jones et al., 2006). The researchers read through the first focus group transcript repeatedly for content reflective of the participants’ experiences and to identify codes. Initial codes were then categorized into more general themes. The authors used emergent themes to draft questions for the second focus group. Qualitative data analysis may be conducted concurrently with gathering data, making interpretations, and writing reports (Creswell, 2009). The researchers read the transcript of each focus group several times and analyzed for codes and themes. Identified themes emerged from participants’ discussions, statements, and expressions and the researchers assigned themes an in vivo label, grounded in the language of the participants (Creswell, 2009).

**Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), congruence and consistency in qualitative procedures depend on how researchers establish confidence in the research findings. Initially, the principal researcher interacted with several participants prior to the study through on-campus social and professional activities. Second, researchers performed member checks with all participants to authenticate the accuracy of the focus group transcripts, the most critical aspect of congruence (Jones et al., 2006).

To provide elements of goodness regarding trustworthiness and to acknowledge researcher subjectivity (Jones et al., 2006), it is important to disclose that the primary investigator is an openly gay man who is interested in this topic for professional and personal reasons. Similarly, he holds personal biases and assumptions about what it means to be a gay male student. The second researcher is a student affairs faculty member who identifies as a heterosexual man and ally and whose scholarship focuses on men and masculinities in higher education.

**Limitations**

This study explored the experiences of six gay college men. Despite attempts to diversify the participant population, all identified as White, and most came from economically privileged backgrounds. The participants cannot properly represent the experiences of all gay men, especially those of color or from working-class backgrounds. Interests in personal safety and unwillingness to disclose a sexual identity may have prevented additional students from participating in this study. Participants may also have shared less information in the focus groups as opposed to individual interviews. The limited diversity is problematic and caution should be exercised regarding the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts.

**Findings**

Three themes emerged from the focus group data: (a) masculinity defined by actions, (b) concealing identity and performing masculinity, and (c) campus environment and peer relationships.

“**It’s How You Carry Yourself**” - Masculinity Defined by Actions

When prompted to provide a definition of masculinity, the participants provided stereotypical characteristics: “You work your job 9–5 . . . drink a beer and watch sports and all that other manly stuff” (Jamal). The other participants confirmed these notions of the “typical man” and added ste-
reotypical masculine actions and traits, including hunting, hiding emotion, personal confidence, physical strength, control, and not crying. For Jay, masculinity meant “how you carry yourself. Not crying, but I think there’s just kind of an air that you have about yourself that portrays masculinity.” Affirming the group’s discussion, Jamal followed, “[Masculinity is] standing up for what you’re sure of and always being able to show it and demand to be respected.”

The participants expressed their definitions of masculinity in ways similar to heterosexual men. Jay shared, “I feel the most masculine when I’m eating chicken wings and drinking beer,” a statement the other men affirmed with laughter. Exercising helped Scott feel more masculine; and several participants expressed feeling masculine when playing violent, loud, and competitive video games. Sports was a dividing topic for the group; some men indicated sports helped them feel more masculine, while others felt it excluded them from social situations. Nick said, “All the guys are out there yelling at the TV about sports and I’m just sitting there, kind of watching, but not really caring, and they’re asking me stuff and I’m like ‘No idea, sports is not my thing.’” Aside from defining masculinity, the participants also talked about performing it.

Using the “Masculine Face” to Conceal Identity

Several participants discussed concealing their sexual orientation or restricting gestures and emotions at times, from peers, professors, or family members to fit in better. Four participants discussed changing their actions or personalities to appear more masculine. Mark used “a lot fewer hand gestures in one-on-one masculine communication.” For Charles, walking on campus meant having on “this blank face and kind of just like [being] sheltered. But when I’m with my friends, I’m just open and flail my hands.” The men discussed “putting on” a masculine personality: “[in class] I put on more of a masculine personality just because I don’t know if they know [about my sexual identity], and I don’t necessarily want them making judgments before they get to know me” (Ryan). Nick added, “I guess it depends on who you’re out to. For me, if I’m not out to somebody at work or in a classroom or something like that, I just put on the masculine face.” Depending on when the participants came out and to whom, they each had several years to practice and perhaps perfect this performance.

Participants spoke of adapting their gender expressions to fit their social environment, mainly as a safety mechanism. Among friends, all but one participant indicated they did not feel the need to conceal their identity: “When I’m with my friends, I’m just who I am. I don’t really try to impress anybody and have a masculine role. I’m just myself then” (Nick).

The participants perceived they benefit from conforming to society’s expectations about how men should look and behave. Jamal stated that conforming to heterosexual gender norms “gives you an opportunity to socialize more if you’re into a lot of masculine norms, cause you have a lot of things to talk about, similar things you can do together.” Scott added that by conforming a traditionally masculine gender expression, he can “gain a unique view on heterosexual men, because [I don’t] fit the ‘mold’ of stereotypes of gay men that [heterosexual men] have heard about, and therefore break down a few walls and open peoples’ minds up a bit more.” For Jay, the benefits were simple: “I think you would gain not being asked about your sexuality,” which often resulted in uncomfortable situations for the participants.

Failing to maintain a masculine front at times left the participants facing unexpected and occasionally isolating consequences, such as feeling inauthentic and without a true sense of self. Scott provided the following representative statement:

I lose somewhat [of] a sense of who I am as an individual. By feeling like I have to change my level of masculinity between groups of straight male friends, or any other straight males I am
around that are more masculine, I am forced to “put on a show” to feel and be accepted, and therefore lose a small part of my sense of self. After doing this long enough, it almost becomes second nature to “switch” my level or masculine presence to adapt to those around me.

Performing masculinity related to how participants perceived their immediate environment comprised of peers, faculty, and staff.

**Campus Environment: When Intimidation is “To Be Expected”**

The participants spoke extensively about their experiences on campus. All of them, except Jay, had lived in residence halls during their time at the institution, and three of them still lived on campus at the time of data collection.

The students expressed feeling safe and having positive experiences on campus. Charles shared, “On campus, I feel really safe. I don’t expect bad things to happen, so I’m pretty open.” Scott agreed, but added “I might feel a little more intimidated in the weight room or over in [the physical education building], which is to be expected.” Mark and Jamal both described the campus as a “bubble” of acceptance, set apart from the community in which the institution is located. The men expressed gratitude for having a supportive environment of faculty, staff, and peers; most expressed fear for their physical safety if they publicly expressed physical intimacy with another man on campus:

I just always think judgments are being made, even if they’re not actually there. A lot of it has to do with when I came out to my parents and they were always like, “Oh, be careful,” and “Make sure you’re safe about it.” I think that just resonates in the back of my mind. (Jay)

The other participants supported Jay’s statement by nodding and verbal affirmations.

In campus residence halls, the men had varying experiences. For Charles, living in an all-male community was difficult, perceived never bonding with the other residents in his community, and instead, opted to visit female friends in other parts of his building: “I felt like I shouldn’t have been there. I didn’t hide myself, but when I was on my floor, it was to get to my room as fast as possible.”

Mark served as a resident assistant and had more positive experiences in the halls. While his residents accepted Mark as an openly gay man, they assumed his positivity and caring attitude displayed a feminine gender expression, and students referred to him frequently as “Mama Bear.” This moniker caused him to struggle to retain his masculinity in that setting: “I guess I retained my masculinity, but now looking back, it’s like I had a really overtly feminine nickname.”

The participants developed relationships with peers in markedly different ways than their heterosexual counterparts. For Jamal, Scott, and Nick, socializing with other straight men involved playing and watching sports and video games, drinking alcohol, or studying for class. Participants who viewed themselves as most masculine were more likely to identify and socialize with straight men and highly valued these relationships as a means of affirming their masculinities. Such relationships were sometimes challenging and were strained by not disclosing intimate relationships, monitoring and restricting conversation, and facing awkward questions about being gay.

The participants also had varied reactions toward friendships with women. Mark’s female friends often wanted to paint his fingernails or give him a mud mask facial despite his resistance to these activities. Forming relationships with other gay men on campus was difficult for several of the participants due to a lack of openly gay men. Participants did not perceive their relationships with gay men differed drastically from those with other friends. Some unique benefits of having another gay man to relate to surfaced, including the freedom to explore their gay identities, to discuss topics more fully, and to have confidants.
There are some nights we just need to sit on the futon and just, like, talk identity, gender, and sexuality. I don’t really have that in any of my other relationships . . . like, there’s just another tier to a nonheterosexual and a nonheterosexual relationship. (Mark)

Although the participants were well-versed in performing masculinity, they struggled to make meaning of the performance. This performance led to confusion for a few participants who felt pressured to express their gender following heteronormative cues and who felt pressured to act more masculine or more feminine to appease their friends.

Discussion and Implications

The participants described several means of navigating masculine norms on campus, including adapting physical appearances, behaviors, and attitudes to conform; resisting others’ attempts to define their gender identity for them; engaging in activism to increase confidence; using gender norms to defend themselves from social and physical harm; forming a network for safety and support; and being conscious of when to disclose their sexual orientation.

Some participants used all of these strategies, while others used only a few, depending on how close their gender expression conformed to traditional masculine norms. Several participants viewed masculinity in a fluid manner, indicating they could increase or decrease their masculinity to fit a given social environment. These findings confirm Kimmel’s (1994) conclusion that demonstrating manhood to other men validates being a man, which may be particularly difficult for gay men, who may have more than one identity to conceal or perform. The participants in the current study struggled to describe masculinity as it related to them, instead opting to explain it through interactions with peers and their understanding of societal expectations. Participants’ perceptions of peer expectations support much of the literature regarding masculine gender expression, including adapting physical appearances and actions to conform (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Gresham, 2009). The men in the present study received similar gender cues as their straight peers, but had to interpret them first through the unique lens of a gay sexual identity. This interpretation process marks the difference in how masculinity is performed in gay and straight men. The concept of this internal filter supports Kimmel’s (1994, 2008) claim that homophobia is a necessary component of developing a male identity. Even gay men must evaluate themselves on societal expectations to know what not to do. If they are to adapt quickly and avoid harm, gay men must be adept at appearing both gay and straight. Gay men are required to adapt less when surrounded by individuals with progressive views of masculinity that are inclusive of gay identities. Gay men who experience less conflict between sharing emotions and expressing affection openly express fewer negative effects and a greater likelihood to seek psychological help surface (Simonsen, Blazina, & Watkins, 2000).

The positive effects of a supportive campus climate on gay college men cannot be understated. The participants discussed their appreciation for supportive and encouraging professionals at the research site, but identified two areas of concern. While students felt generally safe, they were hesitant to show or refer to physical intimacy with another man on campus. While the participants indicated the inclusion of LGBT issues and themes in their coursework, they were introduced in potentially negative ways, focusing on “deviant” health issues or solely on oppression. LGBT people were rarely discussed in a positive or holistic manner, consistent with the curriculum at some other institutions (Lopez & Chism, 1993). The complex way the participants described their experiences as men and the degrees of confidence each had in their gender expression support the contemporary trend toward nonlinear developmental models focused on the whole lifespan, affirming the work of a variety of gay identity development models (D’Augelli, 1994; Fox, 1995; Klein, 1993; Rhoads, 1994).
This study holds implications for identity development theory, as well as for guiding gay college men to be successful inside and outside of the classroom. Gay college men are simultaneously developing both a male gender identity and a gay sexual identity. Extant development models (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994) have joined these paths together, but it may be necessary to look at each individually. A particular student may encounter an incident that sets back his sexual identity but not his gender identity. Findings from the present study suggest that gay college men face greater risks for violating masculine norms, confirming Kimmel’s (1994) and Rhoads’ (1994) work. Racial, spiritual, and other identities may affect a student’s development in other ways. Future research should explore the idea that gay identities intersect with other identities but do not necessarily develop in tandem.

The results from the current study also provide practical implications for educators working with gay college men on issues of identity development and coping mechanisms. Academic courses and cocurricular activities should be inclusive of gay men’s identity development. Faculty tasked with instructing students on gender issues should address hegemonic masculinity and its effects on all of society. This can help more LGBT people to feel comfortable coming out and motivate allies to dismantle rigid gender constructs and achieve equity for persons of all sexual orientations. Sexual assault prevention efforts must be inclusive of gay men, who are not likely to assault women, but who can serve as role models for other men and may provide support to women. Gay men can play the role of aggressor or victim, and should receive sexual assault education specific to their needs.

Services for LGBT students should actively seek to encourage gay men’s gender identity development, particularly in engaging them in conversations about gender performance, concealing sexual orientation, peer relations, and campus climate. These conversations can take place in classrooms as well as in cocurricular arenas, such as student organizations, residence halls, fraternities, or in counseling groups. Residence life professionals should train resident assistant staff to be appropriately more assertive and intentional in conversations with openly gay men and to provide safe spaces for discussion. Student affairs administrators should hire openly LGBT professional and student staff to serve as role models for students. Campus climates can become more inclusive by establishing LGBT resource centers, introducing courses that cover LGBT people and issues, by reviewing and revising policies such as domestic partner benefits, and by creating a mentoring program for gay men. Helping gay male students to identify role models on campus and to discuss their experiences with peers can provide opportunities for learning and growth. Institutions restricted by budgets or religious affiliation should create a directory of staff who identify as allies, create gay men’s discussion groups, and help gay men form clubs and organizations. Educators working directly with LGBT student organizations must seek to educate their members on issues facing the community, being mindful of their growth and the stage of development each student is at. Students just beginning to explore a gay sexual identity will need different resources and support than students engaged in on-campus activism (D’Augelli, 1994).

Many institutions have services catering only to one part of a student’s identity. Instead, college educators must call for campus-wide efforts to support students’ development in all aspects of their identity. Campus initiatives such as safe space programs must include training to address several social identities or risk creating unsafe spaces for lesbian, bisexual, and queer Women or Students of Color. Student affairs professionals and faculty must be mindful to respect each student’s gender identity, even if it conflicts with their expression of it. Performing traditional masculinity may not be a goal for all gay college men; some may choose to blend femininity in to express their authentic self or to resist homophobic oppression. Berila (2011) states that performances of diverse masculinities are important parts of students’ identities and these explorations are part of the coming out process.
Finally, future qualitative research should focus on the following three areas: situation-specific ways in which gay college men conceal their identities and possible consequences of such actions, the impact of peer interactions on gay male gender identity development, and the conception of a grounded theory describing the developmental ways gay men create masculine identities. Future research should also explore gay men’s experiences at colleges and universities outside of the Midwest or in private (e.g., religiously affiliated) institutions. This study did not specifically explore how masculinity is signaled, policed, and reinforced at the research site, presenting an opportunity for further research. Scholars using quantitative methods should compile and examine longitudinal campus climate data regarding gender expression and sexual orientation and the effect perceived campus climate has on gay male identity development.

Conclusion

Participants in the present study concealed their gay identity and performed heterosexual masculinity unless they felt safe in a comfortable climate. Masculinity performance of the participants did not vary widely from that of heterosexual men but greater consequences exist for gay men in revealing their true identity. Participants expressed their masculinity with less freedom because they feared not conforming to expected masculine norms and heteronormative expectations. College educators should be perceptive of multiple masculine expressions and create environments where gay men can live their genuine and authentic identities. A campus climate where progressive or nonconforming gender behaviors are accepted will allow gay, bisexual, and straight men to express in ways that make them feel safe and comfortable. These environments may be provided physically, as in resource centers or support groups, or verbally, through conversation and intentional statements by student affairs professionals and faculty.

References

Gay College Men


