In Search of Community: The Experiences of Black Queer Women in College

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Chapter 1: Background

Historically, educational institutions have ensured the future for wealthy, religious, heterosexual white men (Gordon, 2013). But as time has progressed and education has become more accessible, the types of students that institutions served have changed. White, wealthy, heterosexual men were no longer the default identities of all students as students became more diverse (Gordon, 2013). Since the conception of higher education There has been an increase of diversity amongst students. According to the William Institute (2018), 11% of the LGBT population is African American, and out of the African American LGBT population in America, 57% are female. While there is not an exact statistic on the number of Black queer women on campus, the above statistic allows us to infer that there is a significant population that may need support. This study examines what community looks like and how it is created for black queer women on college campuses using both intersectionality and queer theory frameworks.

For the sake of this study, "queer" is being used as the umbrella term that encompasses the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community (Rogers, 2017). Additionally, this study will use "Black" to describe all people of African descent. This study uses semi-structured interviews to further explore what it means to be a Black queer woman in college by answering the following question: What are the experiences of black queer women on campus?

Statement of the Problem

Over the last few years, many college campuses have worked to create an environment that is inclusive of queer people (Fine, 2012). Despite campus efforts to create spaces that are more queer-friendly, some of the diverse communities within the LGBT community, including Black queer women, have been excluded (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Queer resources can become more inclusive by deepening their understandings of queer students who hold multiple marginalized.

Black women are becoming more present on college campuses therefore, the diversity amongst them is increasing (Bailey & Miller, 2015). Even though queer women of color encompass many types of women, this study will only focus on Black queer women due to the aforementioned increases of black women on campus, because the number of Black women in postsecondary education is increasing and the. The aim of this study is to further provide insight in to the ways in which black queer women at PWI's experience college and how they make community.

Purpose and Significance

Given the lack of data, this study presents a significant contribution that can better inform practices and help researchers explore varied aspects of life for queer women of color. The study can further the use of intersectionality to explore black women in a higher education context. The increasing prevalence of intersectionality in higher education allows professionals to look at students more holistically.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will provide empirically based knowledge and research on the Black queer women experience. To do this, the chapter starts with a brief overview of the history of queer people in America. The section will continue on by discussing whiteness and queer people of color, followed by a

discussing queer students of color. The second part of this chapter is focused on Black queer everyday experiences, by gathering an understanding of systematic barriers and exploring Black queer womanhood in higher education.

Queerness People of color and whiteness

Queer people of color have always been a major part of queer history, but the whiteness of the queer experience has continually been the main narrative (Hillstrom, 2016). Despite the important role that people of color played in many queer movements, the typical narrative of queerness in America often excluded them. Current trends put white people as the most prominent race of queer identities, however this may be incongruent with data and reality. In fact, many people color prefer not to self-identify using queer identities for many reasons including lack of language and cultural beliefs (Ward, 2008). However according to data white people statistically make up a larger part of queer people compared to black queer people who make up 12% of the queer population (Williams institute,2019)

While the statistics are important they do not account for age group difference, resource utilization, or the way the way white supremacy prevents people of color from identifying as a part of the queer community. One of the more prevalent acts of white supremacy that these centers uphold is the false equivalency that gayness or queerness is equivalent to whiteness (Ward, 2008). Many narratives of the queer experience are white normative (coming out the closet and sexual identities) because these narratives were created from a white European lens that did not include the experience of queer people of color; this white normativity further centers whiteness in the queer community (Ward, 2008). Centering whiteness even extends to college campus.

For queer students of color, there are certain barriers that cause difficulties during their educational journeys. For example, in a review of literature by Duran (2018), suggested that some of the issues that queer students of color are experiencing are coming out and finding support; campus climate and navigating singular identity spaces; lack of resources and representation; and individual complexities. For this study, it is particularly important to consider campus climate, the navigation of singular identity spaces, and the lack of resources and representation due to the known impact that these elements have on student success. Additionally, Duran (2018), reveals that campus queer spaces often do not provide resources that consider the intersecting needs of queer students of color and could benefit from having more staff members of color.

Due to the lack of resources queer students of color usually take on draining activist roles (Renn, 2007). According to Miller and Vaccaro (2016), these standards from leadership also separate queer students of color and cause difficulties with friendship and relationship-making. Building relationships with other queer students of color is important because bonding with like-minded persons can help queer students navigate institutions. But for queer students of color, that can be hard because of the lack of visibility on campus paired with lack of an engaging campus environment (Pastrana, 2014; Hudson, 2015). Thus, it becomes difficult for queer students of color to connect with one another.

According to Vaccaro (2012), it is the duty of the higher education professional to ensure an affirming and engaging queer experience for all queer students, including queer students of color. In queer centers specifically, professionals and students have employed a tolerance approach to diversity. According to Ward (2008), in order for centers to be better engaged with racially diverse people, centers must first ensure that the management reflects racial diversity as well. While Ward's (2008) study was not conducted in a higher education setting, the same idea could benefit queer spaces on college campuses. For example, many of the people interfacing with students are the student workers. Centers would benefit if all staff were at least knowledgeable about intersectionality in order to ensure that the center is racially accepting (Tillapaugh & Castellano, 2018). According to Duran (2018), problems created by a lack of not belonging were less prominent if students had formalized institution-sponsored events and programming. This is especially the case for students with multiple marginalized identities like Black

queer women.

Queer Black Women

While this study specifically looks at the needs of queer Black women attaining higher education, it is important to understand their experiences as a population in a non-educational setting to further contextualize this study. Black queer women often need support relating to situations related to their gender, race, and queer identity (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Due to the overwhelming whiteness in queer spaces, finding that support can be difficult. In order to be fully inclusive of the needs of Black queer women, queer spaces need to be cognizant and address the issues that many Black queer women face.

One of the issues that many Black queer women faces is harassment by men trying to "coax them out" of homosexuality and convince queer women of their straight identity (Brooks, 2016). As Black woman's queer identity becomes more visibly expressed their chances of harassment increase. For example, in 2014, a young Black queer woman named Brittany Cosby was killed because of her masculine appearance and her refusal to have sex with a man (Isoke, 2013). Black queer women are often forced to conform or hide their sexual orientation out of fear. The idea of hiding your queerness is important to consider when thinking about what prevents community formation for black queer women and the one may mange their identity.

A study by Szymanki and Meyer (2008) examined the way racism and heterosexism correlate with psychiatric distress in 91 women who identified as African American whose sexuality was marginalized; the study intentionally examined distress in a disaggregated manner. The study measured racist events, heterosexist events, internalized racism, and internalized heterosexism, and found a positive correlation between racist events, heterosexist events, internalized heterosexism, and distress. Szymanki and Meyer (2008) also found that conversation and awareness of intersectional identities may benefit Black queer woman clients by allowing them to talk through some of the issues related to their identities. This study provided an explanation of the way multiple marginalization may greatly affect a Black queer woman's mental health and wellbeing.

Currently, there is not enough research about the Black queer woman college experience. The research that is available does show that the needs of black queer women are unique. One of the available studies has shown that their needs, experience, and barriers are all due to the interplay of their multiple minority identities (Fine, 2004). According to Winkle-Wagner (2015), studies often look at Black women's experiences solely through the lenses of race, gender, sexual orientation, or academic success. This approach does not account the way intersecting identities can affect the student or institution type.

Black queer women attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) may be able to explore their sexual orientation more easily than those at historically black colleges and institutions (HBCU), but they still might have issues related to support (Bailey & Miller, 2015). At PWIs black queer women might have to deal with racism, homophobia, and sexism while still focusing on academics (Fine, 2004). Black queer women at both PWIs and HBCUs struggle to find community and support (Bailey & Miller; Fine, 2004). For Black queer women, finding support and community difficult because of the lack of practical understanding of how race, gender and homophobia impacts they experiences. On campus, cultural centers often disempower Black queer women by forcing them to pick between their queer identity and their black identity, thus encouraging Black queer women to find other means of support (Worthen, 2018). Black queer students will create support systems or peer groups if those systems are not put in place by campus (Means et al., 2017).

By first looking at the experiences of Black queer women generally, this section highlights some of the issues that Black queer women are dealing with and the resources that they need. This section also looked at the experiences of Black queer women in college. While there is still not very much

research on Black queer women in college, this chapter provides an overview of their experiences and needs. To further understand these experience queer theory and intersectionality are used to expand on participants experiences.

Theory

Queer theory allows researchers to further explore the connection between sexual orientation and gender (Halperin, 2008). This study uses queer theory to better understand the ways in which participants create meaningful relationships and understand their queer identities. However, queer theory alone cannot depict complete experiences of Black queer women in college. By using both intersectionality and queer theory, we can gain a fuller understanding of their experiences. According to Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality is the idea that multiple identities extend over one another to create a new identity that differs from singular identities. This concept allows researchers to look at people as complex individuals with multiple identities that affect one another. Using an intersectional approach explores the complexity of intragroup issues. By looking at the participants' experiences with an intersectional lens, we will be able to better understand their meaning-making, experiences, and needs.

Chapter 3: Methods

As stated above, the goal of this study is to further understand community for queer Black women at a PWI by answering the following question: What is the current state of Black queer women in college? To do this, both an intersectional framework and queer theory are used as theoretical lenses. This study uses a phenomenological approach to analyze the data and to create the research design. The aim of phenomenological research is to encourage participants to further explore personal experience using an individual perspective ((Braun & Clarke, 2014). This approach is used in this design to provide participant the opportunity to expound upon their experiences.

Research Design

This study aims to comprehend the experiences of the participants by allowing the researcher and participants to reflect and make meaning of experiences together. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative method that allows the participants to discuss and expand on what it means to be Black and queer at a PWI while exploring their experiences. This qualitative study uses a phenomenological research design. This study uses a phenomenological approach because phenomenology allows the participants to give detailed accounts of their lived experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

The study took place at a large research one university with approximately 47,000 students. Five voluntary participants were compensated for their time with a gift card at the end of the study. Participants were over the age of 18 and a matriculated student at the institution for at least one year. After IRB approval, participants were recruited using purposive snowball sampling via posters in the cultural centers and through word of mouth. The identity of the institution is hidden from readers, and the participants chose pseudonyms as a way to protect their identities. After completion of this study all transcriptions and recordings were properly disposed of.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Major	Years on campus/ Graduate (G) or Undergraduate (UG)	Sexual orientation	Identity

W	20	Public Health	6/UG/G		Lesbian	Black Afro-Latina/ Mixed
Kara	24	Social Work	2/G		Bisexual	Black/ Afro- Caribbean
Naomi	21	Business	3/UG		Pansexual	Afro Caribbean
Angela	19	Drama	3/UG		Lesbian	Black African American
Jai	30	Communication	1/G		Lesbian	Black

Data Collection

Recorded interviews were approximately one hour. The researcher uses an interview protocol to further ensure reliability. Participants were encouraged to expand on their answers and provide follow-up when needed. Participants reflected on identity in terms of acceptance, discrimination, and understanding of their dualistic identities by answering question such as what can the institution due to provide you with community and what does community look like for black queer women? The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to further explain and expound on all of their experiences and answer the questions fully (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is used to interpret the data This study uses IPA to make connections between the participants and their experiences.

Limitation and Positionality

The biggest strength was my positionality because of my identity as a Black queer woman. My proximity to the participants encouraged honest engagement. Additionally, the interview protocol was open-ended and was created based on insight from both queer theory and intersectionality. Traditionally, IPA lends itself to a smaller sample size to allow the researcher to thoroughly engage with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2014).

A limitation of this study is that it is not generalizable. However, the information gathered in this study can be used to inform educators and as a base for furthered research. A final limitation is the cis-gendered focus of this study. The experience of queer Black trans women should be explored in the future.

Trustworthiness

I reviewed the transcripts several times to ensure understanding of participants experience. Also, the use of purposive sampling allowed for easier replication of the study methods due to the descriptive nature of the population. In addition to purposive sampling, the sample group was diverse in perspective, which enhances credibility despite a small sample size.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

This chapter will analyze and discuss the findings as well as explore opportunities for future research. Then, it will discuss implications for both research and higher education as a whole. This chapter ends with concluding thoughts and researcher notes.

Discussion

While the participants of this study are varying and unique, there were a few key themes that connect them, which will orient discussion about our findings. The themes seem to be consistent with current research on the experiences of Black queer woman in college and provide more insight into the experiences of the target population.

Three thematic areas define each discussion of the finding:
1.   Isolation

2.   Community
3.   Barriers to community

Isolation

        According to Bailey and Miller (2015), finding other queer Black women on campus is an issue for all Black queer women in a higher education institution; this remained true for the participants of this study. Angela further described the idea of isolation by saying, "It is so hard finding them, literally finding queer people on campus is almost impossible. It is like no one wants to be (pause) Black and queer. So, no one identifies which means there is no community".

        Isolation has many negative implications, including social issues and struggles related to mental health and positive peer relation (Formby, 2017). Participants of this study felt isolated from the Black community due to their queerness and from the queer community due to their Blackness, which presents deepened feelings of isolation. Black queer women must be able to establish peer relations with those who have similar identities.

Community

        Due to social isolation, participants either struggled to find community or had to create their own community. According to Means et al. (2018), Black queer students often create community to fill social needs. In explaining her experience with community, W spoke to the community,

        I don't really know queer Black women there aren't really a lot. But I was able to find
        queer people of color. But queer Black women are hard to find…   I can find queer
        women, and if there was a community of queer Black women they are not out.

        Participants who were unable to create community with black queer women often tried to code as heterosexual in order to utilize the established Black community. However, participants of this study were apt to create community among other queer people of color. They viewed this self-created community as their main source of support. According to Johnson (2001), Black queer theory articulates the social issues that related to the of lack of communal support for Black queer individuals, emphasizing the importance of communal support for Black people in general. While participants created communities based off shared queer and of color identities, they also expressed the isolation felt due to having multiple marginalized identities. That created community often excluded the use of the single identity cultural centers on campus. Kara went on to explain major flaws in single identity spaces,

        Many times, I have felt like I had no one, but in single identity spaces I really see how
        much of an outsider I am. I can't find a community of people. I wish it was easier to find
        more Black queer women so I can have more people. It would help to have other people
        who understand what I am going through and what it is like to be Black queer and a
        woman.

        Despite the flaws of singular identity spaces, they remain present on campus. In recent years, many campuses have worked to ensure that their LGBT resources and centers are inclusive to the needs of students with varying identities (Fine, 2012). While the institution in which this study was conducted has done work to ensure inclusive LGBT spaces, many of the participants felt the campus still lacked adequate resources. This deficit makes peer support important for queer women of color because it often fills in the resource gaps in cultural centers and campuses as a whole (Guyton & Mcgaskey, 2012). In order to ensure adequate support and resources Angela suggested,

They [cultural center] should center link up like host an event together. But would people really come out to that. They need to make their spaces more accepting. Or make themselves more inviting [to queer Black women] so we can meet each other.

While many LGBT services may not use queer theory as a program guide, they tend to focus on disassembling the establishment of heteronormativity (Reid-Pharr, 2002; Fox & Ore, 2010). According to Dill and Zambrano (2009), a holistic approach to practice is consistent with the tenets of intersectionality. Accordingly, the centers on campus must further ingrain the needs of the multiple perspectives of Black queer women.

While the ideas of identity and intersectionality have been woven throughout this study, the importance of identity and the influence of identity were mentioned several times by both participants and in the research question. Participants reflected on identity in terms of acceptance, discrimination, and understanding of their dualistic identities.

Barriers to Community

In order to participate in this study, the participants had to affirm their identity as a Black queer woman; however, the way they made sense or explored their identities varied from person to person. According to the participants, one of the biggest risks associated with coming out as queer had to do with the way that non-queer family and community members might respond. The idea of coming out is often associated with antiquated Eurocentric ideals of the LGBT community; Many students of color prefer not to come out for many reasons including out of fear of losing their safety and support (Duran, 2018). Study participants felt pressure to come out because of current queer norms and often describe the act as a form of self-acceptance. While coming out is a big theme within the LGBT community, participants of this study also mentioned struggles maintaining queer identity as a Black woman. In general, the idea of coming out is common in LGBT research but multiple marginalized identities complicated the narrative of coming out. Naomi explained that coming out and being queer was a greater barrier for her because of her Afro-Caribbean background.

Being gay in a Black group or area it almost sometimes it can be equally as isolating, but in a sense, you can still feel that solidarity because you still have that one thing in common which is being Black. But sadly, I didn't feel any of that because I am also Caribbean that also a different underlying thing that divides me from people because most people identify as African American or African. But just being gay feel like people don't even want to talk to me because I am queer or the simple fact, they might think I have a crush on them. It is like I have to hide two part of me to be Black.

Due to both their queer and Black identities, they often felt a disconnect between those identities. According to Reed and Valenti (2012), Black queer women often try to pass as heterosexual to protect themselves from discrimination, which can create further isolation. The idea of wanting to pass as heterosexual is consistent because participants discussed dealing with the perception of being heterosexual. In queer spaces, participants were not able to hide their Black identity, thus increasing the likelihood of isolation due to their blackness. Though their dual identities did provide them with instances of isolation and stress, they emphasized the beauty of Black unity shared by those on campus. This unity often centered the African American experience and no other Black diasporic identities.

The multiple identities interacting and affecting one another is intersectional in nature due to the heightened awareness of the way multiple systems of oppression and privilege affect people experiences. This adequately describes the participants feeling of isolation and communal support.

While intersectionality as a concept aims to avoid prioritizing one identity over the other, it also allows for these intersecting identities to create the assumption of prioritization (Bowleg, 2008). Additionally, intersectionality provided an understanding of how institutions and space can further affect identity. Often, cultural centers on campus take a single identity approach, which often leaves students with multiple marginalized identities left out or unable to fully develop their identities (Harris & Patton, 2017). Traditional queer theory does not allow for a broader understanding of the interplay of multiple identities, but Black queer theory does work to effectively consider the interplay of these identities and the way they may affect a queer person of color (Harris & Patton, 2017). Participants of this study were aware of - and accustomed to - the interplay of their identities and how at times these identities made them feel both hyper visible and invisible at the same time

Chapter 5: Implications

This study provides PWIs with insight into the higher education experience of Black queer women. Additionally, this study provides specific suggestions on how the institution can further improve the experience of not only Black queer women but queer people of color as a whole. In addition to benefiting higher education, this study provides guidance for all LGBT centered and Black centered spaces.

Most importantly this study provides insight into Black queer woman experience. Considering and acknowledging the needs of all students including Black queer women benefit the student as well as the institution (Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010). Lastly colleges should further look into the current structure of cultural centers and LGBT programs from other campuses that are similar to them. Participants, in general, valued the cultural center, but they also noted that cultural centers can be isolating.

Future Research

This study looked at small sample from a specific population. Future research should look at further experiences of Black queer college women in general. As mentioned earlier, this study only included cis women; future research including transwomen and/or non-binary students would provide a fuller understanding of the black queer woman experience on campus. Also, it would be imperative to replicate this study with a larger sample size with participants from many institutions. Doing so will provide more details about the experiences as well as account for institution specific issues. Finally, studies should focus on research looking at the academic experience for Black queer women.

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