"In My Letters, But I Was Still by Myself": Highlighting the Experiences of Queer Men of Color in Culturally Based Fraternities

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Culturally based sororities and fraternities have long played a positive role in the experiences of Students of Color on college campuses, though questions remain of how they create space for other minoritized identities. This narrative inquiry study thus provides a contribution by exploring the role that sexuality and gender expression play in the experiences of Queer Men of Color in culturally based fraternities. This research sought to illuminate the connections that Queer Men of Color developed to their organizations and how they navigated issues pertaining to their identities in these fraternities. The specific questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do Queer Men of Color describe their motivations to join multicultural and National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities?

2. How do Queer Men of Color in multicultural and NPHC fraternities discuss navigating issues of sexuality and gender expression in these organizations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Queer Men of Color in Postsecondary Institutions

Beyond encountering marginalizing environments on the institutional level, research has acknowledged ways in which siloed identity spaces serve to marginalize Queer Men of Color (Blockett, 2017; Duran, 2021; Duran & Pérez, 2017; Strayhorn, 2013). Blockett's (2017) findings showed that Black queer men struggled within white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) spaces. Although these spaces affirmed their sexual identities, they did not affirm their Black identity. Thus, participants discussed navigating dichotomous communities—a predominantly white LGBT space and the Black community.

Culturally Based Fraternities and Queer Men of Color

Although much of the research that exists on culturally based fraternities and sexuality focused on hegemonic forms of masculinities, Chan (2017) and McClure (2006) showcased the potential of culturally based fraternities to provide Queer Men of Color spaces to positively explore their identities when shaped by productive masculinities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Queer of color critique brings to light the social structures and cultural discourses around race, gender, and sexuality that disenfranchise Queer People of Color (Brockenbrough, 2013; Ferguson, 2004, 2018). Queer of color critique emerged in response to numerous academic disciplines failing to attend to how race and racial capitalism play an integral role in discussions on sexuality and gender (Ferguson, 2018).

Aligning well with queer crit, a theory of disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) provides further insight to how Queer People of Color practice agency within a society that inherently marginalizes bodies that deviate from norms rooted in whiteness, heteronormativity, and binary gender roles.

METHOD

This work was drawn from a larger study focused on how Queer Men of Color in Multicultural Greek Council (MGC) and NPHC fraternities made meaning of their race, gender, and sexuality in these racialized and gendered organizations. Queer crit asserts "the centrality of experiential knowledge" (Misawa, 2012, p. 242); accordingly, we relied on a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to center our participants' voice. Narrative inquiry recognizes that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Participant Selection and Data Collection

We sent out a national call for participants that identified as (a) part of the queer community, (b) a Person of Color, (c) a man aged 18 or older, and (d) a member of a MGC or NPHC fraternal organization. We intentionally sought out participants that already completed their undergraduate degree. Eight individuals from four different NPHC and MGC organizations based in chapters across the country completed the study in its entirety.

RESULTS

We found that participants' intersecting identities as Queer Men of Color played a defining role in their fraternal experiences. Furthermore, these participants responded to these fraternal contexts by engaging in queer worldmaking (Muñoz, 1999). Of note, we referred to each participants' organization using pseudonyms.

Motivation to Join Culturally Based Fraternities

Participants named a number of reasons they chose for joining their fraternities, including a family history in fraternity and sorority life (FSL) and wanting to develop more friendships with men. Regardless of their different reasoning, all participants' responses centered their identities as Men of Color. Komplexity saw the members of Tau as examples of the Black man he wanted to be in the future, differing from the hegemonic ways that masculinities manifested in Omicron, another organization. Hearing that the Omicron fraternity valued individual differences caused Scott to believe that his sexuality would also be accepted in this space, which reinforced his decision to join. However, Scott later discovered that his fraternity did not attend to sexuality within their attempts at inclusion, noting that they were inclusive up until sexuality was introduced.

Fraternal Behaviors Surrounding Sexuality and Gender

Participants reflected on the behaviors their fraternities engaged in surrounding sexuality. Some of these behaviors were indicative of productive masculinities, whereas others were hegemonic forms.

Enacting Productive Masculinities

One way chapter members enacted productive masculinities involved having respectful conversations centered on sexuality. August explained that when his fraternity brothers engaged in "conversations about like women or men or sexuality or anything surrounding it— we try to be as respectful as possible." August valued that although his brothers were not perfect, they established a level of respect surrounding sexuality that reinforced that he was welcome and valued within the fraternity.

Enacting Hegemonic Masculinities

A primary way in which hegemonic masculinities

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were embodied within participants' fraternities was by regulating sexualities of incoming members through member selection processes. Importantly, this policing of sexualities was oftentimes tied to gender-based value judgments, looking down upon those who expressed their gender in more feminine ways. In addition to policing new members' sexualities during intake, the chapters regulated sexualities of current members by cultivating cultures that emphasized heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual identity and by rendering queer identities invisible.

Responses to Fraternal Behaviors Surrounding Sexuality and Gender

Regardless of how participants performed their gender and shared their sexuality within these spaces, all participants described engaging in acts of resistance by challenging heteronormative behaviors and hegemonic masculinities.

Conforming Within Hostile Environments

One manner in which participants responded to hostile environments was by conforming to heteronormative behaviors in the form of hiding their sexuality. These participants believed that staying on the "down-low" (DL) was their only option if they wanted to remain members of their fraternities. Another way in which participants negotiated their sexuality involved overcompensating with their work ethic. Queer men were expected to not only enter their chapters with more accolades than their peers but also perform at higher rates to compensate for their sexuality.

In addition to efforts to minimize focus on their sexuality, participants diverted attention from their identities by enacting hegemonic forms of masculinities to remain DL. Aaron was not the only participant that reported voting down flamboyant or openly gay potential brothers. Jeff also admitted that in order to fit in, he sometimes went along with this perpetuation of homophobia and regulation of others' gender performance.

Challenging Heteronormative Behaviors

August recalled times when he had to confront a brother, or other individuals, about displays of disrespect to the LGBT community. August explained, "I have an obligation to defend the LGBT community. And just like I have an obligation to defend the Black community or the male population or whatever." For Derek, he intentionally networked with other members of FSL to not only promote collaborations with his fraternity but also normalize being queer within FSL.

Serving as Mentors for Other Queer Men of Color

Another form of resistance against fraternal heteronormativity involved mentoring other men in culturally based fraternities and specifically other Queer Men of Color. Aaron did not feel that "being gay and in my fraternity define who [he is]," rather, he is "more focused on being a positive role model for African American men in general."

Forming Subcultures and Engaging in Worldmaking

A final approach that participants took to enact resistance to heteronormativity was through building subcultures with other Queer Men of Color and like-minded brothers within their fraternities, engaging in queer worldmaking in the process. Evan found "brothers in a deeper sense" through same-gender-loving groups through social media for his fraternity and NPHC.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This work has direct implications for practice for fraternity members, FSL professionals, and national fraternal organizations. We would like to emphasize that these implications are also relevant to historically white fraternal organizations, as systems such as heterosexism and hegemonic forms of masculinity are also present in those spaces. Rather than engaging in discussions

around sexuality and masculinities once each year or solely including these topics as an optional session within FSL educational efforts, these conversations should be required and engaged in frequently. Within these discussions, presenters must equip students with the knowledge, as well as the language needed to recognize and interrupt heterosexist behaviors.

Furthermore, national organizations hold positions of power and influence on a broad scale and have the ability to influence climates for queer members. Participants recommended actions such as releasing explicit statements addressing sexuality, requiring sexuality training, and identifying other ways to engage current members and alumni in conversations surrounding sexuality.

Although the participants all described the intentionality in their decision making when selecting an organization to be part of, their experiences within the organization did not necessarily align with those positive notions they had of the organization and members after they joined. To address this disparity, FSL practitioners, national organizations, and local chapters could more effectively incorporate discussions, workshops, and other experiences within their new member education processes that serve to reduce the marginalization of queer people and other marginalized populations within these organizations.

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