

# Sexual and Ethnic Identity Development Among Gay–Bisexual–Questioning (GBQ) Male Ethnic Minority Adolescents

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Identity development is a critical task of adolescence and occurs across multiple areas of self-identification. Although research on the identity development process among individuals who are ethnic and sexual minorities has been conducted for individuals who have 1 minority status or the other, few studies have examined these processes in people who are both ethnic and sexual minorities. In this qualitative study, the authors examined the dual identity development processes related to ethnic and sexual identity among gay–bisexual–questioning (GBQ) Latino and African American male adolescents. Results indicated that the processes associated with the development of sexual orientation and ethnic identity occur concurrently. However, the actual processes involved with the development of each identity not only differed, but seemed to be independent of each other because neither process was referenced in the development of the other. Overall, the process of ethnic identity development involved the process of becoming aware of one's ethnic and cultural heritage, whereas sexual identity development involved finding one's own personally relevant sexual orientation label and connecting to that community. The implications of these findings for the development of interventions to assist in the healthy development of GBQ adolescents are discussed.

*Keywords:* sexual identity development, ethnic identity development, adolescents, gay, bisexual

Adolescence has been characterized as a time when the bulk of one's identity is developed (Adams, Gullotta, & Montemayor, 1992; Erikson, 1980; Marcia, 1966). During adolescence, a person is faced with the important challenge of developing a sense of identity in her or his occupation, sex roles, politics, and religion (Erikson, 1980). Developing one's identity requires creating a self-image from one's experiences that is meaningful within the community in which one lives. Much of the adolescent's future,

therefore, is shaped by her or his experiences and development during adolescence. Consequently, research has indicated that youth who fail to develop a healthy adult identity are more likely to use illicit drugs at higher rates (R. M. Jones & Hartman, 1988), are more susceptible and influenced by negative peer pressure (Adams, Ryan, Hoffman, Dobson, & Nielson, 1985), are less likely to be self-accepting (Rasmussen, 1964), and have lower self-esteem (Marcia, 1966).

This concept of identity development is multifaceted and complex. Although much identity research has focused singularly on one's adult identity, this overall sense of self includes the development of several distinct and unique identities. Therefore, adolescents who belong to various identity groups, such as those who are both ethnic and sexual minorities, must develop both their ethnic and sexual identities as they develop their overall adult identity (Chung & Katayama, 1998). In addition, because it has been posited that the process of identity development differs by gender (Gilligan, Ward, Taylor, & Bardige, 1988; Lyons, 1983), the lens of gender may color experiences of sexual and ethnic identity development accordingly. Therefore, in this study we focused on examining two specific identity development processes—ethnic identity and sexual identity—among a group of gay–bisexual–questioning (GBQ) male youth of color using in-depth qualitative interviews.

Previous literature has suggested that because of heterosexism in ethnic minority communities, the sexual identity development of sexual minority youth of color may be delayed or hindered (Díaz, 1998; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996; Stokes & Peterson, 1998). However, when Dube and Savin-Williams (1999) examined the

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timing of sexual identity development milestones for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth (such as age of awareness of same-sex attractions, disclosure of sexual identity to others, and first same-sex sexual encounter), they found that regardless of ethnicity, all participants met their sexual identity development milestones at developmentally appropriate ages, with differences noted in the ages of their first sexual experiences and identification as LGB.

Rosario, Scrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) found similar results, reporting no differences in the timing of identity development milestones, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, or sexual identity among LGB youth regardless of ethnicity. However, they found differences in other factors related to identity development, in that when compared with White youth, African American youth participated in fewer social activities within the gay community. Additionally, both African American and Latino–Latina youth disclosed their sexual orientation to fewer people compared with White youth. C. A. Parks, Hughes, and Matthews's (2004) research with adult lesbians revealed similar ethnic differences, with Latina and African American women reporting that they delayed their sexual identity development milestones and disclosed their sexual orientation to fewer individuals than did White participants.

Although previous empirical research has examined the timing of LGB youth of color's sexual identity development milestones, there is limited research on the specific processes by which youth develop this identity. Additionally, research has not examined the timing of ethnic identity development milestones for LGB youth of color. In theoretical writings, LGB ethnic minority adolescents are hypothesized to experience delayed timing of labeling their ethnic and sexual identity (Manalansan, 1996) and disclosure of their identity to others (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). These delays may be because of factors such as lack of support resources, perceptions of rejection, and internalized homophobia (Manalansan, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996).

No published empirical research has examined the specific processes of both ethnic and sexual identity development among gay youth of color. In this study, we used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore these two separate identity development processes among a group of adolescents who have received little empirical attention—ethnic minority GBQ youth. For the purposes of this article, we define ethnic identity development as the process through which an adolescent develops his or her sense of being a member of a specific ethnic group and learns about culturally specific values, symbols, practices, and history (J. M. Jones, 1997). We similarly define sexual identity development as the process through which an adolescent develops his or her sense of sexual orientation, becomes a member of a specific sexual orientation group, and learns about culturally specific values, symbols, practices, and history (Harper, 2007).

### Theories of Ethnic Identity Development

Ethnic identity development has been conceptualized using both stage and fluid theories. Many of the stage theories identify an initial ignorance regarding the existence and impact of racism and of an individual's own ethnicity, a state that is challenged when the individual personally experiences oppression or racism (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Kim, 1981; Helms, 1990). Many stage theories also stress the importance of a search for one's ethnic identity, which occurs after one is first made aware of one's

identity and involves a (physical or emotional) withdrawal from the larger White community and cultural immersion into learning more about one's ethnic community (Atkinson et al., 1979; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1989; Smith, 1991). These theories also propose a later integration phase in which the individual incorporates her or his ethnic identity into her or his holistic self-image and values both members of his or her ethnic community and members of the larger White community (Atkinson et al., 1979; Helms, 1990; Kim, 1981; Phinney, 1989).

Although the majority of the theoretical models for ethnic identity development are stage models, several models are fluid or nonlinear. Smith's (1991) model of ethnic identity development is less defined by categories and stages and instead focuses more on the fluidity of ethnic identity, specifically through the relationships one has with the majority and minority group members. Other fluid theories are similar to stage theories of identity development but depart from stage models in that they suggest that progression from stages (Atkinson et al., 1979) or statuses (Helms, 1990) is variable and may move in any direction from one stage to another. Parham (1989) also suggested that development is an ongoing process, suggesting that individuals may normally re-cycle through stages without implicating regression of identity development.

In addition to the variations in identity development represented through the different types of identity development models, identity development may also differ on the basis of the individual's gender. It has been proposed that women may be more likely than men to engage in the search and immersion process of developing their identities, which may promote higher levels of identity achievement than in men (Phinney, 1990; Rotheram-Borus, Lightfoot, Moraes, Dopkins, & LaCour, 1998).

### Theories of Sexual Identity Development

Research and theoretical literature regarding the development of a sexual identity has primarily been conceptualized as a process of progression through stages. Common to the most predominant theories is an initial stage in which an individual experiences same-sex sexual attractions, with subsequent feelings of confusion because these attractions are different than those of her or his heterosexual peers (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). After this stage, both Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) identified a period in which an individual becomes aware of the heterosexism present in larger society and withdraws from the heterosexual community. Exploration of the gay and lesbian community then follows, which involves personal contacts with publicly identified (or "out") gay or lesbian individuals (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) and dating and romantic or sexual relationships with openly identified gay or lesbian individuals (Coleman, 1982). Once the individual has had positive contact with members of the gay and lesbian community and is able to accept and integrate her or his sexual orientation as an element of her or his total identity, the individual has reached the final stage in sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989).

Similar to ethnic and gender identity development, research has also suggested that the process of sexual identity development may also differ by gender. For example, Diamond (2005) found that women with same-sex attractions differed in the types of attractions they had toward other women and that these attractions were not always consistent after an 8-year follow-up. Diamond and

Savin-Williams (2000) also found that young women with same-sex attractions were more similar to heterosexual women than to young men with same-sex attractions with regard to desires for romantic relationships, use of sexual behavior, and relations with parents. Consequently, sexual identity development of lesbian and bisexual women has been proposed to differ from that of gay and bisexual men (Diamond, 2003; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Schneider, 2001).

### Applicability of Identity Development Theories for Sexual Minority Youth of Color

Although comprehensive, theories of the identity development process for sexual and ethnic minorities do not account for the challenges faced by individuals who are “multiple minorities,” or individuals who are both sexual and ethnic minorities. For example, many ethnic identity development models state that part of the development of one’s ethnic identity involves an immersion into one’s respective ethnic community (Atkinson et al., 1979; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1989). However, for individuals who are sexual minorities, total withdrawal from the larger White community and subsequent immersion into their ethnic community may be difficult because of heterosexism and homophobia within their ethnic community (Chung & Katayama, 1998; C. W. Parks, 2001; Tremble, Schneider & Appathurai, 1989). Additionally, with regard to sexual identity, ethnic minority individuals may face ethnically based oppression by other White sexual minority individuals, which may prevent acceptance and integration into the gay and lesbian community (Díaz, 1998; Harper, Jernewall, & Zea, 2004; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998).

Identity development theories for either ethnic or sexual identity development may not be wholly applicable to the unique experiences of GBQ male youth of color. Although informative, studies examining the timing of sexual identity development milestones among GBQ male youth of color have not captured the specific processes involved in either sexual or ethnic identity development. In this qualitative inquiry, we explored the two separate processes of ethnic identity and sexual identity among African American and Latino GBQ male youth via in-depth qualitative interviews. We also explored barriers to and facilitators of these identity development processes. Because previous research has highlighted the gender differences in ethnic and sexual identity development, we only examined GBQ male youth.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were a subset of youth who participated in a larger mixed-methods investigation. Male youth between the ages of 16 and 22 who self-identified as gay, bisexual, or questioning were recruited from seven different lesbian–gay–bisexual–questioning community agencies located in a large metropolitan community. From the initial 97 participants who completed quantitative surveys, we selected 39 to participate in qualitative interviews on the basis of various identity-related characteristics to create a stratified purposive sample representing different backgrounds and life experiences.

Because the analyses presented here focus on issues of ethnic and sexual identity development for GBQ youth of color, we included only the 22 interviews conducted with youth who reported an ethnic identity as either African American or Latino. The 12 Latino participants included 9 who are Mexican or Mexican American, 2 who are Puerto Rican, and 1 who identified as both Puerto Rican and Mexican. Among the Latino participants, 7 identified as gay, 4 identified as bisexual, and 1 identified as questioning. All 10 African American participants identified as having African American ethnic identities. Six of the African American participants identified as gay, 3 identified as bisexual, and 1 identified as questioning. Ages of participants ranged from 16 to 22 ( $M = 18.8$  years,  $SD = 1.9$ ). All 22 participants were actively enrolled in schooling relevant to their age group (high school or college). Two of the 10 African American (20%) and 4 of the 12 Latino participants (30%) reported receiving at least one form of government support in their lifetime, including health care through a medical card, food stamps, or public aid checks.

### Procedure

Potential participants were privately screened for eligibility, and informed consent or assent was obtained. Participants then completed a survey that assessed their ethnic identity, sexual identity, and other behavioral and demographic factors. On the basis of their responses, we then selected participants to create a stratified purposive sample to participate in qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interviews took between approximately 2 hr to complete, and participants were given \$35 for their participation. Interviewers received extensive training in qualitative interviewing techniques. All interviewers identified as gay or lesbian; four were men (one White, two Latino, and one Pakistani American) and one was a woman (biracial). Interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews were entered into NVivo software (QSR NUD\*IST Vivo software; Qualitative Solutions & Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts) to assist with analysis. Once codes were assigned to appropriate portions of the transcripts, the NVivo software assisted with classifying, sorting, and retrieving coded text to facilitate the analysis process.

### Interview Guide

A semistructured qualitative interview guide was created specifically for this study during a 3-month development process by a team of researchers who had extensive experience working with GBQ youth. The interview guide was grounded in phenomenological and constructivist frameworks, which provided a general structure for discussion but required participants to provide their own definitions, based on their life experiences and perceptions. Thus, for each identity, participants were first asked to define their identity using their own words and conceptualizations and were then guided through an in-depth exploration of factors that have influenced each specific identity development. Several areas within the interview protocol covered important areas of identity development established in previous literature, including personal meaning, awareness of identity, connection to community, and presence of facilitators and supports. Within these areas, youth provided accounts of their own experiences but were also encouraged to discuss additional information that was not covered in the

interview guide but that seemed personally relevant in their identity development. By using participants' own lived experiences and definitions rather than imposing on them definitions based on prior research, the interview guide was grounded in the inductive nature of phenomenological inquiry. This course of inquiry assessed important connections and developments over time; however, it did not provide a developmental narrative trajectory of identity development from conception to current identity.

We extracted data for the current analysis primarily from two sections of the interview, namely ethnic identity development and sexual identity development, but we analyzed the complete texts of the interviews, which also revealed relevant data in other sections of the interviews. Sample questions from the interview guide are provided in Table 1. Questions regarding each identity development were identical in format across ethnic and sexual identity development.

### Analysis

We conducted analyses with a psychological phenomenological focus. This entails concentrating on participants' life experiences to ascertain the meaning of a phenomenon, which in this study is sexual and ethnic identity development among GBQ ethnic minority youth. By understanding each individual's experiences and how they converge with those of similar participants, the researcher can determine the larger framework to describe the structure (or "essence") of the phenomenon (Schutz, 1970).

Before data analysis, the research team examined the research on ethnic and sexual identity development and identified key shared factors across both identity development processes to serve as initial codes. These a priori codes, such as "identity awareness," "identity connection," and "identity comfort," served as the gen-

eral framework to which we added further codes during the iterative analysis process. After we initially read the entire transcripts, we created or clarified additional codes based in a phenomenological framework. For example, participants made clarifications between different types of media that influenced sexual identity development, such as magazines, movies, books, and the Internet. We then accommodated these distinctions into the coding system as various subcodes under a larger "media" code. Throughout this process, we read the transcripts in their entirety multiple times to capture all relevant information related to the multiple identity development processes. After creating the comprehensive list of initial codes and subcodes, we then created pattern codes to connect subsequent concepts under larger headings. Examples of pattern codes are "barriers to identity development," "facilitators to identity development," and "oppression." Because our primary focus was to explore the separate identity development processes of ethnic and sexual identity among GBQ male youth of color as a collective group, we did not conduct comparative analyses between the African American and Latino participants.

To ensure the quality and credibility of the emergent themes from the qualitative interviews, we enacted several validation checks. The first validation check involved member-checking interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) with 3 GBQ male youth. These occurred after approximately half the qualitative interviews had been conducted and involved youth responding to initial interview themes and identifying additional areas for inquiry. The second check was peer-debriefing interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with three adult "experts" that occurred at the same time as the initial member-checking youth interviews. These experts had extensive experience working with GBQ ethnic minority youth, and we asked them to independently verify the emergent themes from the qualitative analyses. The third validation check consisted of two focus groups, to which interview participants returned after all interviews were completed to verify patterns and themes revealed in analyses.

Table 1  
*In-Depth Interview Sample Questions for Sexual Identity and Ethnic Identity*

Topic	Sample questions
Meaning	What messages do you get about being [identity]? Tell me some of the positive things about being [identity].
	Tell me some of the negative things about being [identity].
	What are the specific roles and responsibilities of being [identity]?
Self-identification	You have just told me a little bit about what it means to be [identity]. How do you fit into this? What is that like for you?
	How are you different than the things you told me about being [identity]?
Awareness	Describe for me when you first realized that you were a [identity].
Community	Do you feel that there is a [identity] community? Describe this community to me. How do you fit into this?
	In what ways are you connected with a [identity] community?
	How did you develop this connection?
Facilitators—supports	What has helped you in the process of seeing yourself as a/n [identity]? Which people/institutions/resources have helped you?

### Results

In examining the key developmental concepts that arose from the participants' descriptions of their sexual and ethnic identity development processes, four overarching themes emerged across both processes: (a) timing and contexts of identity awareness, (b) process of identity development, (c) different experiences of oppression, and (d) connection to the community. In this section, we discuss themes independently and detail differences and similarities between sexual and ethnic identity according to each theme. Within the discussion of each theme, we provide quotes from interview text, with, when applicable, interviewers' responses in italics. To ensure participants' confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms and removed identifying names of companies or agencies.

#### *Timing and Contexts of Identity Awareness*

Youth stated that they were made aware of their sexual and ethnic identities during the period between elementary school and high school. Awareness in these contexts involved an awareness that they were different from their peers, which involved being ethnically different or having a nonheterosexual sexual orientation.

Youth did not indicate specifically whether awareness of these identities occurred simultaneously; however, given that their development typically spanned several years, one can safely assume that the ethnic and sexual identity development processes that followed initial awareness overlapped for many youth. Although sexual and ethnic identity development occurred during similar time periods, the contexts within which this awareness occurred differed greatly for the participants.

*Ethnic identity.* For ethnic identity, participants noted that they became aware of their ethnicity through experiences of racism, positive ethnic experiences, and an experience of being ethnically dissimilar from others. Participants identified negative racist interactions with individuals and groups as defining moments in awareness of their ethnic identity. Some reported being aware of their ethnic identity after hearing racial slurs while in a predominantly White neighborhood. Others were accused by other ethnic minority group members of being too assimilated into the dominant U.S. (White) society. Although verbal forms of racism were most salient and visible to the participants, they also indicated that nonverbal negative experiences also initiated a sense of ethnic identity awareness, such as being glared at and experiencing differential or poor treatment because of their ethnicity. The following text illustrates the institutional barriers placed on ethnic minority youth in an academic setting:

Hmm. The first time was probably when we got here from Puerto Rico. And I got held back from I think it was like first grade or second grade or something because I didn't know English. So they said oh he's Puerto Rican, put him in the English as a second language classes. When I learned English and I was going off the charts in English, they kept me in those classes . . . . It said to me that my language was inferior to this language. And for that I had to be punished. (Donovan, Latino, 22 years old)

In addition to negative interactions, positive experiences with other individuals and groups prompted awareness of participants' ethnic identity. Most youth described this interaction as consisting of a family member's telling them of their ethnic identity, which also entailed the family member's providing a brief description of their identity (e.g., descriptions of history and heritage). Others were made aware of their ethnic identity through interactions with friends who were members of their ethnic group and through positive interactions with ethnically dissimilar peers. Finally, many participants stated that experiences in which they were the minority or felt "other-ness" prompted a sense of ethnic awareness. This typically occurred in school settings, where participants were placed in classrooms in which they were the only member of their ethnic group.

*Sexual identity.* With regard to sexual identity, participants experienced awareness primarily through having sexual or romantic fantasies about other men, through sexual experiences with other young men, and through an analysis of relationships and attractions. First, participants indicated awareness of their sexual identity or of their attraction to members of the same sex, through romantic or sexual fantasies about other men. Some participants referred to these attractions as "crushes" on other men whom they found attractive, stating that they had strong emotional attachments to these other men. Other participants indicated that other men evoked a physiological response, either in the form of an erection

or in a generalized state of arousal. Several other youth had sexual fantasies of other men while masturbating.

But then sophomore year kicked in and I don't know, it was like something was totally different, because I started like checking out the, like, guys a lot, and it was like I started getting like, like thinking of sex. But when I thought of sex it was like with a GUY. Or when I see someone that was hot, I would be like, I wasn't trying to like totally stare at them or anything, but it's like the vision of them would just keep repeating itself in my head or whatever. (Bernard, African American, 22 years old)

Some youth indicated becoming aware of their same-sex sexual attractions through sexual experiences with other young male youth; many mentioned an absence of attraction to males before the sexual activity. However, these sexual activities were initiated without the youth and sexual partner disclosing to one another their sexual orientation or attractions. For these youth, it appeared that there was a shared understanding of a common sexual attraction to one another.

We went to Boston for eighth grade. We were on the bus, I sat next to this guy name J. He was, we were really cool friends . . . .When we got to the hotel and we were all sleeping, . . . Like he just turned my head and like all of a sudden we started kissing. I'm like, like if a gay guy went up to a straight guy and started kissing him. Ugh. He's gonna get it beat down. But like I really didn't do anything. I just went along with it, so that's when I first started, that's when I first had my first kiss. (Antonio, Latino, 16 years old)

Finally, several of the youth reported being engaged in same-sex sexual relationships, but not identifying their relationships or themselves as gay or bisexual until a period of time elapsed, ranging from several months to several years. Participants reported an instance in which, within the relationship, they discussed with their romantic partner that their relationship might be labeled a "gay" relationship and that they were in fact each other's "boy-friends." Most participants mentioned that this discovery of the label led to a mutual agreement to adopt such labels for the relationship.

### *Process of Identity Development*

After discovering an initial awareness of their sexual and ethnic identities during similar time periods, the youth then developed these identities along divergent paths. Overall, youth developed their ethnic identities using resources within their immediate community and developed their sexual identity by actively searching for and connecting with a gay community.

*Ethnic identity.* To explore their ethnic identity, youth used an array of resources within their own immediate surroundings, which included forms of cultural expression, family members, and peers. A majority lived in neighborhoods with ethnically similar peers, and therefore their immediate social networks were primarily with individuals of their ethnic group and could therefore be used as resources for ethnic identity development.

Many youth identified elements within their culture as facilitative in the development of their ethnic identity. Most participants stated that staples of their culture, such as food and music, were perceived as positive elements of their culture.

In all honesty, all Mexican food is great. I do like Mexican, some Mexican foods, but I'm, when it comes to spicy foods I don't do spicy foods. Which eliminates about 98% of Mexican foods . . . I love Spanish dancing. It's something that all started with my freshman year of high school, which goes back a long way, but one of the positive things, I'll explain about that later, more of the positive things, um, just being able to dance Spanish dances. (Alfonso, Latino, 19 years old)

Participants indicated a strong sense of pride with these cultural elements, especially related to ethnic-specific food. One participant stated that the style of the culture was unique, and another stated that the culture had "fun customs and exciting ways of doing things." Participants therefore viewed how these cultural elements were expressed in festivals, holidays, customs, and everyday living with high favor and pride.

Youth also identified members of their immediate and extended family as facilitators of their comfort with their ethnic identity. Family members were seen as transmitting culture to the participant by teaching language skills, cultural elements (e.g., food and dance), and generalized concepts of how to be a member of their ethnic group (e.g., "how to be Mexican"). Additionally, participants stated that their family reminded them to be constantly aware of their ethnic identity (e.g., "Never forget you're a Puerto Rican") and imbued them with a sense of pride in their ethnic identity and culture. Participants also identified peers as facilitating the development of their ethnic identity. Peers served as transmitters of cultural elements and traditions, but also emboldened the participants with a sense of pride and appreciation for their ethnic identity.

*Sexual identity.* In contrast to ethnic identity, participants used community-based organizations (CBOs), peers, and the Internet as their primary sources of information for development of their sexual identity. CBOs that catered to the needs of LGB youth were identified as being supportive of participants' sense of comfort with their sexual identity. Many youth indicated that these organizations helped them identify their sexual orientation and understand many issues concerning individuals who publicly identify as GBQ. These included managing heterosexism and connecting and thriving within the gay community, among others. Participants also stated that the youth and staff members present in the organizations were able to normalize being GBQ by facilitating and engaging in discussions of sex and sexuality. Staff members were also identified as being positive role models who often talked about their personal lives and gave participants insights into how their lives as a sexual minority could be normal.

Uh, one of the counselors, like he has a boyfriend and they live together and everything like there. And I asked them like, um, how they worked it, like how did you guys meet and it's like, okay, we're gonna be steady and start living together and try to be a couple in the real world . . . And I said like wasn't it hard, like searching for an apartment together and stuff? And they talked to the landlord or the superintendent and they had to see, like both names in the contract, like explain it? And they said, no, people just don't care nowadays. They just say, if they're paying the bills, so it's all that matters. And I figure it was so easy for them, and eventually if I want to stay with a guy, which I might, then I just asked them if there are, anything they could teach me or show me that they've overcome. (Trevor, African American, 18 years old)

Participants also indicated that peers provided support with their sense of comfort with their sexual identity. Many participants indicated finding support from heterosexually identified peers, both male and female. Most of these peers were individuals from their schools who were also members of their ethnic group. Participants also identified LGB friends as facilitating their sense of comfort with their sexual identity. Through their shared experience of marginalization because of their sexuality, male youth were able to connect with other sexual minority youth, regardless of gender. Many of these friends introduced the participant to LGB-specific neighborhoods, activities and events, and CBOs. Additionally, these LGB friends provided participants with social support, either in explicitly giving advice to the participant or in being positive role models.

Although these youth of color navigated venues and peer networks that varied in their ethnic composition, youth considered these diverse multiple geographical areas as part of their personal gay community. For example, youth indicated that some elements of their gay community represented primarily members of one ethnic group, and others reported socializing in predominantly White venues. However, none segmented their communities into a White gay community or a Black gay community; rather, all areas that they were involved in, regardless of ethnic composition, represented their gay community.

Finally, several participants described using Internet message boards and chat rooms specifically oriented to African American or Latino GBQ men as a means to connect with and find support from other individuals. This was seen as a way to anonymously explore their sexual identity, but also as a way to find mentorship and support with ethnically similar GBQ men. The following quote illustrates how use of the Internet allowed 1 youth to learn about being gay before officially "coming out":

Helpful and supportive? Um, well, at 14, when I came out, um, I would say Internet discussion boards, like forums and chat rooms, just hearing other people's experiences and stuff like that. And reading what they had to say um, really helped me. Um, to I don't know, come into acceptance.

*Okay. Okay. That's very interesting. How did they help you?*

Just like seeing their stories and like giving me advice and stuff. What to do and safety tips and stuff like that. (Malcolm, African American, 19 years old).

### *Different Experiences of Oppression*

In addition to developing their ethnic and sexual identities along different developmental trajectories, the types of oppression youth faced in the development of these identities differed. For ethnic identity, they primarily faced racism from the larger White community, whereas for sexual identity they faced heterosexism from both the larger White heterosexual community and their ethnic community.

*Ethnic identity.* With regard to their ethnic identity, youth identified experiencing continual indirect and direct experiences of racism after first becoming aware of their identity, manifested in the forms of discrimination and hate crimes. Several participants described not being able to find jobs because of their ethnicity. For those who did find jobs, 1 reported being fired for a minor offense because of his ethnicity:

Like I would get a job, and the job just wouldn't work out. One job, like I was working for [company name], I got fired from there, I don't know why I was being fired, but to me there was a lot of discrimination, and I understood it. It's [an] all-White store. I was the only Black man in there. (Ashani, African American, 21 years old)

One participant stated that this widespread lack of jobs often leads young GBQ African American men to prostitution or hustling.

Other participants described experiencing more ambiguous or covert forms of discrimination. For example, 1 youth stated that he was often mistreated while shopping in affluent neighborhoods. Another participant stated that while his family was living in an all-White neighborhood, none of his neighbors talked to his family and refused to socialize with them at neighborhood events.

Some participants recalled experiencing hate crimes or overt forms of racism as a challenge in developing their ethnic identity. Several youth were assaulted by hate speech and intolerant comments. Additionally, several participants reported being attacked by groups of White individuals, often while venturing into neighborhoods that were predominantly White. The following illustrates how 1 participant was attacked:

But then like we was just standing in the liquor store and it was like we just turned around and it's like all these rednecks, talking about the skin. And see very much I turned around, and I said, "Hey, what you gonna do? Because I fear no man, for what? He bleed just like me." And luckily by the time the altercation had really got out of hand . . . the police came. (Taji, African American, 22 years old)

*Sexual identity.* With regard to their sexual identity, some participants reported experiencing some form of heterosexism in both direct and indirect ways. A number of participants mentioned being fired from their jobs or mistreated in a variety of settings shortly after disclosing their sexual orientation. For other participants, however, their oppression was overt, and many reported being either verbally harassed or physically assaulted in a variety of settings, including their neighborhood, their school, or home.

They'd judge like, wow, damn, he's gay and, and some people probably want to fight. That's for serious. Some people want to fight, because that's what people—that's [what] homophobic [people do]. (Cameron, African American, 19 years old)

Additionally, many participants also mentioned having to navigate environments that were neither tolerant nor inclusive of LGB individuals. This intolerance was manifested either by heterosexual people not accepting the youth's identity or by attempts to change the youth's sexual orientation. Participants who experienced oppression in the home reported experiencing particularly high levels of distress. Oppression in these various settings therefore affected many different aspects of their lives.

### *Connection to the Community*

In addition to the varying processes of identification and development of identity, youth identified many different ways in which they connected with their respective communities throughout these processes. Akin to the divergent developmental pathways of identity development for ethnic and sexual identity, the types of connections used for both identities also differed. Youth were able to connect to their ethnic identity through an array of readily avail-

able resources, whereas youth connected to their sexual identity through more artificial and distant sources.

*Ethnic identity.* With regard to ethnic identity, youth stated that they were connected with their ethnic identity through a variety of physical locations and spaces. Many participants described these geographic spaces as ethnic-specific neighborhoods and described feeling a connection with their identity through a variety of actions in these neighborhoods, varying from working in the community, having friends in the neighborhood, participating in block parties, and patronizing stores in the neighborhood. One youth describes how he connected with his community through growing up in a predominantly African American neighborhood:

The community I grew up in was . . . basically all Black, yeah, all Black, but middle, I mean, basically middle class. I mean, basically we trying to come together and make the neighborhood better, but, um, we still got the gangs and people hanging on the street. (David, African American, 19 years old)

Participants also stated that organizations and clubs at school were a means of connecting with their ethnic community. Many participants enjoyed cultural events hosted by these clubs, which included traditional ethnic-specific holidays and festivals. Additionally, the Latino participants of Mexican ancestry indicated benefiting from school-based groups that discussed current topics concerning the United States and Mexico. Other participants indicated that these organizations were facilitative in developing new friendship networks because of a shared identity and heritage and that these connections and friendships were long lasting. Participants also identified ethnically similar peers whom they met at these organizations as being connections with their ethnic identity.

Because many youth were connected to their ethnic identity by learning from family members about their culture, heritage, and ancestry, they were able to honor and practice their ethnicity with their family. One participant whose extended family was in Mexico was able to connect with his identity and heritage through his immediate family. Other participants felt connected through the experienced history of other family members, which affected their current worldview. One participant stated that his grandmother's history surviving oppression during the civil rights movement made him connect with his ethnic identity but also affected his own resilience toward current experiences of oppression.

*Sexual identity.* Concerning connection with their sexual identity, CBOs assisted youth with learning how to successfully navigate gay, White, and ethnic communities as a GBQ person of color. In addition, they obtained self-confidence and support and met other friends, which fostered new connections with the gay community.

Yeah, first, after I started going to like say for instance groups like [group name] or [group name] or anything like that, you started to fit in like, hey, this culture is funny, to me it's like, it's culture. This culture is funny and man, I love to be a part of this, this is funny. (Cameron, African American, 19 years old)

Participants noted that friendships with individuals whom they met at organizations endured after they stopped using services at the organization.

Youth also formed connections with GBQ individuals through other venues and identified these individuals as connections with

their sexual identity. One participant described being connected through coworkers who identify as gay.

*So with the gay community that you're connected to now, in person, can you tell me a little bit more about how you developed this connection?*

Mainly through moving to the North Side and working in like a retail store, it's a lot of gay males. (chuckles) (Sergio, Latino, 19 y/o)

Many participants also identified bars and clubs as their current connection to their sexual identity community. This included LGB-specific bars and clubs (gay bars) and also bars and clubs that cater to other sexual identities, such as "down-low" clubs or parties or LGB-oriented events at heterosexual bars and clubs.

Several participants identified the Internet as a means to connect with their sexual identity community. Participants used chat rooms and Internet message boards to explore their sexuality and to communicate with other sexual minority youth. Youth met other peers through the Internet, peers whom the individual later met in person in physical locations. Also through the Internet, youth could connect with similarly identified individuals without having to visit gay-specific neighborhoods or locations.

I'd say the Internet was just a way of getting close without really meeting anyone. It was like I was scared, but not scared enough, and then now it's like I'm not, I'm not afraid to actually like talk to someone. So I'd say in person.

*Okay. So it sounds like the Internet community made it, was kind of like a bridge?*

Yeah, like a stepping stone. (Sergio, Latino, 19 years old)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine both sexual and ethnic identity development among GBQ male African American and Latino youth and to examine how these processes differed from one another. This study offers valuable insight into these critical identity development processes by listening to the voices of GBQ youth of color as they are currently experiencing these transitions. Such information is especially valuable regarding the sexual identity process because previous literature in this area has primarily relied on retrospective accounts of White adults (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). Overall, the data suggest that the development of sexual identity and ethnic identity are very different processes despite often occurring simultaneously.

Our findings reveal that both sexual and ethnic identities are forming during early to late adolescence, a time when youth are developing their unique adult identities (Adams et al., 1992; Erikson, 1980; Marcia, 1966). Contrary to what Manalansan (1996) hypothesized, youth did not experience delays in the timing of specific stages in their identity development processes as a result of being both an ethnic and a sexual minority. Instead, these two identity development processes occurred at similar time periods and, for most youth, occurred concurrently. This is consistent with Chung and Katayama's (1998) hypothesis that ethnic and sexual identity development occur simultaneously for LGB youth of color.

The differences between our findings and prior theoretical literature may be because of more recent advancements in Western society's acceptance of people from sexual minority groups. Such

a shift in societal perceptions of sexual minority people may have created more positive environments that allowed youth in our sample to develop their identities in ways that differed from projected courses described in theoretical writings. In addition, we recruited our participants primarily through GBQ community-based organizations through which they often engaged in interactions with other sexual minority individuals; thus, they may reflect a different subset of youth compared with those represented in previous theories. All of the youth reported some level of connection to other individuals in their own identified gay community, therefore indicating some level of support from other sexual minority individuals that may have facilitated their identity development. Moreover, youth in this study live in a large urban metropolitan area where there are gay-friendly neighborhoods and social venues as well as ethnic-specific neighborhoods and venues. These exist both in physical spaces and in cyberspace. Consequently, these youth are not only already connected to resources, but also have more access to additional resources they may need during their future development.

The characteristics of each identity development process and the resources that youth accessed to assist in each type of development differed. Additionally, participants did not discuss consciously using resources or knowledge garnered during one development course in the advancement of the other. For example, distinct differences existed in the triggers that prompted the ethnic and sexual identity development processes, thus experience with one type of trigger event did not assist or inform the other. Ethnic identity awareness and exploration were typically triggered by actions of others, whereas sexual identity awareness was typically triggered by the young men becoming aware of their internal feelings and attractions.

The triggers reported by youth in this study demonstrated both similarities to and differences from prior literature. Participants recalled that they were typically made aware of their ethnicity by others, through experiences of racism, through positive experiences with ethnically dissimilar individuals, or by being in an environment in which they were the only individual who belonged to a particular ethnic group. These awareness-initiating moments have been echoed in previous literature on ethnic identity development, such as Cross's (1978) and Helms's (1990) stage-status encounter and Kim's (1981) stage of awakening to social political awareness.

However, sexual identity awareness was triggered internally, by youth recognizing their sexual or romantic attraction to members of the same sex. This notion of first becoming aware of one's sexual identity solely by being aware of sexual or romantic attractions has not been previously reported in the literature. Instead, Cass (1979) suggested that although youth are aware that they are different from their heterosexual peers in some way, they are not yet aware of their same-sex attractions. Troiden (1989) stated that youth develop a monolithic concept of gay or lesbian people first and then compare their sexuality to this concept as part of their sexual identity development. In our study, youth identified their same-sex attractions first and then subsequently attached a label to this identity.

From these different means of gaining awareness regarding ethnic and sexual identity, youth then developed their identities along different pathways. Because ethnic minority youth are often connected from birth to their ethnic identity through ethnically



similar family and peer networks, they were able to consult resources within their immediate communities to develop their ethnic identity. This experience of looking inward to one's own community has been encapsulated in Phinney's (1989) stage of ethnic identity search and Cross's (1978), Helms's (1990), and Atkinson et al.'s (1979) stages–statuses of immersion–emersion. During these stages or statuses, the individual removes her- or himself from the dominant culture and develops her or his identity through an immersion into her or his respective communities.

In our study, youth did not wholly immerse themselves in systematically investigating and understanding their ethnic communities. Instead, they turned to these communities as resources to casually explore when they wanted to learn about their identity and did so without apparently neglecting other aspects of themselves. Youth gained assistance and strength from community resources such as family and peers as well as from cultural practices. By drawing on the visibly positive aspects of their ethnic communities, participants were able to develop affirming ethnic identities without encountering hostile responses from community members who do not support their sexuality. Overall, the ethnic identity process was a visible and public affair that was recognized by individuals within the youth's ethnic community.

In contrast, the process of sexual identity development was for the most part a private and solitary process. For our participants, developing their sexual identity involved a search for specific individuals who identified as GBQ, those who were both ethnically similar and dissimilar, and for organizations that catered to the needs of GBQ youth. Some youth were able to safely navigate their burgeoning sexual identity and develop connections to other GBQ individuals through the Internet, which served as an anonymous venue to explore their identity.

This process of investigating one's sexual identity is markedly different from previous theories of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989), which suggests that individuals link with more adult-oriented gay or lesbian venues, such as bars and clubs. These theories do not account for youth who may not have geographical access to gay or lesbian bars and clubs or who may not meet the age requirements to enter such establishments. Additionally, these previous theories do not account for those who are developing their identity while living with parents who may disapprove of their sexuality and who may punish youth by removing financial and/or housing support (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). As a result, much of the exploration youth reported in this study was covert and often did not involve the more public exploration reported in previous literature.

During ethnic and sexual identity development, youth from the current study identified contrasting experiences of oppression. Regarding their ethnic identity, youth indicated that they experienced both direct and indirect forms of racism from the larger White community. They also experienced oppression in the predominately White gay community in the form of eroticization and objectification because of their ethnicity and a general lack of inclusion and acceptance. In contrast, youth experienced heterosexism from the larger heterosexual community, in addition to specific acts of oppression from family members, peers, and people in their neighborhood. As a result, youth of color reported facing oppression from a variety of sources, including groups and individuals who may have been

able to play a supportive role in one of their identity development processes. This notion of multiple forms of oppression for LGB people of color from multiple sources is consistent with prior research (Bonilla & Porter, 1990; Díaz, Ayala, & Bein, 2004; Herek & Capitiano, 1995; Washington, 2001).

Participants indicated that they remained connected to both their sexual and their ethnic communities throughout their identity development processes by embracing the resources that supported their development. For example, youth stated that they maintained connections to their ethnic communities through cultural traditions and elements as well as family and friends. Youth also indicated that they felt connected with their sexual identity through organizations, social events, and the Internet. Youth were able to maintain these connections to their ethnic and sexual identities amid experiences of oppression from both communities. This contrasts with Dube and Savin-Williams's (1999) assertion that sexual minority male youth of color often have to choose between their sexual or their ethnic identity. On the contrary, youth in our study were able to manage both identities in creative and adaptive ways.

### *Implications*

Interventions and therapeutic treatment modalities that support the mental health and well-being of GBQ young men of color will benefit from addressing the different needs associated with each identity development process. Interventions should attend to elements that may facilitate the development of one identity but hinder the other and assist youth in identifying and overcoming such potential obstacles. In addition, this study demonstrates that positive interpersonal relationships, particularly with peers and family members, are essential to a healthy sense of ethnic and sexual identity. Therefore, developing and maintaining positive and supportive relationships should also be a focus of interventions for GBQ youth of color. Other, more structural interventions may focus on assisting various types of youth service providers in becoming more sensitive to and supportive of the identity needs of GBQ youth of color, especially for youth who may not have supportive peer or family relationships. Barber and Mobley (1999) suggested that providers engage in a self-reflective and exploratory process to increase their own sensitivity to the needs of GBQ male youth of color.

Connecting youth with other GBQ male youth of color may be a beneficial form of intervention. This may serve to build solidarity and to provide a forum for collectively strategizing about how to best address the challenges associated with developing two unique identities that represent communities that may be at odds with each other. Supportive connections with GBQ peers may also serve as a way for young men to see that they are not alone in their developmental journey. Intervention programs may also benefit from building a range of supportive connections between youth and ethnic minority GBQ adults. Some of the youth in the current study reported benefiting from interactions with community agency staff members who were GBQ persons of color because these individuals often served as informal role models to whom youth could turn for advice. Hearing testimonials regarding the ways in which ethnic minority GBQ adults were able to integrate their ethnic and sexual

orientation identities and succeed in various aspects of their life (e.g., family, career, and community) could serve as a useful adjunct to interventions. In addition, a more formalized mentorship program for GBQ male youth of color could provide a continual form of support and would be invaluable to youth as they develop their multiple identities.

Youth must also be equipped with means of coping with different types of oppression from multiple sources, and interventions should teach youth how to navigate potentially oppressive communities. Successful intervention may involve the identification and use of coping resources, such as supportive physical locations, educational materials, and Internet Web sites and message boards. Although the Internet can provide GBQ youth with a way to cope by creating their own communities, exploring their identities, and creating social change as they connect with one another (Russell, 2002), youth may need guidance in using this resource in a safe manner given the potential for exploitation and connection with negative peers.

In addition, youth can be taught the skills needed to combat oppressive societal forces by engaging in social action activities such as community organizing and political activism. Interventions may help to increase youths' sociopolitical awareness related to oppressive actions aimed at both their ethnicity and their sexual orientation and engage youth in social and political activities such as letter-writing campaigns to elected officials and fund-raising events to support affirming community organizations (Harper, 2007).

Data from the current study suggest that the identity development process is very personal and involves reflection and integration of many societal and cultural messages and concepts. The process of participating in research itself can be a validating and enriching experience for participants, especially for LGB youth (Harper, Jamil, & Wilson, 2007). Consequently, on the basis of observations from the data and the manner in which participants reacted to the data collection process, a personal reflective component is recommended for interventions. This may involve journal writing, projective drawings, storytelling, or exercises involving calm and collected thought, such as meditation or deep breathing. This independent and reflective process is particularly important and beneficial for individuals such as GBQ ethnic minority youth, who may appreciate a space in which to reflect independently amid stresses associated with their various identities. Additionally, youth may benefit from an opportunity to be validated through expressing their stories and experiences afterward with other peers in a group setting.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

One strength of this study is that it examined identity development from the perspective and voices of participants during their adolescence, as opposed to relying on retrospective reports from adults. Therefore, youth could more easily access important or relevant steps in the identity development process. The phenomenological framework that guided the interview process was another strength because this allowed youth to define and describe their identity using their own words and conceptualizations, after which interviewers guided them through an in-depth exploration of factors that influenced each specific identity development. This interview approach avoided the use of predetermined heteronor-

native sexual orientation and ethnicity labels that may have restricted participants' responses. Another strength was the study's purposive sampling method, which ensured that participants who were interviewed reflected a variety of diverse experiences and backgrounds. The rigor of the validation procedures, which involved multiple levels of feedback from youth and adult experts working with youth, was another methodological strength.

A potential limitation of the current study is that we recruited participants only through community agencies that serve LGBTQ youth. Therefore, participants were already accessing connections with their sexual identity community, which may be associated with a positive sense of identity. It may be that those youth who have not accessed community agencies have a different identity development trajectory. It is clear from the breadth of responses provided that factors other than community agencies did facilitate sexual identity development. As a focused qualitative phenomenological study, the results provided here can direct future and more comprehensive research on this topic, which may capture the experiences of those not interviewed in this study.

Another limitation was that the interview guide did not ask participants to discuss the specific steps in their ethnic and sexual identity development process. Furthermore, participants were interviewed at only one time point, and subsequent interviews were not conducted with youth over time as they developed their identities. Also, because the study focused on two ethnic groups, the findings cannot be generalized to youth from other ethnic minority groups. Additionally, for purposes of parsimony in the data analysis process, we did not investigate between-groups differences among African American and Latino participants; however, overall the development processes were similar.

### *Directions for Future Research*

The current study provides a beginning framework for understanding the ethnic and sexual identity development processes of GBQ male adolescents. Future research may benefit from a more detailed account of the historical events associated with the identity development process. This may take the form of a more in-depth interview focused exclusively on each identity development process, possibly occurring across multiple sessions. A longitudinal design may also be more beneficial in encapsulating the specific identity development stages as they occur for these youth. Additionally, a longitudinal design may provide youth with the opportunity to expound or reflect on previously voiced material in later interview sessions.

Future research may also investigate identity development processes by interviewing individuals recruited from a variety of venues, such as through the Internet, GBQ-oriented clubs, or peer networks. Such studies may also investigate the identity development process as it occurs for other ethnic minorities or individuals in different geographic regions. Comparisons across various ethnic groups are also important because the processes may vary significantly depending on specific ethnic and cultural factors. Future research may also investigate the identity development process as it occurs for individuals who are part of older age groups and among female youth.

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