Demonized No More: The Spiritual Journeys and Spaces of Black Gay Male College Students

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Introduction

Studies have shown there are several benefits for students to be engaged in spiritual exploration, including less challenges with academic suspensions and probations (Walker & Dixon, 2012), better psychological well-being (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Park & Millora, 2010), more resilient (Astin et al., 2011; Herndon, 2010), and more willing to tackle the complex problems facing the global society (Astin et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, there is little research on the spiritual narratives and spiritual exploration experiences of college students with multiple marginalized identities at PWIs. For example, scholars have discussed how spirituality can be a source of resiliency for Black male college students (Herndon, 2010; Watson, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012), but current research has not explored how spirituality may impact the experiences of Black gay male college students. Furthermore, scholars have discussed how Black gay male students struggle with fitting in with the Black community and LGB communities at PWIs (Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Washington & Wall, 2010), but research has not explored to what extent the spiritual journeys and spiritual spaces of Black gay male college students impact their challenges and successes.

This study explored the spiritual narratives and spaces of Black gay male college students as they navigate their spiritual journeys. The guiding research questions were: (a) How do Black gay male undergraduate college students navigate their spiritual journey? (b) How do Black male undergraduate college students find and create their own spiritual spaces?

Method

Nine students from three PWIs participated in this study. They were recruited through email listservs of LGBT student organizations, multicultural student organizations, and religious student organizations. Students were also recruited at student organization meetings and through flyers placed around their campuses. Data were collected through two semi-structured, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews, photovoice, and field observations. Data were analyzed using both a constructivism lens and a quare theory lens.

Data Analysis Step | Constructivism | Quare Theory
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Step 1 | Read interview transcript multiple times | Categorical analysis: Open coding; focus on meaning-making and micro experiences
Step 2 | Make notes in margin | Categorical analysis: Open coding; focus on power relationships, social location, and the interrogation of racism and heterosexism
Step 3 | Develop participant profiles | Categorical analysis: Axial coding
Step 4 | Cross-case analysis | Cross-case analysis
Step 5 | Analytical memoing and fieldnotes; End point format | Analytical memoing and fieldnotes; End point format
Step 6 | Themes | Themes
Step 7 | Empathetic immersion to analyze fieldnotes; End point format | Empathetic immersion to analyze fieldnotes; End point format
Step 8 | Categorical analysis: Axial coding | Categorical analysis: Axial coding

Findings

Constructivism

Defining spirituality: The participants in this study defined spirituality in various ways. Some defined spirituality as nothing. Others defined spirituality based on their religion, which was Christianity for the majority of the participants. Others described their spirituality in connection with nature, music, and/or science.

Role of spirituality: The students turned to their spirituality for college choice decisions, career options, academic challenges, motivation, and determination.

Self-authorship: The nine students in this study described a spiritual trajectory as they moved from following formulas to an internal foundation of spirituality and personal belief, which was Christianity for the majority of the students. Several participants had internalized homophobia based on their experiences with oppression in their lives as Black, non-heterosexual men. Their journeys were complex, and most men did not reflect reaching an internal foundation of spirituality. The students moved back and forth among the trajectory depending on life experiences and settings (family, school, spiritual space). The students also demonstrated that they were further along in developing self-authorship in the epistemological and interpersonal dimensions than they were in the interpersonal dimension.

Quare Theory

Spiritual Disconnection: The participants in this study not only discussed experiences with oppression in their lives as Black, non-heterosexual men but they also explored these experiences in the context of spirituality and religion. Several participants had internalized homophobia based on their experiences in a spiritual and/or religious setting or based on religious texts. Several participants described disconnections with spiritual and/or religious spaces because of race, sexual orientation, and class.

Resisting Oppression: Participants described enacting soul force—creative and resistant soul force—during their spiritual journeys. Several students in this study discussed the use of creative soul force, including involvement with music in spiritual spaces. Several students in this study enacted resistant soul force to resist dehumanization, demonization, and oppression. The participants did this by questioning spiritual leaders or text, reflecting on the oppression they have experienced and reacted against, questioning the authoritative voice of religious leaders, and questioning the authoritative voice of spiritual leaders.

Photovoice and Spaces

"Nature and music; they just go hand in hand with my spirituality because for me it’s beauty. I know I’m religiously a non-denominational Christian and that connects me in the religious spiritual world as well. I really believe that God provided us nature and music to get our minds off of things, to relax because they’ve been there forever; they’ve been there since the beginning of time. There’s not one instance where there was no music or no nature." (Eric)

"My spirituality is like music. It’s the one time where my mind and body are probably directly connected." (Luke)

Discussion

This study extends the research on Black gay men in higher education. There continues to be a lack of research on the experiences of LGB students of color (Misawa, 2010; Renn, 2010; Stevens, 2004). The research on Black gay male college students’ strengths, successes, and resiliency is almost non-existent in higher education. Social worker researchers Akerlund and Cheung (2000) emphasized the need for more research on the experiences of LGB people of color and strategies to be successful. The current research on Black gay male college students is focused mostly on challenges related to how they deal with a variety of barriers, including the lack of a supportive network of faculty and peer relationships with psychological and personal challenges, as well as struggling as a double minority at PWIs. Although this study further reveals the barriers and challenges for Black gay men in higher education, this study also adds to the literature by exploring how they enacted creative and resistant soul force to not only navigate their general life and collegiate experiences but also how they navigated their spiritual journeys and spaces. This study also explores the spiritual self-authorship narratives of Black gay male college students to better understand their challenges and successes.