



Exploring How Gay Latinx Men Cope in College Using Emotion Regulation

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■ A recent survey from Gen Forward found that 22% of Latinx millennials (aged 18-34 years) identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ). The same survey also found that 61% of Latinx millennials said that there is “a lot” of discrimination against LGBTQ people within their own racial community. With the majority of college students being millennials, there is a need for higher education scholars to explore how gay Latinx students navigate and transition their identities as gay men from their homes and communities to college campuses. Research has found that gay students experience greater challenges and psychological stress during college transitions compared to their heterosexual peers (Kirsch et al., 2015). Little work, however, has examined how gay Latinx men cope with psycho-sociocultural stressors and how their sexual orientation and identification influences their college experiences (Duran & Perez, 2017; Eaton & Rios, 2017; Rios & Eaton, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative study was to use Gross’s (1998) process-oriented model of emotional regulation to explore how gay Latinx men overcome academic and personal obstacles in college. The study was guided by two core questions: (1) How do gay Latinx men cope with personal and academic obstacles during their college experience within the paradigm of emotion regulation? (2) How do gay Latinx men use emotion regulation processes to cope with heterosexist attitudes and comments on college campuses?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Latinx Men in Higher Education

Hostile campus climates, negative stereotypes, and limited inclusion negatively affect Latinx men’s sense of belonging. They may also feel cultural incongruence and differences in the values of their family and the university. Such stressors can negatively impact Latinx men’s ability to cope and persist. Prior research shows that contradictory masculinity constructs can be magnified in college for Latino men because cultural norms of masculinity can sometimes be at odds with values and expectations at universities (Cerna et al., 2009; Lu, 2015).

Latinx Men, Families, and the Process of Coping

Through their educational practices and family networks, Latinx families contribute to their children’s college knowledge and development (Kiyama, 2011). However, Latinx families also play a complicated role in the support systems of Latinx men (Sáenz et al., 2017, 2018.) Overall, Latinx men often choose to cope internally with obstacles rather seek available support systems; for those men who did activate support systems, college peers and mentors were relied on more than family (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Double Jeopardy and Intersectional Invisibility

Although some studies have found that gay Latinx men have social support systems to navigate intersectional identities (e.g., Rios & Eaton, 2016), others have found that they still experience prejudice and discrimination on college campuses (Eaton & Rios, 2017). The “double jeopardy hypothesis” (Ferraro & Farmer, 1996), which suggests that being in two minoritized groups magnifies stress and challenges, is supported by some scholarship. Individuals who are not prototypical in more than one social group are often overlooked. Gay Latinx men are neither prototypically Latino (heterosexual) nor prototypically gay (White).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research study utilized Gross’s (1998) process model of emotion regulation to explore how gay Latinx men coped with personal and academic obstacles as well as heterosexism on college campuses. Emotion regulation is a multifaceted process that includes processes such as understanding the emotions of oneself and others, controlling and expressing emotions, and using emotion strategies effectively (Gross, 2014). We chose to use this conceptual foundation for three reasons. First, this study focused on gay Latinx men and how they navigated obstacles, including heterosexist attitudes at home and on campus. Second, most scholarship on coping mechanisms of gay men has focused on disclosing sexual identity or “coming out” (D’Augelli

& Hershberger, 1993; Eaton & Rios, 2017). Finally, emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) considers how people are proactive and reactive in managing situations that can lead to certain emotions.

METHOD

This study utilized a narrative approach to understand how gay Latinx men regulated their emotions toward obstacles during their college experience. Using narrative inquiry, we explored seven students’ experiences in-depth and interpreted them within their sociocultural settings (Riessman, 2008). We utilized an experience-centered or quasi-phenomenological approach (Ratner, 2001) that recognizes narrative as a means of sense making, as participants must recreate or reimagine their narratives through social and cultural contexts and across times and spaces (Squire, 2008).

FINDINGS

Four main findings emerged, all of which were interpreted through Gross’s (1998) emotion-regulation framework: (a) Finding Gay-affirming Communities, (b) Avoiding and Modifying Gay-adverse Spaces, (c) Changing the Subject, and (d) Positive Reframing.

Finding Gay-Affirming Communities

A key finding was that students utilized situational selection to find gay-affirming communities at Treemont University. All seven participants sought and developed relationships with people who affirmed and valued their gay identities. They found support from a variety of different sources on campus, including peer mentors, graduate student advisors, coaches, and professional staff. The importance of gay-affirming spaces was universal; all seven participants agreed that these spaces increased their sense of belonging, which helped them become more comfortable in their academic aspirations.

Avoiding and Modifying Gay-Adverse Spaces

We found that students used emotion regulation by avoiding and modifying gay-adverse spaces

that could make them feel stigmatized or triggered. Participants discussed avoiding and modifying gay-adverse encounters with heterosexist individuals, events that perpetuated toxic masculinity, and initiatives that reinforced gender binary norms. Several discussed avoiding football or basketball games, which was extremely challenging due to the popularity of athletics at Treemont University. All seven participants acknowledged that they expected heterosexist attitudes, toxic masculinity, and gender binary to be engrained within the university. However, some were surprised to see them play out in spaces that promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Changing the Subject

When participants were unable to choose, avoid, or modify heterosexist situations, they used attention deployment to shift the focus of uncomfortable conversations or situations to another topic. Participants discussed remaining closeted in particular environments and settings that might be heterosexist, such as home or church; however, they also talked about the emotional toll that could take.

Positive Reframing

The final theme was that students used positive self-talk as a mechanism of cognitive change to

reinterpret the meaning of a situation and lead to better emotions. Participants used positive self-talk in a variety of ways to diffuse emotion attached to stress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study highlights several areas in which administrators and student affairs professionals might re-examine how they interact with issues of coping and Latinx men. Institutions should create spaces for Latinx men to discuss issues related to coping, especially as related to gender and sexuality. Cross programming with culturally congruent centers may offer an avenue for engaging in sense making around gender, sexuality, and ethnic identities and offers cross-pollination opportunities for raising awareness and positive visibility of specific subpopulations

AUTHOR BIOS

Dr. Charles Lu serves as the Director of the Office of Academic Support and Instructional Services (OASIS) at the University of California, San Diego. In his role, he provides strategic oversight and management of the center and works collaboratively with external units to create programs and initiatives that provide a holistic and student-centered academic experience. Over the years, Dr. Lu has served as a researcher, consultant, school director, academic coach,

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Dr. Beth E. Bukoski is Associate Professor of Practice and co-coordinates the Program in Higher Education Leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at The University of Texas at Austin and is faculty affiliate with the Center for Women's and Gender Studies. She teaches with an explicit focus on diversity, inclusion, social justice issues. She uses qualitative methodologies and critical theories to guide her research, which explores constructs of gender, sexuality, and race in the experiences of underrepresented faculty, staff, and students.

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