Perceived social support in the lives of gay, bisexual and queer Hispanic college men

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, we examined the sources and nature of social support reported by 24 gay, bisexual and queer Hispanic college men at a small liberal arts college and a large university in the USA. We identified four themes of support across the interviews: Shared experiences (46%), Protector (42%), Support in the air (33%) and Gradual support (29%). Shared experiences included support from those who had previous experience with the lesbian, gay or bisexual community. Protector indicated a type of support that was psychologically, emotionally or physically protective in nature. Participants also reported receiving indirect support such as nonverbal behaviours or indirect gestures of endorsement and caring (support in the air). Participants reported that many of their network members came to support them gradually over time (gradual support). Within each theme we found support from both women and men, who provided support in gender-consistent ways. Our results highlight that despite continued prejudice and discrimination in society, sexual and racial/ethnic minority men have strongholds of support from men and women in their lives that enable them to navigate their development successfully.

Introduction

In the last 10 years, attitudes towards lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in the USA have undergone substantial change. The percentage of US Americans who agree homosexuality should be accepted by society grew from 49% in 2007 to 60% in 2013 (Pew Research Center 2014), and most US residents today support marriage equality for same-sex couples (60% in favour; McCarthy 2015). However, 28% of US Americans think same-sex relationships between consenting adults should be illegal, and 37% think same-sex marriages should not be recognised by law (Gallup 2015).

Despite US society transitioning towards acceptance, many sexual minorities continue to face challenges being accepted by others. Additionally, individuals with multiple stigmatised identities often face unique challenges and stresses (Baytan 2000; Meyer 2003), although

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there is evidence they can develop enhanced coping skills and resilience due to pervasive discrimination (Grigorovich 2015; Wilson and Miller 2002).

One potential coping tool available to individuals who identify as both sexual and ethnic/racial minorities is support from various social groups. However, we lack knowledge about the nature of culturally-relevant social supports that Hispanic sexual minority young adults draw from. Motivated by the contact hypothesis, we consider how Hispanic[1] college men who identify as sexual minorities perceive support from their ethnic/familial and college/peer communities when they disclose their sexual identity.

Background

The contact hypothesis

The contact hypothesis states that intergroup prejudice can be reduced by personal contact between privileged majority group members and stigmatised minority group members (Allport 1954). Some research suggests that, regardless of demographic background, contact is associated with less prejudice toward gay men (Herek 1996), and is a significant predictor of favourable implicit and explicit attitudes toward gay men (Dasgupta and Rivera 2008; Herek 1996). This may be partially explained by majority group members perceiving minority group members to share goals, interests and other social memberships, which in turn increases acceptance of minority group members over time (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000). Reduction of homophobic prejudice may be especially relevant for the Hispanic community whose values include group harmony (Sabogal et al. 1987).

Social support in the Hispanic community

Social support consists of 'various forms of aid and assistance supplied by family members, friends, neighbours, and others' (Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsay 1981, 435), and may include social embeddedness, enacted support and perceived support (Barrera 1986). Social embeddedness, or frequency of contact with one's community, is associated with positive affect (Siedlecki et al. 2014) and may be particularly relevant to Hispanic people considering cultural values including close familial ties. Enacted support includes emotional, financial, informational or otherwise tangible support. Finally, perceived support refers to anticipated support from members of the person's social network. Both enacted and perceived support have been shown to predict greater life satisfaction (Siedlecki et al. 2014).

Family support is hypothesised to be one reason Hispanic US Americans display better health outcomes compared to socioeconomically comparable minority groups (e.g., African Americans; for a review, see Perez and Cruess [2014]). There is some cross-cultural evidence that the family can serve as a geographical site of support for sexual minority youth (Gorman-Murray 2008), which is especially relevant for Hispanics who endorse *familismo* or the importance of strong interdependent family relationships (Sabogal et al. 1987). Hispanic individuals report significantly higher levels of family support compared to non-Hispanic Whites (e.g., Almeida et al. 2009), and close family relationships as critical to their identity and health (Finch and Vega 2003; Parsai et al. 2009).

Although research on the coming out experiences of gay Hispanic men is underdeveloped, there is qualitative work showing that Hispanic lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

adolescents receive high-quality support from extended family members (Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, and Saltzburg 2009). While some evidence suggests Hispanic communities are less accepting of sexual minorities than other communities, other research finds race and ethnicity are less important than traditionalism and religiosity in predicting families' responses to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young adults (Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, and Saltzburg 2009; Ryan et al. 2010). Recent research on US Hispanic, Black and Asian men who have sex with men has also failed to find racial/ethnic differences in perceived homophobia within the family (Choi et al. 2013).

Social support in college

Young adults and college-educated individuals are reportedly more progressive in their attitudes towards sexual minorities than older or less educated adults (Lambert et al. 2006; Pew Research Center 2015). Studies suggest changes in attitudes toward sexual minorities across the nation over time are due in large part to shifts in the population's age and education (e.g., Keleher and Smith 2012). College campuses are known for being especially lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friendly compared to other locations and cultures. Campus efforts to create safer spaces include the presence of student centres and classes devoted to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues (Campus Pride 2015; Henshaw 2015). Consistent with the contact hypothesis, the college experience can increase acceptance towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues due to interactions between heterosexual undergraduates and sexual minorities (Sevecke et al. 2015).

Gender and support

Hegemonic standards of masculinity in the USA include dominance, independence, emotional detachment and heterosexuality (Kimmel 2008), which are defined in terms of differentiated male and female gender roles (Eaton and Matamala 2014). Masculinity in Hispanic culture, or *machismo*, has been historically interpreted through a negative stereotypic lens that assumes hypermasculinity, dominance over women and (heterosexual) promiscuity (Mirandé 1997). However, scholars argue against a one-dimensional assumption of masculinity, noting that masculinity is multidimensional and varies within a culture based on race, social class and sexual orientation (Kimmel 2008; Torres et al. 2002). Until recently, researchers overlooked positive aspects of machismo, known as *caballerismo*, which reflect Hispanic cultural values, such as being family oriented, caring for loved ones and respecting oneself and others (Mirandé 1997; Torres et al. 2002). There is also evidence that Hispanic men who reside in the USA endorse positive traits associated with *caballerismo* (Arciniega et al. 2008), including flexible gender roles, empathy and emotional expressiveness (Torres et al. 2002), which coincide with the broader Hispanic emphasis on group wellbeing. Considering the importance of heterosexual prowess in masculine gender roles, Hispanic gay men may receive less social support from men than from women in their ethnic and college communities. This is consistent with previous research finding that men are more likely than women to hold negative attitudes toward gay men (Kite and Whitley 1998).

Standards for femininity in the USA include being warm, compassionate and sexually submissive to men (Prentice and Carranza 2002). In Hispanic culture, the female gender role norm of *marianismo* encourages women to be submissive, humble, non-sexual and

make sacrifices for the good of her family (Castillo et al. 2010). The term itself comes from Catholicism's Virgin Mary, an iconic figure that represents moral integrity, spiritual strength and self-sacrifice for the benefit of her family (Galanti 2003). Based on expectations for women's behaviour, social support for gay Hispanic men from women may take the forms of comfort, assurance, friendship and cooperation.

Methods

We collected data from two institutions: a small, private liberal arts college in New England and a large research institution in the Southeast USA. The private liberal arts college ranks among the top 10 in the USA and is considered a primarily White institution with less than 2000 students enrolled. Students are traditional college age (i.e., 18–22 years) and 67% identify as White, 13% Hispanic, 7.5% Asian, 4.9% Black/African American and 6.3% multi-racial. The research institution in the Southeast is a large, public, urban, Hispanic-serving commuter university. Of the over 50,000 students it serves, approximately 61% self-identify as Hispanic, 15% White, 13% Black, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander and 7% as another minority ethnic group. Students at the research institution include traditional college-age students and returning students (the average undergraduate age is 23).

Participants at both institutions were recruited via flyers posted on campus, emails to student groups and word of mouth. Participants at the liberal arts college received $25 Amazon gift cards for their time, while participants at the research university received course credit or $10 cash. Participants at both institutions were guaranteed confidentiality. Any identifying references to individuals, departments or programmes made by a participant were deleted from the transcripts. The project was reviewed by institutional review boards at both institutions and was approved as compliant with all institutional, state and federal regulations pertaining to studies involving human subjects.

Participants

A total of 51 men participated in the study. Of the 51 men, 24 men identified as Hispanic and cisgender. Seven of these men attended the liberal arts college in New England and 17 attended the research university in the Southeast. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 ($M = 21.50$, $SD = 3.70$). For race/ethnicity, all participants identified with the broad category Hispanic, with most Hispanic subgroups being Hispanic (29%), Mexican/Mexican American (21%) and Cuban/Cuban American (21%). The remaining participants identified with ethnicities from various countries throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America. For sexual orientation, 80% of participants identified as gay or homosexual and 8% identified as bisexual. The remaining 12% of participants identified as something other than gay or bisexual, for example heteroflexible or 'open'. Of participants, 58% were born in the USA and the remaining 42% were born in countries throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America.

Data collection

Participants were first asked to complete a short survey that asked about demographic information. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were then contacted via email to schedule an interview time. Interviews were conducted in private spaces such as the first author's office or in private rooms designated for conducting studies in the second author's

psychology department. Participants who attended the liberal arts college were interviewed by the first author; remaining interviews were conducted by two trained research assistants.

The semi-structured interview protocol included open-ended questions that allowed participants to respond with relevant detail and also afforded them the opportunity to decline elaborating on topics they were not comfortable discussing. Participants were asked questions about their hometown, family, why they chose their college, racial/ethnic identity, sexual identity, masculinity and positive and negative college experiences. For this paper, we focused largely on responses to questions about support systems in the participant's ethnic/familial community and their college/peer community, such as 'Who do you receive the most support from in your family? How about for issues related to romantic relationships?' and 'What has your experience of "coming out" to others been like? Who has been supportive?'

All interviews were audio-recorded and took between one and three hours. Transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were conducted by a third party for all interviews and all identifiers including names, organisations and locations were removed from the transcripts.

Analysis

By quantitative standards our sample is small; however, the richness of qualitative data is amenable to robust theorising about similarities rather than testing hypotheses to generalise the meaning of difference across groups of people (Braun and Clarke 2006). Most studies on coming out experiences have included White participants. Because of this, examining more in more detail the experiences of Hispanic men who identify as sexual minorities will facilitate the discovery of new information (Braun and Clarke 2006). Although Hispanic people in the USA are not homogeneous in terms of race, politics, social class, religion or country of origin (Malavé and Giordani 2015), as a group they share some characteristics and cultural practices. Therefore, we present a sample comprised of Hispanic men and highlight patterns of social support among them.

Our inductive approach to analysing these data included a thematic analysis of all interviews. First, we developed a detailed coding system using a series of steps common in qualitative research to ensure consistency across coders and across time (Strauss and Corbin 1998). From a subsample of three interviews randomly selected from the database, the authors identified thematic patterns and established a first draft of the coding manual with detailed coding criteria (for an overview of thematic analysis, see Braun and Clarke 2006). Next, using the coding manual, the authors coded five additional interviews; interrater reliability assessed by percent agreement based on the presence of a coded theme was .91 (Boyatzis 1998). Inconsistencies or questions about the themes were addressed and the coding manual was updated to reflect these decisions. Finally, based on the high interrater reliability score, the first author coded the remaining 16 interviews.

Findings

Emergent themes

We observed gendered descriptions by participants in reference to types of support; notably, 79% of participants described perceived support from both gay and heterosexual men including fathers, stepfathers, brothers, cousins, uncles, friends and colleagues, with friends accounting for 33% and fathers and brothers each accounting for 20% of all references.

Of participants, 75% also referred to perceived support by women, although compared to references of men's support, there were few references by the participants about the sexual orientation of these women. Across all references about women's support, friends and mothers each accounted for 32% of all references, with sisters, grandmothers, aunts and cousins collectively accounting for an additional 32% of all references. We identified four themes that include female and male support across all interviews including Shared experiences (46%), Protector (42%), Support in the air (33%) and Gradual support (29%).

Shared experiences

Shared experiences (46%) was a prominent theme across interviews and were described by participants in two ways: (1) supportive others having prior experiences with the lesbian, gay and bisexual community, such as siblings having gay friends, and (2) supportive others having their own experiences of being gay or bisexual. For example, Alex described feeling comfortable disclosing to his brother because of his brother's existing work relationship with a gay man:

> I guess my middle brother and I have always been really close, and when I told him he gave me that kind of push like 'oh, I was waiting for you to tell me about it'. But I had assumed that he would be supportive of it, and he's been really open minded about things. His boss is gay, so I knew that it was just like a comfortable thing. (Alex, age 18, PWI[2])

For some participants, Shared experiences include the coming out process where best friends, older siblings, cousins and/or uncles' offer support:

> One of my friends … she's also gay, we become really good friends … I think it's because we're both gay …. You know? That helped us. And … we have a really good relationship … and I think that was one of the most positive experiences that I got out of being gay here … we're accepting of each other, you know? We help each other through it … and we're gonna actually help each other as far as when it comes to having kids. We plan to … in the future, actually have a child. (Thomas, age 22, HSI)

Shared experiences and the coming out process were also described as identifying others who were out and could serves as mentors or role models for the participant:

> I have a relationship more with my mom since we just went over there to visit my mom's side of the family, and I got to meet [my gay uncles]. And they're like, they're very kind, and they understood. (Jay, age 19, HSI)

A gendered feature of shared experiences is the bonding between the participant and a woman over similar interests such as discussing romantic relationships with heterosexual female friends:

> I think she was the first girl here … who is straight …. She was always my support system, and so given that we sort of had similar experiences in dealing with men we sort of got along together that way, and so every single time she tells me whoever the man is in her life right now, and I'll tell her about my situation, so sort of the back and forth only brings us closer. (Daniel, age 21, PWI)

Other shared interests described by participants include female cousins, sisters or friends wanting to go out to 'gay places' such as gay night clubs or shopping, which are perceived as feminine places that are safe for both gay men and women.

Protector

The theme Protector (42%) included expressions of protectiveness of the participant by supportive men and women in their lives. For example, Javi described his fraternity brothers' response to homophobia as a defining feature of fraternities on US college campuses:

And then my advisors in my fraternity, they don't really see it, they see me as a member of my organisation, not by my sexual identity. My brothers are super over-protective of me, they're like, super. (Javi, age 20, HSI)

Other forms of protective support by men include older gay brothers offering protection from parents in the form of housing or financial aid when parents threatened to throw the participant out after learning about his sexual orientation. For example, Darren (HSI) described his older brother's response to their parents' threat as 'you can come live with me, like fuck them'. Thus, the Protector role as enacted by men hints at an aggressive response against potential physical harm or displacement.

Compared to the men in their lives, women played the Protector differently. For example, Jose described being 'very thankful' for his mother coming out for him. He stated:

The same day … my mum … found out, I asked her to please tell my grandma for me because I couldn't do it, and to tell my dad. So, she did it for me so 'til this day I'm very thankful that she did that because I know … there was no way I was gonna be able to tell my dad … and there was no way that I was gonna be able to tell my grandma, so my mum did that for me. In a way she experienced coming out too, because she did it for me … (Jose, age 20, HSI)

Jose described feeling afraid to tell his father and grandmother and his mother protected him from potential negative reactions. Importantly, Jose notes they share the coming out experience because 'she did it for me'.

In other cases, women were concerned for the participant's physical safety, mental and sexual health, and spiritual salvation:

It was fine with my mum. Like I said, she's always had gay friends but I don't know if she ever thought about how it would be different when that's your son, so at first she just didn't really know how to think or what to do … she told me her main concern … was she just wanted to keep me safe … like hearing all these reports on the news and all this stuff you hear all across the country of people getting abused or harassed because of their sexuality. Also with race like they experienced with my oldest brother, she's now concerned because I have my race and my sexuality. She said that was just like a whole new inner fear that she had about it. But she's been fine with it, and we'll have conversations about my partner now and stuff. (Alex, age 18, PWI)

Jay described his mother's concern for his mental health and overall wellbeing:

[My mother] is supportive … she has moments where … she's like 'Oh, but it'll make your life harder. Why would you want it?' And I mean, I understand … because it does make your life harder … you just have to be more secretive. (Jay, age 19, HSI)

Other participants described supportive women expressing concern for their sexual health:

My sister? She found out probably through my brother. It was fine. She just thought like – 'cause she once thought she was bisexual so she just compared … her situation to mine and she thought I was going through the same thing. And I informed her it wasn't like that …. It just took her a lot to understand what it was … the gay people she knew were promiscuous, so she was afraid I was gonna be just like the people that she knew. (Ivan, age 20, HSI)

Finally, a notable gender difference early on in the acceptance process involved the use of religious beliefs by some of the women. Chris described his mother's initial response to his disclosure as concerned about his spiritual salvation:

She says that, 'You know, you're going to hell, and you're probably gonna die' …. And I was like, 'Mum, you know what, if that's your view, I understand. But, unfortunately, that's not gonna change me as a person from growing. And for me in order to grow, I have to be an openly gay me' …. She was like, 'Okay baby, it's fine, don't worry. I support you, I accept you, whatever you need, you know you can call me and I'm here for you 100% and I'm very happy that you're happy'. (Chris, age 23, HSI)

Whereas men were perceived by participants as offering physical protection against harm directed at the participant, women were more likely to verbally express concern about the participant's physical safety, mental and sexual health and, in some cases, spiritual salvation.

Support in the air

Support in the air (33%) is a term we coined to represent the inverse of Claude Steele's (1998) 'threat in the air' (p. 614) in the sense that participants describe a situational sense of support, rather than a threat, that is palpable but not always specifically directed at the participant. Notably, Support in the air was described by participants in identifiably gendered ways. In some cases, men in their lives may not explicitly acknowledge the participant's sexual orientation, but indirect gestures indicate they are interested and/or supportive of the participant. For example, Chris described his father never directly discussing his sexuality with him but often asking about his romantic relationships or his gay best friend:

> … we went out to dinner a few times and my dad, my grandparents and my boyfriend came. I don't think they knew that he was my boyfriend, per say, but they're not stupid. They obviously put two and two together. Um, so I never had to tell them, like he knew. And he would always ask me like, 'Oh, how's Roy?' or, 'Hey, how's Nick?' like he asked me at least three of my first relationships, he would ask me how these guys were. And he knew that my best friend was gay, so he would always ask me, 'Oh, how's Brian?' (Chris, age 23, HSI)

Support in the air was also described by participants as being cultivated by men in the academic sphere and particularly those in leadership positions who demonstrate their support at the institutional level. For this type of indirect support, the participant may not personally know the supportive male but perceives him to be influential for building an inclusive environment for sexual minorities. For example, two participants referred to national leaders in their fraternities known to be supportive of sexual minorities as instrumental to their acceptance in the local chapter. Other examples included public demonstrations of support by the president of the university ('I was astounded when I found out that the president was at the … Pride Parade'), and male professors' public demonstrations of support for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community such as:

> I think it was beautiful that we had an [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] art show … the theme was like gender roles … like I enjoyed it a lot. That we had that – people had the opportunity to display their art. And I like Dr [surname], he's really like one of the leaders in that. I think we have a lot of leaders, a lot of teachers here, who stand up for your rights. (Ivan, age 20, HSI)

Women in participants' lives cultivated Support in the air differently than men. For example, participants described women's Support in the air in sometimes objectifying behaviours that were perceived by participants as acceptance. For example:

> Making friends … [it's] easier to gravitate towards … girls because you can even play out the gay thing a little bit, and most girls are … I mean my best friends would tell me that they heard somewhere in the news that it's almost like an accessory to have a gay best friend, so in that aspect I guess it sometimes makes it easier if you break the ice with girls to make friends. (Alex, age 18, PWI)

In Johnny's case, his grandmother used humour to ask him questions specifically about his sex life:

> My grandmother on my mom's side is kind of like a comedian so it's kind of hard to take her seriously … how would I? So she's giving me advice and she starts to [gesture] and I'm like why are you [repeats gesture]? 'Ha-ha-ha, anal sex'. And I'm like, 'what Grandma?' And she's like,

'God, does it hurt, does it feel good?' And I'm like, 'Grandma, this isn't what we're talking about.' (Johnny, age 20, PWI)

Associations with fashion and anal sex as defining characteristics of gay men are features of a stereotype, but for Alex and Johnny being objectified as a fashion accessory or sexual act was perceived as a form of acceptance. In Alex's case, being valued as an 'accessory' was better than not being valued at all. Although Johnny expressed some discomfort with his grandmother's direct questions about his sex life he perceived her enquiry as her way of learning about the gay community and her acceptance of him as a gay man.

Gradual support

Finally, with respect to Gradual support (29%), participants describe a process where people in their lives need time to consider the new information. Generally, the process was described as one towards greater acceptance of the participant's sexuality, which was perceived by the participant as a form of support. For example:

So, my dad also does still … I mean he's made several comments that make me think he's sort of getting there, he's progressing, but he also doesn't understand. (Jose, age 20, HSI)

Participants describes a similar process with respect to mothers and other women in their lives. While the process might be tentative it will lead to positive outcomes:

[My mum] just … never met or knew any gay people so … to now, for it be her son, it took her a while, but now we're like – extremely comfortable. Nothing compared to how it was in the beginning. (Ivan, age 20, HSI)

Although initial responses to the participant's disclosure may have been negative or mixed in reaction, many participants described a process that led to greater acceptance by the men and women in their lives.

Discussion

Researchers have reported that young and college-educated individuals in the USA are strongly in favour of lesbian, gay and bisexual rights (Lambert et al. 2006; Pew Research Center 2015), while US Hispanic communities show more mixed attitudes towards sexual minorities (Ryan et al. 2009). Arguably, Hispanic college men who identify as sexual minorities may expect to have colliding experiences in coming out to their classmates compared to coming out to their families and ethnic communities. Our identification of four themes somewhat disconfirms these findings.

Previous research suggests that men are more likely than women to hold negative attitudes toward gay men (Kite and Whitley 1998), which is not consistent with our findings. In fact, 79% of our participants referred to men in their lives as supportive and 75% referred to women in the lives as supportive. This high level of perceived support may be partially explained by research demonstrating that when gay men are perceived as 'average' people, men are less likely to respond negatively toward them (Lord, Lepper, and Mackie 1984). Consistent with the contact hypothesis, supportive others described by our participants see them as 'average' guys, such as their sons, cousins or fraternity brothers, and thus have more positive attitudes toward them (Herek 1996). Notably, fathers and brothers accounted for 40% of all references to support by men, and 64% of references to support by women included mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts and cousins. This is consistent with research

on US Hispanics reporting significantly higher levels of family support compared to non-Hispanic Whites (Almeida et al. 2009; Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, and Saltzburg 2009).

Also consistent with contact hypothesis, shared experiences highlights positive effects for both supportive men and women who had prior contact with lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and for participants whose mentors or friends identified as sexual minorities. Prior contact was perceived by participants as an indicator of 'adequate support [that] would be available if it was needed' (Barrera 1986, 417), and shared experiences with other sexual minorities exemplifies social embeddedness with participants viewing lesbian, gay or bisexual supportive others as potential sources of support (Barrera 1986).

Expressions of support described by our participants were often gendered. The theme Protector included individual men as well as male communities who behaved in traditionally masculine ways, such as offering physical protection, which is consistent with positive aspects of *machismo* (Torres et al. 2002), such as caring for loved ones, as well as a form of enacted social support (Barrera 1986) found among family members and fraternity brothers (Harris and Harper 2014). These enacted forms of social support may highlight a cultural shift in masculine norms across forms of institutions including family and education. Among women supporters, the Protector role was more likely to be enacted by mothers compared to male Protectors who included fathers, brothers and peers/friends. As Protectors, mothers 'came out' for their sons and served as buffers for negative responses. Mothers also expressed fear for their son's physical safety, sexual health and spiritual salvation, which is consistent with female gender role norms in Hispanic culture including self-sacrifice for the good of her family and maintaining moral integrity and spiritual strength (Galanti 2003).

Hispanic culture and gender norms were also evident in Support in the air, a form of perceived support (Barrera 1986) characterised by subtle cues of support that were not necessarily directed at the participant. For example, some participants noted that in lieu of explicit acknowledgment of their sexual orientation, fathers often asked about their friend network and romantic partners in general terms. This is consistent with hegemonic standards of masculinity, which prescribe emotional detachment (Kimmel 2008), as well as examples of *caballerismo*, which includes ensuring the wellbeing of family members (Arciniega et al. 2008). Participants described some supportive women as objectifying them, which was nonetheless interpreted as supportive because of superficial positive elements such as using stereotypes to connect with the participant including an assumed interest in fashion or engaging in anal sex, which were interpreted by our participants as supportive based on 'perceived availability and adequacy of supportive ties' (Barrera 1986, 416).

Gradual support captures a common experience of needing time to process the participant's disclosure about his sexual orientation. Participants perceived that although the man or woman was not fully accepting of their sexual orientation, the supportive other would 'eventually get there'. The contact hypothesis states that intergroup prejudice can be reduced by personal contact between privileged majority group members and stigmatised minority group members (Allport 1954), and arguably knowing about a person's sexual orientation and having extended contact with them will reduce prejudice and increase social support for participants. The process of Gradual support is also demonstrative of perceived support (Barrera 1986), wherein the participant expects the family member or friend to eventually be a source of support.

Limitations and future directions

Using a well-defined group of sexual and racial/ethnic minorities as the focus of our research allowed us to deeply probe the types of social support uniquely encountered by these participants. However, the small sample size and self-selection bias should be considered in terms of generalising our research findings to the larger gay, bisexual and queer male community. High levels of social support may have facilitated our participants' sense of agency to contribute to research on sexual minorities, thus making our findings limited to sexual minority Hispanic men who feel supported by their communities. Nonetheless, focusing on sexual minority Hispanic college men allowed us to highlight the experiences of a group that is often overlooked in research on sexuality and race (Cole 2009).

Second, our research collapsed all Hispanic college men who identified as any kind of sexual minority, including but not limited to those who identified as gay, bisexual or queer. Although it is common for researchers to examine similarities within a group of sexual minorities or treat them as homogenous in analyses, the experiences of men who identify as exclusively homosexual are likely to differ from those who identify as bisexual, sexually flexible or queer. For example, some research suggests that bisexual men experience worse health outcomes than heterosexual or homosexual individuals, potentially resulting from prejudice from both gay/lesbian and heterosexual communities (e.g., Friedman et al. 2014). This highlights the importance of continuing to analyse experiences at the intersection of gender, sexual orientation and other features of identity.

While we found that sexual minority Hispanic college men have a number of social resources they draw upon, there is ample evidence that this population still faces heterosexism and homophobia in US society. These biases can be overt, as reported by 20% of the US sexual minority population who experience being adult victims of hate motivated crime (Herek 2009), as well as covert, such as hearing homophobic epithets like 'that's so gay' (Nadal et al. 2011). Future research should continue to probe the biases this population is subject to at the intersection of sexual orientation and racial/ethnic prejudice.

Based on our research findings, we suggest that interventions in academic settings harness the potential of influential leaders and allies to positively influence attitudes and behaviours toward sexual minorities. As detailed in our theme Support in the air, cultivating a safe and supportive environment for sexual minorities can be facilitated by influential community members who show public support. Although we do not have demographic information for participants' academic peers, based on the racial/ethnic composition of both academic institutions, it is reasonable to assume that their academic friend network is diverse. Thus, interventions in educational settings should capitalise on the support of leaders and peers in the academic community who identify as allies of sexual minorities including administrators, faculty members and student group leaders. Moving forward, it will also be important to attend to the relationship between local social supports, formal rights and health and wellbeing for sexual minorities. While there is evidence of a negative correlation between formal discrimination against and psychological wellbeing of sexual minorities (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2010), we do not know the extent to which legislated rights will promote lesbian, gay and bisexual health, especially given the interaction between these rights and local social supports and norms (Cover 2012).

Conclusion

Lesbian, gay and bisexual Hispanic US Americans may have unique experiences and strengths that promote resilience in the face of stigma (e.g., Wilson and Miller 2002). One of these strengths may be having access to multiple sources of social support to draw on. Indeed, personal resilience is increasingly being understood using an ecological perspective that emphasises access to and participation in social systems and resources (Ungar 2012), with evidence for culturally-specific support systems and norms as buffering negative effects of discrimination (Perez and Cruess 2014). Family acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young adults is associated with positive mental and physical health for young adults (Ryan et al. 2010), and we found high levels of social support from both men and women for gay, bisexual and queer Hispanic college men, indicating a positive shift in cultural values in the Hispanic community and college campuses.

Notes

1. The term Hispanic is used in this paper to refer to participants who share a connection to the Spanish language and have cultural roots in a Spanish-speaking country (Fry and Lopez 2012). Hispanic was the preferred term of most of our participants, all of whom self-identified their race/ethnicity.
2. We use PWI as an abbreviation for primarily White institution, which in this case is the liberal arts college; HSI refers to Hispanic serving institution, in this case the large research university.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

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