"It's Kind of Apples and Oranges": Gay College Males' Conceptions of Gender Transgression as Poverty

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"It's Kind of Apples and Oranges": Gay College Males' Conceptions of Gender Transgression as Poverty

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which gay males in college make meaning of gender variance and transgressions from the gender binary as a form of poverty. Using epistemological bricolage, the researchers analyzed data from 17 self-identified gay cisgender males attending three colleges in Southern California. Participants represented an array of racial backgrounds and were between 20 and 23 years old. The researchers posit that three key elements influence these gay males' meaning making: (1) gender coding and policing, (2) hyperawareness of gender transgressions, and (3) reifying hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords

epistemological bricolage, gay males, gender, gender transgression, masculinities

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The terms *gay*, (e.g., Dilley, 2005; Marine, 2011) *queer*, (e.g., Rhoads, 1994; Umphrey, 1995; Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005; Renn, 2010) and *transgender* (e.g., Valentine, 2007) continue to evolve and be sites of contestation in which definitions, self-identification, and coalition building are not only difficult between groups, but also within groups. Furthermore, while many social service agencies and universities have created offices representing and in support of sexual orientations and gender identities under the moniker of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT), this conflation "is contested in theory and in practice" (Renn, 2010, p. 132). It is due precisely to these contested and multiple meanings of categories and definitions that further explanation is warranted, not just of themselves, but also of their potential intersections, particularly as it relates to the services provided by these agencies and offices.

Similarly, the concept of masculinity (or masculinities) continues to evolve through the work by scholars of men and masculinities studies (Kimmel, 2008; Laker & Davis, 2011; O'Neil & Crapser, 2012; Reeser, 2010). The seminal work of James O'Neil and his colleagues around gender role conflict, or men's fear of femininity, continues to serve as foundational knowledge when working with college men (O'Neil & Crapser, 2011; O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 2010). O'Neil et al. (2010) discussed six patterns that exist within gender role conflict which include: "(1) restrictive emotionality, (2) homophobia, (3) socialized control, power, and competition, (4) restrictive sexual and affectionate behavior, (5) obsession with achievement and success and (6) health care problems" (pp. 33-34). This concept of gender role conflict also creates a dangerous cycle of socialization for males due to the restrictive and limiting behaviors that are placed upon them due to this fear of femininity (O'Neil et al., 2010), which further manifests in men's acceptance and enactment of sexist values, attitudes, and behaviors (Kimmel, 2008). Additionally, gender role conflict reifies hegemonic notions of the categorization of masculinity.

That individuals categorize themselves and others is an innocuous observation. However, as Valentine (2007) suggested, "the ways in which these categorizations are made, and which categories come to have effects in the world, are never neutral" (p. 5). Cisgender[1] gay males represent one population within which one can explore the effects of intra-group categorizations, specifically in relation to expressions of femininity. As a population, cisgender gay males maintain certain privileges due to their gender identity (i.e., men), but also face oppression due to their sexual orientation (i.e., gay). Given these complexities, the purpose of this paper is to blend constructivist and critical theoretical perspectives, or what Kincheloe (2001) referred to as epistemological bricolage, to explore the ways in which self-identified gay males make meaning of gender variance and transgression from the gender binary as a form of poverty within the gay male population. The questions framing the inquiry are:

1. What are the ways in which gay males make meaning of multiple expressions of masculinity within the gay male community?
2. How do hegemonic masculinity, sexism, and genderism influence the meaning making of gay males?
3. How do the intersections of gay males' multiple identities influence their understandings of gender expression?

A Word on Poverty

Poverty [pov-er-tee]
1. The state or condition of having little or no money, goods, or means of support;

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[1] Cisgender is a term that refers to individuals whose assigned sex at birth aligns with their gender identity (e.g., someone who is assigned a female sex at birth and self-identifies as a woman).

condition of being poor.

2. Deficiency of necessary or desirable ingredients, qualities, etc.: "poverty of the soil."

3. Scantiness; insufficiency: "Their efforts to stamp out disease were hampered by a poverty of medical supplies." (Poverty, n.d.)

Before moving to the findings of our study, it is important to discuss what we mean by using the words poverty and poor. As the definition above mentions, the words poverty and poor are most commonly associated with socioeconomic class and a lack of money or wealth. However, within our work, we are using these terms in a new way to signify a deficiency or insufficiency. Admittedly, these are loaded terms, especially when used in conjunction with marginalized communities (e.g., gay males, transgender students). Although our use of the words poverty or poor could be misconstrued, we use them in this study to relate to the way gay male participants saw gender variance and gay male femininity as a deficiency of necessary or desirable qualities. We do not mean our use of these terms to signal that gay males and/or gender nonconforming individuals are somehow deficient. Rather, we seek to uncover the ways in which gay male participants view gender variance and transgressing the gender binary, specifically gay male femininity, as a form of poverty. Put another way, the participants in this study illuminated the potential for intragroup dissonance and stratification within the gay male community. Furthermore, it is important to note the dissonance and stratification elucidated by the data pervaded all relationships participants had with other gay males, be they romantic or otherwise. In this sense, findings from the present study have wide-reaching implications for how gay males interact with and understand other gay males, regardless of any romantic attachments or proclivities they may have for one another. While we—one of us identifies as gender nonconforming—do not see either

cisgender or gender variant gay males as deficient, it is important for us to uncover and investigate how gay males view their gender nonconforming peers as such. Doing so will allow educators to gain a better understanding of the confluences and tensions among gay and gender nonconforming students. This study, although specific to the aforementioned student populations, also has implications for understanding the complexities of inter- and intragroup subcultural politics.

Method

The original qualitative study for which these data were gathered used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005, 2006) as a means of understanding how gay males in college made meaning of their multiple identities, specifically their sense of masculinity and sexuality. Constructivist grounded theory, which differs from traditional positivist grounded theory, situates the data collected within the systems of which participants are a part, including the researcher whose positionality plays a role in making sense and meaning of the data as well (Charmaz, 2005). Although the original study used constructivist grounded theory, we utilized a different epistemological lens (i.e., epistemological bricolage, which is discussed in the next section) to draw findings and implications from the data.

Seventeen cisgender gay males between 20 to 23 years of age who were either attending or had recently graduated from three different universities in a metropolitan area of Southern California were selected for this study. All participants were given a pseudonym, which are used throughout this paper. Open sampling (Patton, 2002) was used through the use of an online demographic survey that was distributed to potential participants through campus listserves, Facebook, and in-person calls for participants at campus LGBT organization meetings. From those individuals who completed the online

survey, the 17 participants were selected using maximum variation and discriminate sampling (Patton, 2002) by selecting individuals whose backgrounds, including campus affiliation, race, religion, and social class, were different from others previously selected to participate. Additionally, the study employed discriminate sampling to select participants with specific demographics not represented by previously selected participants to test the initial theory (Charmaz, 2006). While one's gender performance was not a factor for inclusion in the study, out of the 17 participants, four identified as very masculine, 11 identified as somewhat masculine, and two identified as "not masculine at all" or "effeminate."

Participants were each interviewed in-depth twice. In the first interview, participants completed an activity adapted from Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, which indicated the saliency of certain social identities, including their race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and socioeconomic class. During the first interview, participants were asked questions, such as "When did you first realize that you might not be heterosexual?," 'What comes to mind for you when you hear the word masculinity?," "Based upon how you think about masculinity, where do you place yourself in that?," and "What have been some of the most significant—either positive or negative—experiences and/or events you've had in college?." In the second interview, follow up questions from the first interview were asked. Examples included "When thinking about your time in college specifically, what messages have you received about what it means to be a man?," "In what ways have your relationships, as friends or intimate partners, with other men influenced your identity as a gay man?," and "How have other men played a role, if at all, in how you think about your own sense of masculinity?" Additionally, after the first interview, each participant responded to journal prompts about their sense of masculinity, their sexual

orientation, and the intersections of their identities.

All interviews were transcribed and data were coded and analyzed via initial, axial, and theoretical coding schemas (Saldaña, 2009) as were researcher field notes and analytic coding memos. A peer debriefing team of three individuals (two White, heterosexual, cisgender males and one White, genderqueer nonconforming individual) reviewed all data and provided feedback and insights on our initial and categorical coding schema. Following data analysis, eight participants took part in a focus group to review the initial emergent theory and provide feedback on the major themes and subthemes of the study, which aided in triangulating the data and increased trustworthiness.

A collection of subthemes from the original constructivist grounded theory study involved the notion of intragroup gender variance. As a result, we chose to analyze the data involving this theme using epistemological bricolage. This will be discussed in-depth in this next section.

The Case for Epistemological Bricolage

Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) stated, "Various paradigms are beginning to 'interbreed' such that two theorists previously thought to be in irreconcilable conflict may now appear, under a different theoretical rubric, to be informing one another's argument" (p. 97). The current study is an example of this statement, as it emanated from conversations between the two of us—a constructivist theorist and a critical theorist—on how to use both theoretical perspectives to understand how gay males make meaning of their masculinity. Not only do we occupy different theoretical perspectives, but the current study employs a critical theoretical lens with a constructivist lens, making use of the notion of epistemological bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001). This

approach recognizes the overlaps between multiple theoretical perspectives (Abes, 2009) and seeks to exploit these to the benefit of the data analysis, research findings, and study implications. Echoing the notion of bricolage used by Hebdige (2002) in the (re) articulation of subcultural style, Kincheloe (2001) insisted epistemological bricolage was an appropriate strategy in which researchers should partake, stating:

> As bricoleurs recognize the limitations of a single method, the discursive strictures of one disciplinary approach, what is missed by traditional practices of validation, the historicity of certified modes of knowledge production, the inseparability of knower and known, and the complexity and heterogeneity of all human experience, they understand the necessity of new forms of rigor in the research process. (p. 681)

Researchers who are bricoleurs recognize that solitary theoretical perspectives are incomplete (Abes, 2009) and, as such, are unable to explain fully the complexities of social phenomena. By incorporating multiple perspectives and readings of a single data set, researchers are able to create new understandings of the research itself. Due to our different epistemological frames, we engaged in a great deal of reflexivity and dialogue because there are natural tensions as well as areas of congruence that exist based upon our collaborations (see Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014). Not only did we discuss the ways our perspectives converged and diverged epistemologically, but we also discussed the different ways we made meaning of data based on our different paradigmatic orientations. These alternative readings of data are often included in this article side-by-side with one another, thus allowing readers to get a sense for how the same data can be understood from multiple perspectives and, as a result, offer more nuanced insights into possible implications and future recommendations of the research itself.

Findings

After we analyzed the data, we found three key concepts that illuminate the process by which gay college males make meaning of intragroup gender variance. These three themes include: (1) gender coding and policing (an interpersonal construct); (2) hyperawareness of gender transgressions (an intrapersonal construct); and (3) the reification of hegemonic masculinity (a sociocultural construct). For those participants who upheld and engaged in these actions, they perceived being rewarded by others for their complicity, whereas men who did not perceived themselves as being in poverty in terms of their gender variance. As we will discuss in more depth below, the gay males experience each of these concepts on individual, group, and systemic levels.

Gender Coding and Policing

Study participants had substantial experiences with gender policing and coding, both exhibited by, and enacted toward, them. Gender coding is the interpersonal process by which one makes assumptions about another person's gender (Berila, 2011; Kimmel, 2008). Gender policing occurs when people's behavior and actions are regulated based on how others code one's gender expression (Berila, 2011; Kimmel, 2008). For example, people police another individual's gender when they prevent someone from using a particular restroom based on how they have coded that person's gender rather than how that person identifies. Almost all of the participants struggled with the concept of masculinity as it related to them and expressed feeling as though others would not see them as fully masculine due to being gay. Thus, participants were reifying what it means to be both a "good" or "poor" gay male, a juxtaposition that played out internally and externally. Many of the participants shared stories of homophobic (and therefore, hegemonic) behaviors enacted towards others, particularly prior to coming

out. For instance, Brandon stated:

> I know I was guilty of [becoming homophobic] in high school. I mean, I knew I was gay, but I didn't want to be gay. So instead of, like, feeling comfortable, I took it out on people that were more feminine than me.

The desire to pass as heterosexual during high school was particularly salient for most of the males in this study. Out of 17 participants, only four were out openly prior to college. As a result, from a young age, the majority of the males felt a strong need, for an array of reasons, to suppress their sexuality until they were away at college. These included fear of rejection and alienation by friends and family, concerns of how they would be perceived if they came out as gay, and exposure as witnesses to how negatively peers treated those students who were openly gay.

Gender coding and policing affected their intimate relationships as well. For example, Mason, a participant in the study who self-identified as "not masculine at all," discussed his difficulties in connecting with other gay males; he recounted another gay male telling him, "You're just too feminine for me." This explicit and direct message from another gay male signaled to Mason that his overtly feminine gender performance was a diminished—or a poor—display of masculinity. Similarly, Peter, another participant, recalled how his boyfriend also did not match up to the initial ideal masculine image Peter had for his eventual boyfriend. He stated:

> He has these little mannerisms. You know, the way he sits. Sometimes the way that his hand floats like this sometimes. [Puts a "limp wrist" in the air.] And normally I would view those things as kind of a turnoff, but with him, I kind of got beyond it. So it's interesting because in my head, I was like, "I figured out this perfect image of what my eventual boyfriend was going to be like, and I initially thought he was going to fit

it, and then I realized that he doesn't." But Peter's word choice was particularly important here. He "kind of got beyond it" seemed to belie that, in an ideal world, his boyfriend would not have these mannerisms and that he would be just as masculine (if not, more masculine) than him. This form of overt gender policing reifies a view of alternative expressions of masculinity as a form of poverty as understood from the definition previously mentioned in this paper.

Sexual roles with other males tended to also produce gender coding and policing. Through the interview process, approximately half of the participants indicated they had sexual encounters with other males. As a result, many of the participants mentioned a strong sense of external and internal processing about the messages of masculinity and sexual roles. They indicated that being the "top," or the one penetrating his partner, was seen to be more masculine while being the "bottom," or the partner being penetrated, was to be more feminine. Bryan recounts his feelings on this topic, saying:

> I guess I've always been lucky in terms of who I've had sexual encounters with, but yeah.I mean, I wouldn't mind bottoming or whatever. It's the thing that I don't want to feel like I'm always on the feminine side of having sex. Stuff like that. Because you know, in my head, if you're taking it, then you are more of the woman, and for me, it's always—I've always tried to be more masculine and manly so I don't get the stereotypical gay attachment to me.

Bryan's statement illuminated two issues. First, he established an equation in which "bottoming" was synonymous with being more feminine. Secondly, Bryan expressed a propensity to avoid being seen as feminine, which he saw as a pejorative stereotype of gay males. While Bryan's statement provides insight into how gay males make meaning of sexual encounters and sex roles, it also displays the confluence of sexism and genderism (Wilchins, 2002; Bilodeau,

2009). Genderism is defined as the privileging of cisgender experiences over those that transgress the gender binary. Furthermore, this sort of internalized gender policing is limiting. Through Bryan's own words, one can see that his desire to maintain an image of the masculine male came through limiting his own behaviors, even sexually, because he did not want others to perceive him as a poor gay male. This analysis highlights multiple issues. First, Bryan's internalized gender policing is informed by sexism due to equating femininity as negative. Secondly, and perhaps more to the point for this particular analysis, is the conflation of a feminine gender presentation with a poor representation of gay masculinity. This analysis is consistent with Pascoe's (2007) concept of gender-based homophobia as well as Namaste's (2006) notion of "genderbashing," which suggested that much of the violence—physical and otherwise—gay males experienced was actually based on others' coding them as overtly feminine. This mentality was prevalent among most of the participants in this study.

Hyperawareness of Gender Transgressions

Participants connected gender transgressions to their own meaning making in a variety of ways. These gender transgressions often were experienced as larger societal issues that were then internalized by the participants. For example, the Proposition 8 movement in California, a public referendum created to eliminate same-sex marriage in the state, was a component of a larger political agenda foregrounding the needs and desires of some within the LGBT community, specifically lesbian and gay individuals interested in marriage. At the same time, the Prop 8 movement kept other issues (e.g., increasing intragroup acceptance for alternative gender expressions, an issue that increases a sense of safety and a sense of belonging for all individuals) in the background (Conrad, 2010; Halberstam, 2012). Several of the study

participants discussed their involvement in the Prop 8 rallies and events as meaningful and important to their sense of self (e.g., Jonathan participated in several marches and rallies; Brandon debated the issue with classmates and wrote political pieces on his blog). However, the Prop 8 movement itself was steeped in the very heteronormative ideal of the need to marry. This also reflects a very homonormative ideal (Warner, 1999), which signals that gay males who are not committed to marriage equality are in "poor" form or are out of step with the gay rights movement. Here again, we found the notion of poverty through re-reading the transcripts from participant interviews.

Media representation of gay males was another avenue by which gender transgressions played into the participants' meaning making. During a focus group for this research, participants discussed the media representation of gay males frequently. They mentioned the television show *Will & Grace*, and it seemed to trigger conversation among the participants pertaining to gay stereotypes. The character of Jack, the effeminate gay male, was brought up by Marc as a good example of a stereotype he was trying to avoid; other participants agreed that while they grew up watching the show and found Jack to be funny, they did not want to be perceived as being similar to him as a gay male in college.

The presence of media in these gay males' lives and its influence on their socialization is constant, and the males within this study reiterated that. Discussing the media's messages around gender, Mason stated:

> I guess a lot of our definitions of masculinity come from the media and how it's portrayed in magazines. I think [of] someone with a beard or a lot of facial hair, someone that's muscular, someone that has a deep voice, and I think we place a lot of value on masculinity as opposed to femininity. And I think we look at effeminate men [as] less than

men because they don't necessarily have the facial hair or they don't have the deep voice.

Likewise, Will's concept of masculinity was steeped in hegemonic masculinity and conflated with males who were high profile or in higher paying positions due to their stature and strong personalities. In an interview, Brandon mentioned the fact that sexual orientation was becoming less of an obstacle in society by highlighting individuals like Ellen DeGeneres or Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple. However, he did acknowledge there were still clear obstacles for less masculine gay males, saying, "I think what's more important, I think sadly, is traditional male gender traits because I think society is more down on flamboyant gays than just gay people." The privileging of masculinity relayed through messages from the media and others had a significant impact on the meaning making of the participants.

Gender transgressions experienced by the participants were also influenced by others' perceptions of media as well. Bryan discussed watching the reality television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* with his parents while he was in high school and before he had come out as gay. In this show, five gay males would give a straight male an unexpected makeover. While the show reinforced certain gay male stereotypes for Bryan, his father's reaction to the show also proved to be significant. He recalled:

And my dad, there would be a gay moment and my dad would be like, "That's very gay." I'd be like, "Yeah, that was a really gay moment." Like he's, like, I can't think of a specific thing off the top of my head, but yeah, it'd be a gay moment. And I'd laugh, but then at the same time, in the back of my head, it'd be like, "Oh, I guess that's who I shouldn't be".But yeah, that would be one instance where I'd say that my dad's perspective on the gay community kinda turned me—or made me be kind of anti-that. Be the complete opposite…try to be the

complete opposite of that. So you know, not being involved in fashion and grooming and all that kind of stuff, but be more into sports.

Participants internalized the messages they heard from others, which played into the dichotomous gender societal roles. As a result, Bryan and other participants felt compelled to eschew anything socially ascribed as "too feminine," again reinforcing the idea that to be feminine is equated with a form of poverty of intragroup gender variance.

Exposure to the gay community off campus allowed for many of the study participants to grapple with gender transgressions individually, but also within the larger LGBT community. While discussing his recent 21st birthday outing with friends, Mason recalled his friend giving him a pink sash that had "Fabulous" written across it. Immediately after, he learned his friend was taking him to a straight bar instead of a bar in the gay neighborhood of the city. He said:

I was like, "Really?!" It's really straight there. So I think I was kind of practicing that sort of transphobia of wearing something that was feminine. I eventually took it off.

And I feel bad because she went all over the place to try to get that sash, but yes, even small instances like that, that [sic] our aversion towards that, anything that's feminine."

Mason raised this story during the focus group, and other participants interjected their own thoughts. In response, Marc said:

What's interesting is if you were out with your friends or maybe if you went out to [the gay neighborhood], you wouldn't even second-guess it, wearing pink and "fabulous."

Just knowing that there are straight people who are different from you, you're worried about their perception.

On one hand, Mason's and Marc's responses to this situation were perfectly understandable. There are sizeable risks and potential consequences inherent in a male wearing

a pink sash that states "fabulous" on it in a neighborhood bar that caters to predominantly straight college students. One's personal safety and well-being could be compromised by such behavior. On the other hand, limiting one's behavior upholds hegemonic ideals about masculinity while simultaneously further enacting genderism that reifies the gender binary. In essence, by not wearing the sash, Mason admitted his actions led to viewing gender transgressions, even his own, as a form of poverty. By admitting his fear of not being safe wearing the sash, he acknowledged being weak in the face of danger and risk, which can be seen by others as being feminine. Although issues of safety and risk could have played a factor, Mason did not state this, but instead said his actions were in response to societal pressures of behaving in ways that are socially acceptable for a male.

While one's behaviors may shift in different spaces (e.g., wearing the sash may not feel appropriate in a predominantly heterosexual space, yet it may be quite acceptable in a gay-affirming space), some of the college males felt as though these notions of hegemonic masculinity still were very present within gay-affirming spaces as well. Masculinities scholars (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris, 2010; Kimmel, 2008) have often discussed the connection between hegemonic masculinity and the hypersexualization of college males through a culture of hooking up and the prevalence of alcohol abuse. The gay male participants in this study demonstrated the ways in which hegemonic masculinity played a role in their lives. Luke explained:

> Since being 21 and being able to go out in [the gay neighborhood], there's a negative impact that I've noticed which is that I'm seeking that relationship-oriented person, and I'm not finding it. Everyone's out to have sex with you…. But I've seen that without my group of friends out there, it wouldn't be a place that I would really enjoy. It would probably represent

that frustrating atmosphere of going out and getting too drunk and all of that.

Similarly, Will, who was a part of the friend group Luke referred to above, acknowledged messages around masculinity were often a part of the gay bar culture, in particular hypersexuality and the competitive and aggressive nature of hooking up with others, both of which are consistent with O'Neil's (1981) elucidation of male gender role conflict and strain. He said, "I think, like, especially if you go to bars and stuff, there's a big…it's like if you're more masculine, you're thought of as higher. I don't know. Sometimes it feels like that." Additionally, some of the participants mentioned using "hook-up" phone applications, such as Grindr, or social network websites geared to gay men, such as Adam4Adam, as ways to connect, but often these were for the sole purpose of engaging in sex with other males. Luke mentioned hypersexualization connected to these sites, responding, "Things like Grindr actually are bringing out the worst in you because it's very shallow because there's only certain things that you can divulge about yourself, so I feel it's a recipe for disaster." Many of the participants, such as Luke and Nate, discussed a desire to do something beyond going to a gay bar or club and drinking and dancing with their friends. For instance, Nate said how he wished that he and his friends could just go hang out a coffee shop on a Friday night and have a conversation together, but that he knew that instead they would all end up at a popular dance club. Neither Luke nor Nate actually admitted their desires to their friends; instead, they just went along with the status quo, afraid that their friends may not be interested in shifting from their routine.

Even in gay-affirming spaces, one's gender transgressions were closely monitored by oneself and others. The study participants discussed many of their behaviors within gay-affirming spaces, which were fraught with deeply held notions that reify hegemon-

ic masculinity. By engaging in these behaviors, these males are replicating and supporting patterns that only disservice them. For example, many of the participants attempted to avoid falling into traps of the "stereotypical" gay male, but in fact, they only followed other held stereotypes (e.g., gay males are only interested in sex, significant use of alcohol). In this way, gender transgressions serve to limit the full range of possibilities for one's sense of self, as some possibilities were understood to be connected to being in "poor" standing with other gay males.

Reifying Hegemonic Masculinity

The illusion of a cohesive LGBT community was not as tight as the often-cited moniker would have one believe, especially with the view held by some gay males in the study that to transgress from expressing hegemonic masculinity was to be a poor gay male. Put a different way, some participants understood any gender expression that strayed from dominant masculine gender norms as a form of poverty. Moreover, participants expressed using gender transgressions, marked as a form of poverty, to castigate gay males they deemed to be too feminine to the fringes of the gay male community. Luke stated this best when he said:

> There's [sic] so many parallels between the trans community and the gay community; some so that aren't really related. Sometimes I feel like we're all grouped together, but there's so much about transgendered [sic] people that I don't understand. And I'm willing to understand, but to me…it's kind of apples and oranges a little bit.

Echoing this thought, Brandon said:

> It seems like our culture, the LGBT subculture, like [Luke] said, we lump everything together. But I don't think that we represent transgender issues or even want to represent them as LGBT people—we want to ignore them because a lot of gay people are transphobic.

Brandon's words, however, are curious given that in a previous interview he used language that could only be called transphobic and sexist when discussing his own growing acceptance of transgender people and/or males who were less masculine. He stated:

> Because when I, when I was a kid, still even once I came out, I didn't understand why if you're lucky enough to be born a male, and you want to go get it chopped off? But I didn't understand the psychology behind it, feeling that they're [sic] a woman trapped in a man's body.

Brandon's limited understanding of what it means to be transgender (e.g., that to be transgender means one wants to "get it chopped off") and his framing transgender identities in psychological discourse, serving to pathologize transgender individuals, is fraught with transphobic notions. Not being able to understand how someone identifies makes sense, and could point to a sincere confusion on his behalf, despite his potentially wanting to be accepting. However, Brandon's remarks also conveyed a misinformed understanding of transgender people in his saying they were "a woman trapped in a man's body," which he "didn't understand." This disconnect reinforces our position as researchers that the genderism (and sexism) participants expressed call the seeming cohesiveness of the LGBT community in question. While other scholars have made this point (e.g., Halberstam, 1998b; Hale, 1998; Spade, 2008; Valentine, 2007), it has yet to be situated in a college context until now.

However, the participants who upheld certain hegemonic notions around masculinity felt this sense of discord more than those who saw themselves as less masculine. In discussing his hopes for greater acceptance within society around gender fluidity, Mason voiced his desire, saying:

> I think when you have gender identity or gender performance issues, those conflicts, it kind of tears you apart. You wonder, "What am I?" And you don't feel like you are on ground level, you're unstable. You're questioning your core, what you

thought you were.

While he acknowledged that sense of meaning making was potentially "liberating," he also understood it would take a significant amount of time and work to make that change holistically. In other words, although Mason himself identified as more feminine, his suggestion that "gender identity or gender performance issues" likely made one feel unstable is a manifestation of genderism brought about by the sociocultural privileging of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, although Mason felt that his own enactments of femininity were liberating for him on a personal level, and he was comfortable transgressing hegemonic gender norms, he was also reifying these norms by suggesting that gender nonconformity "tears you apart."

There was often a lack of desire by the participants to challenge the social gender binary despite acknowledging the negative consequences of upholding both hegemonic masculinity and cisgender privilege. Even while these males are gay, which puts them on the margins of what it means to "be a man" and thereby being "poor," they still strove to be seen as "normal men," which meant not troubling the gender binary through their language and gender expression. This finding extends Bilodeau's (2005, 2009) finding that genderism exists throughout the collegiate environs by suggesting gay males comply with and further this form of oppression. Therefore, genderism, gender-based homophobia, and sexism intersect with one another to create conditions for poverty for those who do not uphold hegemonic-based gender norms and expectations. The participants were keenly aware that many people hold gendered expectations for others. And, as Mason stated, "if you don't follow [those expectations], you're just an outcast or you're gay or lesbian. That's what we [as a society] typically think." This fear of being a social outcast pressed upon the gay male participants, providing the impetus for their viewing gender transgressions as a form of poverty and, as a result, upholding hege-

monic masculinity.

Fear of judgment and others' perceptions was a significant factor in keeping the gender binary in place. Will discussed this fear of judgment when he mentioned the upcoming drag show on his campus, saying:

> The three of us [referring to Marc, Luke, and himself] have talked about, "Oh, we would totally be in it if it was just our group." But I don't want to dress up in drag in front of the whole campus. Like, it's just what you're comfortable with, and obviously no one in our group is going to judge us and make pre-judgments on how we're dressed because obviously we trust each other. But none of us want to do that in front of the whole school with people that we're in class with.

This fear of judgment, rooted in gender role conflict (O'Neil et al., 2010), plays a significant role in limiting one's gender performance and one's acceptance for the broad spectrum of gender performances of others as well. Mason discussed his own need to "confront masculinity at an earlier age and what it means to me" in regards to dismissing the traditionally upheld gender binary because he did not conform to that binary. Being told throughout his life that he was not masculine enough, but still identifying as a man, he said:

> Accepting myself even though there are many people trying to herd me in, trying to reel me into their thoughts and the way that they think about gender, and I think that's the struggle is that when people are trying to pull you out, well, pull you in, you're trying to pull yourself out.

By reifying hegemonic masculinity, the gay males in this study perpetuate a cycle whereby they participate in psychic violence against gay males as well as others who do not fit the traditional scripts for gendered expectations. Mason's own lived experiences as a male who does not fit the hegemonic notions of masculinity illuminate the difficulties that exist in a society that continues

to uphold the rigidity of the gender binary.

Implications

The findings of this study on gay college males' meaning making of intragroup gender variance have some significant implications in both practice and research. It must be noted that these implications come from the data, but also from the process by which we as the researchers also conducted this work. Through the lens of epistemological bricolage, we, as researchers, had to make meaning of our interpretations of the data through a shared process of dialogue while continuing to respect and honor the meaning made by the participants. Therefore, the meaning making processes of both the participants and us as researchers worked in conjunction to provide insights into this topic.

One key implication for practice is the need for educators to be conscious of the vast intragroup diversity that exists within identity groups. From the findings of this specific study, the participants found themselves engaging in as well as experiencing gender coding and policing, which was deeply connected to an internalized hyperawareness of gender transgressions. Additionally, these behaviors then led to the reification of hegemonic masculinity—a sociocultural system—among the males in ways that were ultimately doing them harm (despite some participants' perceptions that upholding these hegemonic norms was productive and beneficial for them). The interpersonal and intrapersonal violence that resulted from the reification of hegemonic masculinity (in which they themselves participated) has detrimental consequences for gay males, among other marginalized populations. For example, sexism, gender-based homophobia or genderbashing, and transphobia are endemic to gay male populations, and create conditions where those gay males who transgress hegemonic gender norms are made to feel like 'poor gay men,' are ostracized from gay male peer groups, or are policed

into conformity by their peers. As a result, practitioners should take care to not assume knowledge or understanding of anyone based on identity markers or labels. Each student's developmental process is different, and as a result, we must keep in mind that just because someone identifies with or as a particular identity (e.g., gay) does not mean he, she, or ze has the same meaning of that identity as someone else (Sedgwick, 2008).

To take this one step further, higher education professionals must be reflexive of the ways in which they may be complicit in the promulgation of gender coding and policing that reinforces hegemonic masculinity. We encourage colleagues to interrogate systems that uphold hegemonic ideals, rewarding individuals who adhere to rigid gender binaries and traditional gender role expectations. These ideals are often deeply embedded within higher education institutions and are viewed by many as status quo. Therefore, they may not always be easily identified. However, we suggest educators use the following questions as a way to begin exploring one's own adherence to hegemonic masculinity: In what ways am I complicit in enforcing gender norms to students and colleagues on campus? How do the programs, services, and initiatives my office or department offers maintain a rigid gender binary? Can we create opportunities to engage students around healthy, positive masculinities rather than messages steeped in hegemonic masculinity? By critiquing and challenging the ways in which higher education institutions as systems have maintained genderism, sexism, and heterosexism, we may open a door to possibilities that can signal for students that their behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes must shift as well in these areas.

From both a research and practice perspective, the power of transformative dialogue is also inherent in the participation in reflective-oriented processes. For the particular study highlighted in this paper, Dan used a focus group as both a means for data

collection, but also for member checking. The focus group was conducted after data analysis had been completed and served as an opportunity to see if the emerging theory from the data held up for the males who participated in the study. Prior to the focus group, however, Dan worked with his team of peer reviewers, of which Z was a part, and identified certain themes or subthemes that had emerged as key findings. As a result, when facilitating the focus group, Dan was able to challenge the males to think about certain aspects of themselves they may have not previously considered (e.g., one's sense of privilege around race or gender, the impact of heteronormativity and genderism on their daily lives). By creating space for these males to be reflective, they, in turn, were able to engage themselves and their peers in challenging assumptions in a respectful manner. Using Sanford's (1966) notion of challenge and support, the focus group facilitation was completed in a way that was supportive and ethically sound, but also challenged the students to be critically reflective of themselves, their identities, and their potential biases in a way that promoted growth and development. It is entirely possible for these types of discussions to occur outside of a research study. Practitioners are encouraged to consider opportunities where critical dialogue can happen between students, particularly sexual minorities, to consider themselves and others in new ways.

Within this study, the participants possessed a wide array of social identities; however, we recognize that there were few or no African American, Native/Indigenous, or Latino/Hispanic gay males. Although we cannot draw any findings from the current data to discuss particular ethnoracial notions of masculinity as they intersect with notions of poverty, we believe this to be an important next step for research on masculinities. While the data collected for this current study was bound by time and place (e.g., the student demographics of the three institutions where data was collected were predom-

inantly White and Asian Pacific Islander), the lack of representation of participants with other subordinated racial identities does not signal a lack of importance of these populations in future studies. We encourage fellow researchers in the areas of masculinities and gender studies to explore these themes in divergent populations. We also recognize that the participants that we had self-selected into this study, and some participants of subordinated racial identity groups, do not identify with the word "gay." Future researchers should consider different terms, such as same-gender loving, men who have sex with men, nonheterosexual, or queer, to address issues of inclusion (or exclusion) from this work.

Another key implication from this research is the need for greater specificity with the language we as educators use. A critique we have of contemporary masculinity studies is the use of language, which tends to reify the gender binary. For example, when scholars use the term "college men," they are often not talking about college men, a category that would include, for example, transmen (e.g., Green, 2004) and the expression of female masculinity (e.g., Halberstam, 1998a; Pascoe, 2007). Instead, they are discussing college males, thereby reinforcing a binary that establishes a flawed logic for the gender-based homophobia and transphobia these individuals exhibit. This study has peeled back a layer on the scholarship being done on college men. Even through the multiple drafts of writing this paper collaboratively, we needed to be reflective of whether we meant to use the term "males" or "men." We urge educators to think through their language and suggest educators ask themselves the following questions to elucidate who they are researching and/or discussing: Who do we mean to include by using these terms? Who do we mean to focus on? And, who are we potentially excluding? These questions serve as a vitally important opportunity for educators to ensure further specificity and clarity in outlining whether one was discussing

one's sex (i.e., male, female, intersex), gender identity (e.g., man, woman, genderqueer), or gender role (e.g., masculine, feminine) (Lev, 2004). One might argue this is merely an issue of semantics; we do not agree. This is about the greater need for researchers (as well as practitioners) to understand that the language we use is loaded with power and privilege (Quaye, 2011). By dismissing the importance of the distinction between "male" and "man," one only reifies the genderism that limits possibilities for those who transgress the gender binary, including transgender individuals.

Conclusion

The data from this study, which focused on how gay males made meaning of intragroup gender transgressions as a form of poverty, suggests that identifying as a gay male is far from uncontested terrain. While gay males who transgress or trouble the gender binary are not deficient, the fact that other gay males view them as such speaks to identities as both sites of coalition and community as well as tension and refusal. The role educators play in working through these identity-based contestations is vital, specifically for students with marginalized identities. For these students, identifying with their subordinated identity (e.g., identifying as a gay male) can be liberating. However, patterns of oppression may continue to resurface within these marginalized communities, as indicated in the present study for gay males. Being careful with how one comes to understand students and student populations, becoming more specific with language, and challenging students to reconsider their thoughts, attitudes, and actions are steps educators can take to ensure that identifying with and identifying as remains an act of liberation for all in marginalized communities.

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