

THE SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK GAY MEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT

THE SENSE OF BELONGING OF BLACK GAY MEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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This qualitative study utilized Harper and Hurtado's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model as a conceptual framework and a processes similar to ground theory as a theoretical framework to answer two research questions:

1. Do Black gay men feel a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions?
2. If Black gay men do feel a sense of belonging, what processes contribute to sense of belonging?

Given that the graduation rate of Black men is lower than any other group of students in higher education (Harper, Berhanu, Davis III, & McGuire, 2015) and that Black gay men are likely to experience homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, and racism at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (e.g., Jagers & Iverson, 2015; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a; Woodford & Kulick, 2015), Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging was a fitting conceptual framework because sense of belonging is known to lead to higher rates of persistence for all students and specifically, minoritized students (e.g., Harper & Hurtado, 1997, Strayhorn, 2012).

Social constructivist, anti-deficit, and intersectional lenses were used to explore the sense of belonging of 16 self-identified Black gay men who were at least completing their first year of college at three different PWIs in the Midwest. I conducted two interviews with each participant using a semi-structured interview protocol informed by Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging, Harper and Hurtado's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model, and other relevant literature.

I used a process similar to grounded theory to analyze interview data including the processes of open, axial, and selective coding.

Though participants identified examples of homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, and racism they experienced, they all reported feeling a sense of belonging both within specific groups at their institutions and within their institutions as a whole. The analysis of this study led to the creation of a sense of belonging model that illustrates the process that the 16 Black gay men in this study went through to feel a sense of belonging. The factors identified in the model that led to sense of belonging include identities, cognitive mapping and perception of campus climate, learning appropriate behavior, expression of identities, and developing relationships and finding fit/place. Two participants noted feeling a sense of belonging at some point during their time attending their institution, but did not feel a sense of belonging at the time of their interviews. I describe the sense of belonging model and then the process that three individual participants, Greg, Timothy, and JJ, went through within the sense of belonging model.

The discussion situates the factors in the sense of belonging model in existing literature and addresses the contradiction of participants sometimes having negative experiences on campus and yet still experiencing a sense of belonging. Implications for practice include recommendations for institutions based on university programs, student workplaces, faculty, and student organizations. Future uses of anti-deficit and intersectional research lenses are discussed in relation to implications for theory. Finally, implications for future research include recommendations for studying the sense of belonging of Black gay men at historically Black colleges and universities, applying the sense of belonging model identified in this study to students with other minoritized identities, Black masculinities, and sense of belonging and persistence.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my late father, Scott Alan Gonyo, who left this world on August 3, 2012. We may not have had a perfect relationship or a relationship that others understood, but we had a relationship that worked for us and that I miss deeply. You always set goals to live to see major milestones in my life and you saw so many. Completing this journey is bittersweet without having you physically present. I hope that you are looking down and sharing this with me today. I know how proud you always were of me and I can only imagine how proud you would be now. You always said, “do the best *Claire* can do” and I have worked so hard to do my best. I hope that I have made you proud, that you know how much I miss you, and how much I love you. You were always the pretty one, gurl. I did it, Daddy.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study explored the experiences of 16 self-identified Black gay men who were students at three predominantly White four-year institutions of higher education in the Midwest. Specifically, I utilized a process similar to grounded theory to understand if these men developed a sense of belonging at their institutions, and, if they did, what the process was they went through to feel a sense of belonging. There is limited scholarly work about this student population in terms of sense of belonging (see Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly 2013a), but scholars have explored the experiences of Black gay men and of individuals who share parts of Black gay men's identities (i.e., Black heterosexual students and gay students) (e.g., Means, 2014; Patton, 2011; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konick, & Magley, 2008; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Woodford, et al., 2012). Studying sense of belonging is important because it is known to lead to persistence and graduation (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002/2003; Strayhorn, 2012), which are desired outcomes of higher education (Renn & Reason, 2013).

The study of Black gay men is important for several reasons. Racism occurs in the form of microaggressions and institutional racism at institutions of higher education (e.g., Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2015; Swim, et al., 2003; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Students of color are less likely to persist when they have negative experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (e.g., Iverson & Jagers, 2015). In 2011-2012, White males made up 69.5% of all males graduating, while Black males made up only 8.3% of males graduating across the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). This is meaningful in comparison to the total United States population of which White and Black

men made up 80% and 12.5% respectively in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Additionally, research has shown that of all Black men who start college, less than two-thirds will finish in six years (Harper, Berhanu, Davis III, & McGuire, 2015).

Because lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students have historically not been tracked by their LGB status through institutions of higher education (Sanlo, 2004/2005; Narui, 2014), it is difficult to know much about their experiences throughout the entirety of college attendance. Though Rankin et al. (2010) found in a national study that 33% of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)¹ students had seriously considered leaving their institution as a result of sexuality-related problems they faced on their campus, Carpenter (2009) claimed that LGB persons are more likely to have a college education than their heterosexual peers. Carpenter (2009) does not discuss how many LGB persons have degrees in relation to race, so researchers and practitioners do not know where Black gay men stand in terms of the entire LGBTQ+ population.

Another issue relevant to Black gay men is that racism exists within LGBTQ+ communities (e.g., Collins, 2005; Crawford, et al., 2002; Nadal, 2013; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a; Stroude, 2016; Washington & Wall, 2006), and homophobia exists within Black

¹ Sexual orientation refers to one's sexuality. Common terms used to discuss sexuality are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ), or straight. However, gender identity is related to one's experienced gender. Some common terms used to discuss gender identity are cisgender and transgender. Throughout this document, I will refer to sexuality as LGB or LGBQ. When scholars include information about transgender and queer populations or I am discussing the community in general, the acronym LGBTQ+ will be used in recognition that there are often groups in addition to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons who are considered part of the larger queer community including, but not limited to, allied, intersexed, and asexual persons. Throughout this document I will use the terms or acronyms used by participants and authors.

communities (e.g., Bowleg, 2013; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Moore, 2010; Nadal, 2013; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). As a result of racism in LGBTQ+ communities and homophobia in Black communities, Black gay men may feel like they have nowhere to turn for support or that they must conceal or reduce one of their social identities (Baylor, 2002; Gonyo, 2012; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). Additionally, the expectations of what it means to be a Black man are in conflict with stereotypes that many individuals have about gay men, specifically related to masculinity (e.g., Collins, 2005; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Patton, 2011; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b; Rankin, et al., 2010). Black men are expected to be macho and to get married and have children to continue the Black race, not to be stereotypically feminine gay men who do not have children (Collins, 2005; Patton, 2011; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly 2013b). The microaggressions and gender role expectations placed on Black gay men both within their college environments and in external environments may cause them to feel isolated or torn between communities and lead to increased challenges in feeling a sense of belonging within their institutions.

This study explored how microaggressions, racism, homophobia, and sexism² affected the sense of belonging of Black gay men through intersectional, anti-deficit, and social constructivist lenses. I wanted to understand if and how Black gay men felt a sense of belonging on campus, what this sense of belonging felt like for them (how they knew when they belonged somewhere), and the process of how they came to feel a sense of belonging. Because Black gay

² Many scholars would argue that men cannot experience sexism because their male identity inherently gives them power. I argue that in this context, Black gay men experience sexism in that they are expected to adhere to expectations of Black masculinity.

men experience microaggressions, racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism, they may be less likely to feel a sense of belonging at their institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Scholars (Hausmann, et al., 2009; Hoffman, et al., 2002/2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012) have claimed that sense of belonging plays a role in student satisfaction, success, and retention; however, research (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997) shows that experiences of discrimination may affect a student's ability to feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, exploring the experiences of Black gay men was important in understanding how these students did or did not feeling a sense of belonging, which may have affected their success, persistence, and graduation.

In a pilot study I conducted to explore the experiences of Black gay male students (Gonyo, 2012), I found that students often chose to involve themselves in either communities of color or LGBTQ+ communities but did not feel like they could be engaged in both because they felt like they had to prioritize one identity over the other (Black or gay). Participants struggled to integrate multiple identities simultaneously. Students became involved in a variety of student organizations having to do with their academic majors or other interests (Gonyo, 2012), which I also explored in the current study, but I specifically explored whether students were involved in any identity-based groups and whether this involvement affected their sense of belonging. Other findings from the pilot study were experiences with microaggressions and pervasive stereotypes, which, as I discuss later, may affect sense of belonging.

Problem Statement

Homophobia is prevalent in communities of color (e.g., Bowleg, 2013; Collins, 2005; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Moore, 2010; Nadal, 2013), and racism is common within LGBTQ+ communities (e.g., Baylor, 2002; Collins, 2005; Crawford, et al., 2002; Nadal, 2013; Stroude,

2016; Washington & Wall, 2006). Homophobia, heterosexism, and racism are also common in campus communities (e.g., Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Misawa, 2010a, 2010b; Narui, 2014; Rankin, et al., 2010; Schueler, Hoffman, & Peterson, 2009; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Strayhorn, 2012; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Black gay men are students who have at least two marginalized identities (being Black and being gay). It seems reasonable to assume that Black gay men, like their peers, want to feel a sense of belonging within their campus communities and that feeling a sense of belonging is important to their ultimate success and graduation (Hausmann, et al., 2009; Hoffman, et al., 2002/2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012).

I explored the ways that racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism, along with experiences of affirmation and inclusion, did or did not affect Black gay male students' sense of belonging. Though the negative forces of racism, sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism were present, I utilized an anti-deficit approach in understanding and interpreting the experiences of Black gay men. I discuss relevant themes that affected sense of belonging, and I note incidences of racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism that the participants experienced; however, I intentionally highlight the positive and inclusive experiences Black gay men had that contributed to the process of their feeling a sense of belonging. It is important for scholars and practitioners to understand that although students are likely to face challenges on campus related to their minoritized identities, they are sometimes, in the case of this study, mostly able to overcome those challenges and be successful. Emphasizing successes allows scholars and practitioners to understand behaviors, circumstances, buffers, and resiliencies that help students feel a sense of belonging within their institutions as a whole and within specific communities on campuses.

Major Terms and Concepts

For the purpose of this study, I use the term Black inclusively to mean individuals who identify as Black and/or African American. If participants or relevant literature used the term African American to describe an identity, I use that terminology to describe and discuss their identity where relevant. In this study the term gay describes men who have sexual and affectional attractions to other men and not women. In this study I selected participants who self-identified as gay and cisgender at the time of their self-selection to participate in this study. My intent was to exclude men who identified as non-heterosexual in ways other than gay (i.e., bisexual, men who have sex with men) because of other phenomena linked with the experiences of these men such as being on the “down low,” and because bisexual students often have different experiences than gay students do (Collins, 2005; Poynter & Washington, 2005). Despite solicitations for Black gay men, I did include a participant in this study who said he identified as a gay male in our initial communications, but during his interviews, he discussed his identity as lying outside the binary, that is, he did not identify as gay or straight. Jo’El did not have a specific term he consistently used to describe his sexuality because he was not able to identify a word that fit his identity. Additionally, Kris talked about his biracial identity during his interviews, though he used the term Black to describe himself. Within this text, I use whatever term participants used to describe their sexuality and race in order to respect the terms that they felt best represented them. I intentionally chose to exclude transgender students from this work in recognition of the fact that while transgender individuals are often grouped with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations, they have different experiences because of their gender identity, which is not the same as sexual orientation. In this study, I was specifically concerned with sexual orientation.

Sense of Belonging

The term sense of belonging has become prevalent in higher education literature over the last decade though its roots come from disciplinary fields such as psychology, psychiatry, and sociology. Many models of persistence (i.e., Tinto, 1993) use the term integration to describe the process of how students fit in and find a place on campus, while sense of belonging is more inclusive and relational in its meaning. A student's sense of belonging is important because it leads to student satisfaction with the college experience (Hausmann, et al., 2009; Hoffman, et al., 2002/2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, sense of belonging has a positive effect on a student's sense of institutional commitment and both the intention of persisting and actual persistence (Hausmann, et al., 2009; Hoffman, et al., 2002/2003; Strayhorn, 2012). Based on the findings of their qualitative study, Hausmann et al. (2009) claimed that student persistence models should include sense of belonging as a variable of study of student persistence because of its proven relevance. Similarly, Hurtado and Carter (1997) claimed, "studying a sense of belonging allows researchers to assess which forms of social interaction (academic and social) further enhance students' affiliation and identity with their colleges" (p. 328). Studying the sense of belonging of Black gay men allowed me to consider important factors related to student satisfaction and persistence for this student population.

Strayhorn (2012) created a definition of sense of belonging that is inclusive of the ideas of many scholars. He framed sense of belonging as "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (p. 3). He defined sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus

community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). In this definition, it is important to notice several terms, specifically *perceived*, *feeling*, and *sensation*. While it may be the case that students have social support structures they can call upon, they may not realize or perceive that they have a social support structure. Additionally, students may have created connections with faculty members and peers but not actually feel that connection to be meaningful. In other words, students may have individuals who are there to support them and who feel connected to the student, but the student may not feel the same sense of connection or realize or be interested in those individuals being there for them.

Hausmann et al. (2009) indicated that they view “students’ subjective sense of belonging as conceptually distinct from behavioral indicators of participation, or integration, in the social and academic aspects of university life” (p. 650). This distinction between subjective sense of belonging and behavioral indicators is important to make and has been mostly ignored in many models of student persistence. Focus on behavioral involvement including peer and faculty interactions can be related to a student’s sense of belonging but does not imply that students feel like they belong at their institution (Hausmann et al., 2009). Hoffman et al. (2002/2003) claimed, “Student involvement and interaction in the college systems alone are not sufficient to ensure integration...[and] integration into only one system is not enough to ensure persistence” (p. 228). Similarly, Harper and Quaye (2015) stated, “While conceptually similar, there is a key qualitative difference between involvement and engagement: it is entirely possible to be involved in something without being engaged” (p. 4). In other words, it is possible for students to be involved in student organizations, have some friends, go to their classes, and get good grades, but still not feel a sense of belonging at their institution.

An important consideration to make in researching students' sense of belonging is a distinction made by Hurtado and Carter (1997) regarding perceptions of group cohesion and observed cohesion. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) stressed the importance of assessing one's perceived cohesion, which they claimed, "encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group" (p. 482). Their interests relate to a "group member's perception of his or her group membership that might reflect a tendency to cohere, or 'stick,' to the group" (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 482). In the case of perception of group cohesion, a researcher considers an individual's perceptions of their cohesion with a group, while observed cohesion represents assumptions of cohesion based on researcher observations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). If a researcher were to study observed cohesion, she might simply see that a student seems to have some connections, goes to classes, and belongs to a group, and assume that the student feels a sense of belonging. In the context of this study, I wanted to understand both students' sense of belonging to particular groups and belonging to their institution, and I relied on participant descriptions of their perceived cohesion.

The concept of perceived cohesion was ideal for studying affiliations that helped create a sense of belonging for individuals in larger environments, as is the case for many institutions of higher education. Students who find ways to cut the campus down in size by learning to navigate the complicated bureaucratic systems of colleges and universities that involve things like picking a major, figuring out financial aid, and selecting classes each semester, are more likely to be successful (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The collective affiliations students form aid them in navigating large campus environments and common bureaucratic systems on campus, which is a known challenge for students of color in particular (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Sense of belonging has been found to be particularly important for students of color (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a; Wood & Harris III, 2015). Strayhorn (2012) discussed how sense of belonging can be of greater importance when students are in “environments or situations that individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or foreign, as well as in contexts where certain individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed” (p. 10). Students of color are likely to experience these feelings at PWIs as a result of racism, are more likely to feel alienated, and may have difficulty developing a sense of belonging (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2012; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Swim, et al., 2003; Tuitt & Carter, 2008). Strayhorn (2012) posited the opposite of sense of belonging as alienation, which is a feeling that may occur if a student does not feel welcome, valued, or feels unwanted.

Given the proven relevance of sense of belonging, scholars have assessed many of the factors related to it. For example, sense of belonging for Black men is positively affected by faculty-student interaction, exposure to diversity, and usage of student support services, and it is negatively affected by active and collaborative learning in classrooms (Wood & Harris, 2015). Not surprisingly, homophobia and racism in campus environments are also negatively associated with sense of belonging (e.g., Harper, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita, 2010; Wood & Harris III, 2015)

Some scholars claim that Black gay men often have to choose one identity exclusively over the other, Black or gay (Conerly, 1996; Collins, 2005; Gonyo, 2012; Patton, 2011; Smith, 1999). Gay and Black as identities do not seem to be able to exist equally or intersectionally in the literature, with few exceptions (i.e., Means, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a). For example, one student in my pilot study (Gonyo, 2012) indicated that he had been Black his

whole life, so he decided to take college as his opportunity to explore his gay identity. Another student said that he avoided Black student organizations on his campus because he knew they were not accepting of gay people. In the current study, if students expressed a need to separate their identities, I wanted to learn what effect this separation had on their sense of belonging both within specific spaces and institutionally. I also wanted to understand how student experiences were affected intersectionally, even if students did not think about their experiences being a result of their identity as a Black gay man, not a Black man or a gay man. Finally, I wanted to examine how microaggressions and pervasive stereotypes affected students' sense of belonging.

For this study, I used Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging: "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (p. 3), while also strongly listening for how students *perceive*, *feel*, and *sense* their belonging. I paid attention to the ways in which students felt like they were or were not able to express their identities in order to feel a sense of belonging. For example, it seemed possible that a student could feel a sense of belonging while being involved in Black student organizations, but that this belonging was a result of keeping his gay identity hidden from his Black peers. Conversely, a Black gay male student could have felt a sense of belonging while participating in an LGBTQ+ organization on campus but alienated from Black peers because he decided to be open about his sexual orientation. I sought to understand what, if any, implications this has for a student's overall sense of belonging at his institution.

Purpose and Research Questions

The primary research questions for this study were:

1. Do Black gay men feel a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions?
2. If Black gay men do feel a sense of belonging, what processes contribute to sense of belonging?

Interview questions that were directly related to Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging framework, and other relevant literature were used to explore the research questions. Additionally, participant experiences were analyzed using social constructivist, intersectional, and anti-deficit frameworks, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Conceptual Framework

After reviewing literature related to student persistence, integration, and sense of belonging, the conceptual framework I chose for this study was Hurtado and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging model. They created their model based on the exploration of the sense of belonging of Latino students. Though quantitative methods informed most of the creation of their model, the model translated well to qualitative work based on the development of interview questions related to the factors identified, including selectivity of college, student's gender and academic ability, ease of transition, hostile climate, and sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Additionally, Samura (2016) noted that much of the research related to sense of belonging utilizes quantitative methods and claims that "While this approach [large-scale survey data] enables researchers and practitioners to gain a broad view of students' sense of belonging, students' understanding of their belonging and reasons for their level of belonging are less clear" (p. 147). Samura (2016) also called for scholars to use other methods to better understand student sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) were seeking factors related to Latino students'

sense of belonging by their third year in college in recognition of the fact that students have specific experiences over time that relate to their sense of belonging.

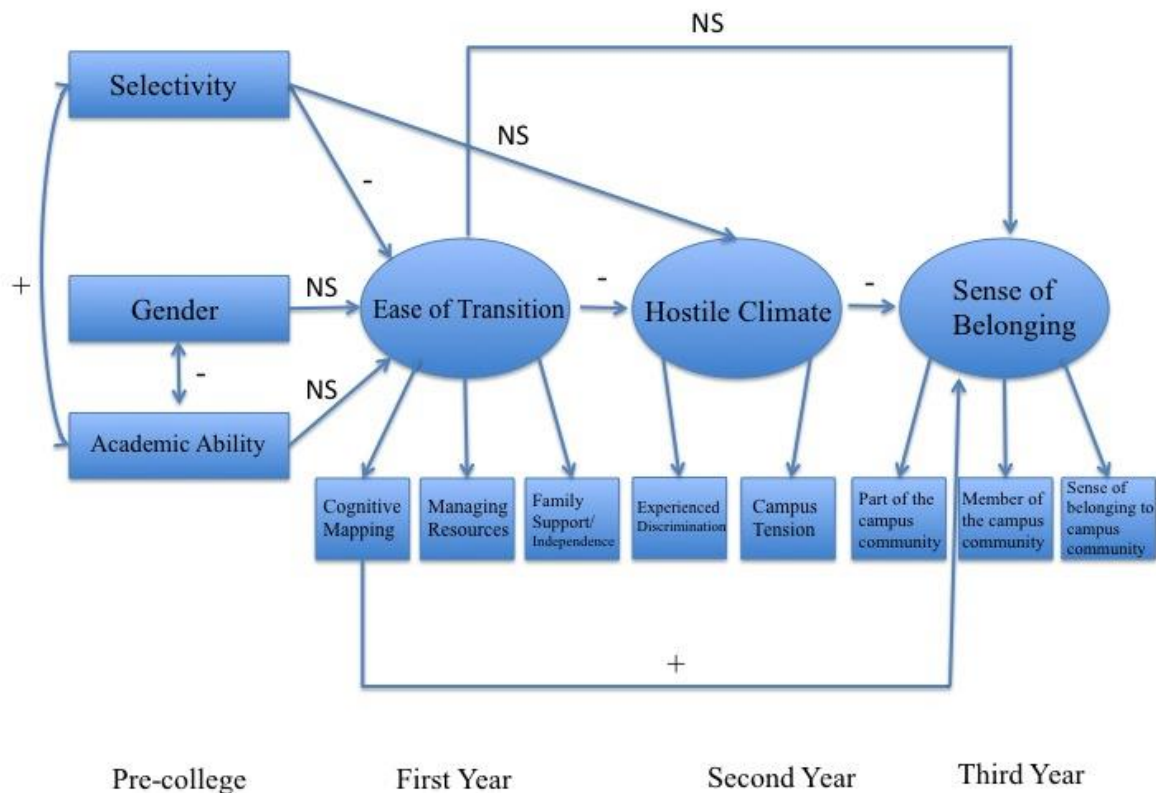


Figure 1.1. Model of Sense of Belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 336)

Hurtado and Carter (1997) coded their findings into two themes: sense of belonging and academic activities, and sense of belonging and participation in student organizations. Within the theme of academic activities, sense of belonging was related to discussions of course material with other students outside class, tutoring other students, and frequently interacting with faculty members outside of the classroom environment. Hurtado and Carter (1997) also noted that academic performance was not necessarily related to sense of belonging for their participants. As a result of the finding that GPA was not related to sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) speculated that other activities must have a more direct relationship to sense of belonging.

In relation to sense of belonging and participation in student organizations, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that during their second year of college the only organizations that led to a higher sense of belonging were religious and Greek-letter organizations (fraternities and sororities). In the third year of college sense of belonging was most directly related to membership in social-community organizations. These findings suggest that both mainstream (e.g., organizations not related to social identities) and religious and social-community organizations (which often had external-to-campus affiliations) were most directly related to sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) noted:

members of ethnic organizations, however, did not have a significantly higher sense of belonging than nonmembers in either [second or third] year, perhaps because some students may join such organizations to share common interests and common problems related to their feelings of marginality in the campus community. These students may experience group cohesion and marginality simultaneously. (p. 335)

While students who become involved with ethnic organizations may find a sense of group cohesion among their peers in their ethnic student organizations, the sense of marginality that is common to all of these students may overpower the cohesion they feel with group members and diminish sense of belonging.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) also claimed that students who perceived racial-ethnic tension on their campuses were less likely to feel a sense of belonging. However, students who perceived racial-ethnic tension and were members of racial-ethnic student organizations had a greater sense of belonging with the overall campus community than their peers who were not members of racial-ethnic student organizations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In other words, racial-ethnic groups may be especially helpful for feeling a sense of belonging on campus when students have peers whom they feel a connection with despite their perception of racial-ethnic tension on campus (Samura, 2016; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

I utilized this conceptual framework to formulate questions that helped guide my interviews with participants. Specifically I sought out information about how students experienced their transition to their institution, their perception of the climate at that institution, and the ways that they did or did not feel a sense of belonging. Though Hurtado and Carter (1997) looked at the experiences of Latino students, current research on Asian American, Latino and Black students showed similarities in experiences (e.g., Harper, 2012; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Samura, 2016; Wood & Palmer, 2015). For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) considered the necessity of students separating from their prior communities in order to feel a sense of belonging. Their study finds that relationships with prior communities, specifically family, are especially valuable for Latino students as is the case with other students, including Black students and LGBTQ+ students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Harper, 2012; Kuh & Love, 2000; Olive, 2010; Rendón, et al., 2000; Vaccaro, Russell, & Koob, 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Hurtado and Carter also claimed that the ease of transition to college is especially important for Latino students. Scholars have also stressed the importance of ease of transition for other groups of students, including Black students (Baird, 2000; Eaton, 2000; Harper 2012).

Finally, the effects of racial climates were cited as important to sense of belonging for Latino students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Many scholars (Astin, 1993,1999; Baird, 2000; Harper, 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2013; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1994) have shown that racial climate is important to sense of belonging for both students of color and White students. As a result of the similarities between the experiences of Latino students and Black students, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model was a good fit for studying the experiences of Black gay men. I also recognized that there were likely unique experiences that

Black gay men faced. As a result, I was attuned to other topics that arose when talking with participants and asked follow-up questions to better understand participant experiences and factors related to sense of belonging.

Researcher Positionality

My interest in researching the experiences of Black gay men was initially sparked by a research project that I did in 2007 while working as a full time professional in residence life. I had done research regarding several parts of the LGBTQ+ community while I was in my master's degree program but was interested in knowing more about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color, specifically Black individuals. I decided to look at the experiences of Black gay men in this study because, based on past research I completed, I learned that gender roles play a large role in the experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color. Additionally, I thought it was important to explore how the "privileged" roles of males play out despite other identities that are minoritized (being gay and Black).

Autobiographically I am connected to this population in the way that I identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as a lesbian. Additionally, I am the daughter of a gay man and spent time with members of the LGB community when I was growing up. When I worked in LGBTQ+ student services, I saw firsthand the challenges that Black gay men have in terms of defining and "living out" their identities that I read about in scholarly work. These challenges were reaffirmed when I completed a pilot study (Gonyo, 2012) and talked with Black gay men about their experiences in college. As a result, I wanted to learn more about the experiences of Black gay men in relation to sense of belonging. I wanted to give individuals the opportunity to talk about their experiences and the challenges and successes they experienced as Black gay men. From my observations prior to beginning this study, many Black gay men were forced to

choose between being Black or being gay, and forced choice may have had negative effects on their development and sense of belonging both in their home and college communities. I wanted to better understand how and if these men were able to feel a sense of belonging at their institution. I also wanted to understand how students knew when they belong someplace (whether it be in a group of people or specific place) and how they perceived, felt, and sensed belonging.

I tried to create a research relationship with participants where they saw me as an individual they could trust, someone who valued them as individuals, who cared about their experiences, and who wanted to make a difference. Going into this study I was aware that developing relationships with research participants had the potential to be challenging in some cases. Some men may have initially thought, “What does this White lesbian adult know about me? What is she going to do for me?” I think that being genuine and explaining my background and intentions helped build trust with participants. I think that these men trusted the genuine “me” that I put forward and I was able to create a dynamic where participants felt free to express themselves openly and honestly. I was at least ten years older than participants and my experiences in college were quite different from those of many of the participants I interacted with due to progress in the way that individuals and society view and value the LGBTQ+ community. As a whole, the LGBTQ+ movement has progressed a great deal in the last decade, and campuses across the country have slowly added more support for students including LGBTQ+ student services and policies that prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons. Additionally, in relation to age, it came to my attention prior to completing this study that students were clearly aware that I was not a member of their generation. While working in LGBTQ+ student services, I experienced students making remarks about my age and how

extreme they viewed our age difference to be. I did not perceive my age to be a factor in this study.

When I completed the pilot study on the experiences of Black gay men at a PWI, I felt like I was well received by participants. My perception was that participants were comfortable with me and were open and honest as a result. Many participants were excited that someone wanted to talk with them about being both Black and gay and about what their experiences were like as a result of their identities. I knew some of the participants who participated in my pilot study outside of the interview context and asked them how they felt about being interviewed by me. All of the participants said they felt comfortable and appreciated the way I asked about their lived experiences. In this study participants were excited to share their lives with me and did not seem to have any hesitations about sharing both positive and negative experiences. Participants like Raheem also expressed that they had never been able to talk about their experiences so openly prior to being interviewed by me.

I think my genuine interest in exploring the sense of belonging of Black gay men was invaluable in this study. I was mindful of my positionality as a White lesbian woman who was a PhD student at all phases of the study, and I think completing the pilot study helped prepare me to be mindful. I was aware that it was a privilege to be able to do this study, and have been grateful both for the opportunity to complete it and to the men who agreed to work with me to help improve experiences for Black gay men in higher education.

Overview of the Dissertation

The second chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to giving context to this study by exploring relevant literature regarding sense of belonging and the experiences of Black gay men that relate to higher education. Relevant topics include students' ease of transition and campus

climate, which are known to affect one's sense of belonging. It is important to lay a foundation for understanding the current state of literature on Black gay men, LGBTQ+ students, Black college students, Black masculinity, homophobia in Black communities, racism among LGBTQ+ populations, and both homophobia and racism on campus. Chapter Three consists of an explanation of the methods and research design I used for this study. The fourth chapter illustrates several of the themes identified in conducting thematic analysis of the data. Chapter Five is dedicated to describing the sense of belonging model I created in interpreting and analyzing the sense of belonging of participants. The sixth chapter describes the individual paths that three participants, Timothy, Greg, and JJ, took to feel a sense of belonging. Finally, Chapter Seven explores implications for future research, theory, and practice in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Literature Review

This literature review serves to situate my study on the sense of belonging of Black gay men at PWIs within the larger body of scholarly literature regarding the experiences of and issues affecting Black gay men and sense of belonging. I start this chapter by discussing the use of intersectionality and additive approaches as frameworks to consider the experiences of individuals with multiple minoritized identities, though there is a dearth of literature regarding Black gay men that uses intersectionality as a framework. I also discuss minority stress theory as it likely affects the sense of belonging of Black gay men, but also their overall health and wellbeing. In this literature review, I analyze work directly related to Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model, which served as the conceptual framework for this study and describe research relevant to ease of transition, including cognitive mapping, managing resources, and family support/independence. I also discuss research about hostile campus climate, including instances of discrimination and campus tension experienced by LGBTQ+ and Black students. Finally, I discuss topics that are likely to be relevant to Black gay men including literature on Black gay men, Black masculinity, homophobia and heterosexism in Black and African-American communities, and racism in LGB communities.

Of note, though I used an anti-deficit framework in designing, analyzing, and interpreting this study, the majority of existing literature about Black and LGBTQ+ persons is framed using a deficit approach (e.g., Black men are underprepared for college) or highlights the negative experiences of students (e.g., microaggressions). While it is important to understand that there are negative factors "working against" Black gay men, it is also important to understand and

recognize the strengths, resiliencies, and positive outcomes for these men. I discuss anti-deficit research at greater length in Chapters Three and Seven.

Multiple Identities and Intersectionality

Throughout this study I was mindful of the ways that participants discussed and made meaning of their multiple identities. There are at least two ways of looking at the experiences of individuals who have multiple identities, which I briefly discuss here. I also discuss intersectionality in Chapter Three as it applies to the framing of this study and in Chapter Seven as it relates to the findings and implications of this study. One way of looking at the experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities is an additive approach (e.g., Pope & Reynolds, 1991), and the other I discuss here is intersectionality (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991).

Concepts like racism and homophobia are often studied separately but are still relevant to one another generally, and more specifically, to the intersectional context of this study. Though the use of an additive approach is most common in existing literature, and may potentially make it more challenging to understand the experiences of Black gay men intersectionally within this chapter, it is important to include research that looks at pieces of Black gay men's identities or that considers the experiences of these men from an additive approach. Work done using an additive approach was relevant to better understand the issues that were likely to be salient to the participants that I interviewed and was helpful in the framing of interview questions.

Additive Approach

When researchers use an additive approach, or what some call a “double jeopardy” approach, to consider multiple identities and oppressions, they consider each of a person's identities as individual pieces that are added onto each other (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008;

Reynolds & Pope, 1991). This method considers each marginalized identity separately and attempts to understand how “disadvantage accumulates to shape the experience of discrimination for people with intersecting subordinate-group identities” (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 378). Reynolds and Pope (1991) claimed, “Often a person is most likely to focus on whichever oppression is most salient in his or her life” (p. 176). As a result Pope and Reynolds (1991) suggested, “it is difficult for individuals to embrace all of who they are when they internalize a worldview based on fragmentation and dichotomization” (p. 177). Scholars who use an additive lens consider how individual forms of oppression add up to form cumulative discrimination and predict that individuals with multiple minoritized identities will experience a greater amount of discrimination than those with just one marginalized identity (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). For example, in considering Black gay men from an additive approach, I would consider participants as men, gay men, and as Black men. I would also consider how homophobia, expectations of masculinity, and racism add up cumulatively to influence their experiences; however, in this study I used an intersectional lens to interpret the experiences of participants.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an emerging framework. Its origins are in the fields of legal studies and sociology and it has been used to study systems of oppressions, not identities (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991), however it has recently become more popular in other fields such as psychology and education. The value of using this lens comes from looking at individuals as whole persons whose identities and oppressions are constructed together rather than having pieces of identity that do not relate to one other (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Jones & Abes, 2013; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Renn, 2010; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a).

For example, Crenshaw (2001) considered how the experiences of violence among Black women are shaped by racism and sexism together, not separately. Crenshaw (2001) claimed:

Because of their [Black women] intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized in both. ... the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (p. 1244)

Crenshaw (2001) critiqued additive approaches because individuals often fall in between issues and their identities and oppressions are left unconsidered as a result. For example, in the case of Black gay men, they may “fall into the void between concerns about” LGBTQ+ issues and Black issues (Crenshaw, 2001, p. 1282). Bowleg (2013) found that the Black gay men she interviewed (who averaged 36 years old as a population) were not able to view the gay and Black pieces of their identity separately. The pieces of identity were seen as “intertwined,” as one participant stated (Bowleg, 2013, p. 767). In this study, I was conscious of the ways in which homophobia, racism, and sexism affected the experiences of Black gay men and their sense of belonging as phenomena occurring together, not as individual phenomena which did not relate to one another.

Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress theory is an important theory to consider when studying the experiences of minoritized persons. Meyer (1995) described minority stress as “psychological stress derived from minority status” (p. 38). He continued, “minority stress arises not only from negative events, but from the totality of the minority person's experience in dominant society. At the center of this experience is the incongruence between the minority person's culture, needs, and experience, and societal structures” (Meyer, 1995, p. 39). In other words, minority stress is not only a result of the discriminatory events minoritized persons experience, but also the very culture and social structures that permeate their lives. Meyers stated, “this concept [minority

stress] is based on the premise that gay people, like members of other minority groups, are subjected to chronic stress related to their stigmatization” (p. 38). In relation to the gay community, Meyer (1995) discussed three processes of minority stress including internalized homophobia, expectations of rejection and discrimination, and actual discriminatory events. He found that these processes predicted psychological distress in a longitudinal study of gay men that started in 1985.

More recent studies have found that minority stress leads to negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ persons both generally and within higher education including decreased academic and social integration of LGBTQ+ students, decreased self-worth, decreased self-acceptance, poorer mental health including anxiety and depression symptoms than heterosexual students, feeling left out, physical illness, higher rates of attempted suicide and suicide than heterosexuals, and alcohol abuse (Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, & Locke, 2011; Sutter & Perrin, 2016; Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012; Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014; Woodford, Kulick, & Attenberry, 2015). Hayes and colleagues (2011) found that both students of color and LGB students experienced similar negative outcomes at higher rates than White heterosexual peers. Most specifically related to this study, in Sutter and Perrin’s (2016) study of LGBTQ+ persons of color, they found that LGBTQ based discrimination had a stronger effect than racism. They speculated that this was a result of LGBTQ+ people of color facing discrimination based on their sexuality from their own racial group in addition to racism faced both in and out of the LGBTQ+ community. Sutter and Perrin (2016) claimed:

as a result, LGBTQ POC [people of color] may feel the need to conceal their identity to fit in with their racial/ethnic group and avoid physical harm (e.g., being attacked), being fired, or feeling shame or guilt. Chronically concealing one’s identity is a cognitively and

behaviorally taxing coping strategy that has serious psychological consequences. (p. 103)

Next I discuss the three processes of minority stress theory including internalized homophobia, expectations of rejection and discrimination, and actual discriminatory events.

Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia occurs when one directs negative attitudes about LGBTQ+ persons towards themselves. It is important to note that persons likely receive negative messages about the LGBTQ+ community long before they recognize their LGBTQ+ identity, which may affect not only one's coming out process, but their feeling about their identity once they have accepted their LGBTQ+ identity (Meyer, 1995). These negative feelings about one's own identity can cause "psychologically-injurious effects" (Meyer, 1995, p. 40).

Perceived Stigma (Expectations of Rejection and Discrimination)

Because LGBTQ+ persons expect to be stigmatized as a result of their minoritized identity(s) they may be anxious and vigilant in their interactions with others. Meyer (1995) claimed that this vigilance is stressful and requires the use of energy resources to manage and that, "a high level of perceived stigma would lead minority group members to maintain a high degree of vigilance – expectations of rejection, discrimination, and violence – with regard to the minority components of their identity in interactions with dominant group members" (p. 41). It is important to note that Meyer (1995) discussed *perceived* stigma. Because LGBTQ+ persons do not know how other people and environments perceive LGBTQ+ persons until they gain an understanding about the feelings of individuals and climates of environments, they are likely to be vigilant interacting with new people and going into new settings, including interactions with students, personnel, and general settings within their college or university. Even though individuals and general campus climates may be favorable for LGBTQ+ persons "the stress

experienced by the vigilant person leads to a general experience of fear and mistrust in interactions with the dominant culture, and a sense of disharmony and alienation with general society” (p. 41). As a result of minority stress, individuals may keep their guard up in settings where they do not necessarily have to. While Meyer (1995) was specifically studying minority stress in gay men, the same is applicable to individuals with other minoritized identities. Minority stress theory is a fitting theory to use with intersectionality because both theories stress the importance of an individual’s environment.

Discrimination and Violence

Actual instances of discrimination and violence are the third process in minority stress theory. Meyer (1995) claimed, “the most explicit sources of minority stress are rejection, discrimination, and violence the minority person experiences because of their stigmatized minority position” (p. 41). When LGBTQ+ persons experience discrimination based on their identity(s), they are likely to experience minority stress “more because of the deep cultural meaning they activate than because of the ramifications of the events themselves” (Meyer, 1995, pp. 41-42). These events remind LGBTQ+ persons that they are not accepted because of their minoritized identity(s) and reach far beyond the actual event they experienced. Recent events in the United States, including the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida and the shootings of Black men by police, have likely had a strong effect on minoritized persons, specifically LGBTQ+ persons and Black persons and heightened their minority stress.

Social and Academic Environments

I sought to explore the sense of belonging of Black gay men by trying to gain an understanding of their experiences in both social and academic environments of their institution. Academic environments included experiences inside the classroom, working on group projects

with peers, and interactions with faculty members. Social environments included social interactions with peers on campus in a variety of settings. For decades scholars (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) have discussed the importance of student learning environments. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claimed that institutional environmental factors such as faculty and student characteristics, student perception of campus, student peer group, and student involvement are more important than other factors, including the size and selectivity of the institution. In fact, much of Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging Model relates to the institutional environment in the way that students are able to negotiate and make sense of their environment, the environment's climate, and the way that students do or do not become a part of the campus environment. Throughout this literature review I highlight topics that are relevant to the institutional environments of PWIs for Black gay men. First, I discuss the nature of predominantly White institutions, the setting for this study.

Predominantly White Institutions

By definition, PWIs are comprised of a majority of White students, faculty, and staff members. The lack of Black students, faculty, and administrators can be isolating (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Means, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Feagin and Sikes (1995) said, "On entering predominantly white colleges and universities black students soon become aware of an essentially white campus" (p. 91). Indeed, Quaye and colleagues (2015) claimed that race shapes campus cultures, which affects the experiences of students of color. Almost everything on campus is geared towards White culture and the interests of White students (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Quaye, et al., 2015). Harper, et al. (2009) called this practice into question and asked what PWIs are doing to be accountable for student diversity, specifically for students of color.

As part of this focus on White culture, “For the most part, white regents, administrators, faculty members, staff, and students have shown little willingness to incorporate black values, interests, or history into the core of campus culture” (Feagin & Sikes, 1995, p. 91). Although Feagin and Sike’s (1995) classic study is two decades old, more recent research (e.g., Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Iverson & Jagers, 2015) provides evidence that not much has changed for Black students at PWIs. Being surrounded by White everything, and the lack of willingness of Whites to learn anything about African American individuals, leaves Black students feeling isolated, devalued, and alienated. One of Feagin and Sikes’ participants said, “It’s a constant battle dealing with racism. It is so much a part of everything. To integrate means simply to be white. It doesn’t mean fusing the two cultures; it simply means to be white” (1995, p. 91). It is not hard to imagine that Black students feel pressure to fit in, which in this case, means being White. This context for the likely experiences of Black men was important as I tried to understand the experiences of Black gay men within PWIs in this study.

Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) Sense of Belonging Model

Ease of Transition

Students’ ability to adjust to their new environment on campus is important to sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that ease of transition played a central role for Latinos who felt a sense of belonging at their institution by their third year. Harper (2012) claimed that transition was also a factor in the success of Black men. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that the factors most related to ease of transition were students’ ability to cognitively map their campus, to manage their resources, and family support and independence.

Cognitive Mapping

Students' ability to cut their campus down to a manageable size, or cognitively map (Attinasi, 1989), is particularly important for students from marginalized groups. Since college campuses consist of many social groups, values, norms, and bureaucratic systems, it can be challenging for students to find their way. Hurtado and Carter (1997) claimed, "an initial orientation to a college's social, academic, and physical geographies is essential to students' feeling that they belong in their college" (p. 339). In other words, students must feel at least familiar with their college environments before they can feel a sense of belonging.

Attinasi (1989) claimed that in his study Mexican American students were more likely to persist when they were able to cut the campus down in size, or negotiate the geography of campus, and to create their own conception of campus environments. Attinasi (1989) said:

These conceptions, or cognitive maps, are a complex of things learned about the environment including expectations, stereotypes, and value judgments. In developing cognitive maps of large and complex spaces, individuals make certain simplifications and adjustments in accordance with their own needs and experience. (p. 268)

Students form cognitive maps by learning about their campus from their peers and selecting a major, which "provided a vehicle for locating oneself in the physical, social, and academic geographies" (Attinasi, 1989, p. 264) of campus. Once students know what areas of campus are of greatest concern to them physically, socially, and academically, they become most familiar with these spaces while giving less attention to the rest of campus (Attinasi, 1989).

Group membership can also provide means to connect students with ways to meet their needs and connect to the larger campus life (Attinasi, 1989; Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Palmer & Wood, 2015; Samura, 2016). Finding a niche can help students form cognitive maps (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) claimed:

In some cases, that niche may be a club or organization. In other cases, it may be a small like-minded and/or familial community on campus that shares similar views or attributes with a new student (e.g., ethnic communities). And in still other cases, it may be found in the major area of study and therefore in a department or academic program. (p. 125)

Scholars propose several ways to improve engagement for students of color. Suggestions include peer to peer mentorship and summer bridge programs that enable students of color can make connections on campus, engage in classroom settings, and cognitively map the campus with their peers (e.g., Harper, 2012; Quaye, et al., 2015). These connections can provide a way for students to scale down and navigate their institutional environment.

Managing Resources

Time and money are the resources that Hurtado and Carter (1997) claimed relate to students feeling a sense of belonging. Wood and Palmer (2015) also stressed the importance of managing time and money for Black students in college. As students transitioned to college, staying on a schedule was an important factor in feeling a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). These claims are likely relevant to Black men as Harper (2012) found that one reason for the attrition of Black men in higher education was lack of financial resources.

Family Support/Independence

Family support is important to all students, but research shows that family support is especially important to students of color and LGBTQ+ students (Berger & Milem, 1999; Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2012; Hausmann, et al., 2009; Olive, 2010; Strayhorn, et al., 2010; Vaccaro, et al., 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Bonner and Bailey (2006) claimed that connections between African American students and their families were strongly related to “psychosocial development, racial identity, academic success, resilience, and self-esteem” (p. 28). Berger and Milem (1999) claimed that home backgrounds play a key role in student integration into the academic and social systems of college. When students perceive their family

as being supportive of and invested in their academic success, they are more likely to persist. However, when students feel like their college attendance is not approved of by their family or is hurting their family, they are less likely to persist (Kuh & Love, 2000; Wood & Palmer, 2015). For example, some students felt like they needed to be home working to help financially support their family and these students might stop or drop out as a result (Kuh & Love, 2000).

In a qualitative study, Hausmann, et al. (2009) found that “for African American students, the largest total effect on intentions to persist was also from encouragement of family and friends, followed by institutional commitment, goal commitment, and sense of belonging” (pp. 664-665). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that for the Latino students in their quantitative study, “ease of separation and maintaining family relationships are essential aspects of the transition to college” (p. 339). For Latino students, the ability to handle the transition of living away from home while maintaining relationships with families was key to transitioning.

In relation to Black gay men, Strayhorn (2008b) claimed that supportive family relationships were essential to student success. In a study of LGBT students from various racial groups, Olive (2010) found that all of his participants indicated that their parents or grandparents were their “closest personal connection” (p. 200), and the students were all sent messages from their families that they were expected to attend college and their education and grades were important. Research indicates that family plays an essential role for Black and LGBTQ+ students in their ability to feel a sense of belonging.

Hostile Climate

Campus climate also plays a central role in a student’s ability to feel a sense of belonging and, ultimately, persist (Astin, 1993, 1999; Baird, 2000; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2013;

Samura, 2016). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who perceived a hostile climate during their second year of college were less likely to feel a sense of belonging during their third year. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) claimed, “continual exposure to a hostile educational climate, marked by racial tension and stereotyping, may adversely influence the academic achievement and psychological health of students of color” (p. 183). A negative campus climate does not necessarily directly lead to attrition but may affect factors related to attrition, such as social and academic involvement (Museus, et al., 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2015).

Baird (2000) created a psychological model of persistence and discussed the role of climate. He stressed the importance of students’ perceptions of their campus environment and claimed, “These appraisals represent students’ personal understandings of the structures and environments and their opportunities and constraints upon behavior” (Baird, 2000, p. 67). In other words, students will act in a way they perceive to be safe and comfortable based on how they feel about the climate. Baird (2000) added that not only is the individual’s assessment of the climate important, but this assessment can also be influenced by “the interpretations of important reference groups” (p. 70). As students find groups they identify with, they will be influenced by what their peers say about the campus climate.

Experienced Discrimination and Campus Tension

Hurtado and Carter (1997) claimed that experiencing discrimination is related to ability to feel a sense of belonging by the third year of college. Latino students who perceived racial tension or experienced discrimination were less likely to feel like they were a part of their campus community, which may affect students’ sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In the following section I discuss literature about experiences of discrimination and campus tension related to homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses. Then I talk about literature related

to experiences of racism on college campuses. I focus here on homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, and racism, as these are likely to be forms of discrimination and campus tension that Black gay men are most aware of and most likely to experience on their campus.

Homophobia and heterosexism are still prevalent on college campuses despite improvements over the last few decades and lead to unwelcoming and non-inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students (Bazarsky, Morrow, & Javier, 2015; Hong, Woodford, Long, & Renn, 2016; Means, 2014; Misawa, 2010a, 2010b; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Rankin, et al., 2010; Schueler, et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015; Tillman-Kelly, 2015; Woodford, et al., 2012; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2014; Woodford & Kulick, 2015), including Black gay men (Means, 2014; Misawa, 2010a; Strayhorn, 2012). Schueler, et al. (2009) claimed, “College and university campuses continue to be chilly climates at best and places of violence at worst for LGBTQ students” (p. 64). Though there have been improvements in campus climates for LGBTQ+ people in higher education, these positive changes have not eliminated the presence or effects of homophobia and heterosexism.

Experiences of homophobia and heterosexism. Homophobia and heterosexism are expressed in varying ways and have different effects on individuals. Some individuals on campuses act out homophobia in violent ways while others use derogatory language or express negative attitudes about LGBTQ+ people (Hong, et al., 2016; Rankin, et al., 2010; Woodford, et al., 2012; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2014; Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Woodford, et al., 2015). Rankin, et al. (2010) claimed that findings from their national study indicated, “LGBQ respondents experience significantly greater harassment and

discrimination than their heterosexual allies and were more likely to indicate the harassment was based on sexual identity” (p. 10). Additionally Rankin, et al. (2010) reported:

LGBQ respondents were more likely to observe others being targets of derogatory comments (77%), being stared at (41%), deliberately ignored or excluded (38%), and intimidated or bullied (30%). LGBQ respondents were twice as likely as heterosexual respondents to report they perceived physical violence in their campus environment (10%, 5% respectively). (p. 12)

These statistics from the 2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender People report (Rankin, et al., 2010) clearly indicate that homophobia and heterosexism are alive and well in institutions of higher education, even if they are, at least in some cases, more subtle or covert than they once were (e.g., Hong, et al., 2016; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2014).

Use of derogatory language about the LGBTQ+ community is not always intended to harass or directed toward LGBTQ+ individuals; however, homophobic language and acts are experienced by both heterosexual and LGB identified individuals and can have a significant impact on both populations (Fanuccee & Taub, 2010; Hong, et al., 2016; Silverschanz, et al., 2008; Woodford, et al., 2012; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014). Hong and colleagues (2016) found that LGB participants who experienced ambient heterosexism (i.e., students hearing “no homo”) on campus were more likely to report particular forms of heterosexist discrimination like verbal threats and being avoided. Additionally, gay men in their study were especially vulnerable to microaggressions and verbal threats based on their sexuality (Hong, et al., 2016).

Homophobic and heterosexist language and behavior are common on college campuses. During a casual conversation, someone might ask a woman if she has a boyfriend, assuming she is in a heterosexual relationship. In classrooms, some faculty members express negative opinions about LGBT individuals (Renn, 1998; Strayhorn, 2012). Rankin and colleagues (2010) found

that LGBTQ respondents in their study were more likely to perceive harassment in classes than their heterosexual peers. Additionally, Schuler, et al. (2009) found that LGBTQ+ students felt like they got less support from faculty on campus than their heterosexual peers did; however, more recent studies have shown that LGBTQ+ students reported feeling supported by faculty in formal interactions both in and out of the classroom and informally outside of the classroom (Linley, et al., 2016) and that LGB students were more satisfied with faculty and staff interactions than their heterosexual peers (Garvey and Inkelas, 2012). Scholars have also found that relationships with faculty have been shown to be important to the academic and social integration of students with sexually minoritized identities and can help buffer the effects of experiencing homophobia and heterosexism on campus (Woodford, Han, et al., 2014; Woodford, et al., 2106; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). When LGBTQ+ students perceive homophobic and heterosexist environments in the classroom, they may choose to keep their sexuality or gender identity hidden from both teachers and student peers (Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Rankin, et al., 2010; Schueler, et al., 2009; Vaccaro, et al., 2015). Other scholars reported similar findings about LGBTQ+ students living in residence halls (Fanuccee & Taub, 2010).

In a qualitative study about heterosexist harassment, Silverschantz, et al. (2008) noted “less extreme forms of HH [heterosexist harassment] represent more commonplace acts that may or may not be meant to intentionally harass others but nevertheless convey hostility, insult, or derogation toward sexual-minority persons” (p. 187). When homophobic behavior is seen as acceptable on campus, it is reinforced and becomes part of the norm for that environment. Scholars have found that participants who heard heterosexist and homophobic remarks on campus felt left out and less accepted on campus, were less integrated socially and academically, reported headaches and problems eating or poor appetite, along with a higher likelihood of

reporting depression and anxiety (Woodford, et al., 2012; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2014; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015).

Being in an environment that is not accepting, where people hear derogatory remarks about parts of their identity that they are just coming to terms with, can be challenging for developing in healthy ways (Waldo, 1998). College is often a time when individuals are coming out and going through a crucial period in their identity development (Hong, et al., 2016; Waldo, 1998; Strayhorn, 2012). Experiencing homophobia and heterosexist behavior can make this more challenging (Waldo, 1998; Woodford, et al., 2012).

An unaccepting environment can also create internalized homophobia within LGBTQ+ persons, which could lead to self-doubt, self-hatred, isolation, negative effects on social and academic functioning, self-destructive behavior, alcohol abuse, feeling less accepted on campus, increased anxiety and depression, and other negative health outcomes (Woodford, et al., 2012; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2014; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Research shows that infrequent blatant discrimination based on one's LGB status may cause short and severe distress, however, persistent microaggressions may cause greater stress to LGB persons and serve as "everyday reminders of one's stigmatized minority status" (Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2014, p. 527). Internalized homophobia can also lead students to conceal their sexuality and often leads LGBTQ+ individuals to isolate themselves and refrain from becoming socially and academically engaged on campus (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011).

Rankin and colleagues (2010) indicated:

LGBQ students were more likely to have seriously considered leaving their institution. The likelihood of leaving for all students, regardless of sexual identity, decreased with each year of study, but the differences between LGBQ and heterosexual students widened, with LGBQ students considering leaving more often. (p. 117)

Though it may seem counterintuitive that individuals chose to stay at institutions despite their perception of a negative environment, Rankin and colleagues (2010) found general themes for why participants who had considered leaving their institution stayed: because they had put in too much time to leave, they felt like they could make a difference and help improve the homophobic environment, they found supportive friends and faculty, economic situations, parental influence, and they felt like they had no other choice but to stay. While homophobia is prevalent on many college campuses and is manifested in different ways, individuals make decisions to leave or stay at their institutions for a variety of reasons.

Invisibility. Another topic relevant to homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses is LGBTQ+ invisibility. Scholars assert that there is a norm of heterosexism within college environments (e.g., Misawa, 2010b; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). When people assume that heterosexuality is the norm, they are less likely to consider LGBTQ+ people around them. The affirmation of heterosexuality can lead to homophobia and heterosexism on campus because heterosexual students assume everyone around them is heterosexual. Increases in homophobia and heterosexism can lead to internalized homophobia in LGBTQ+ students as a result of the discriminatory messages they hear from their peers.

Some argued that an individual's LGBTQ+ identity is unknown to others until the LGBTQ+ individual comes out (Herek, 2009). In fact, Herek (2009) called sexuality a "concealable status" (p.441). The fact that students may be able to keep their LGBTQ+ identity hidden may be one reason why LGBTQ+ students often remain invisible on college campuses. Additionally, while resources on college campuses have increased over the last few decades, there are still many campuses that do not provide resources for LGBTQ+ students (Rankin, 2003; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). Schueler, et al. (2009) noted that LGBTQ+ students

lack role models, which can make them feel further marginalized and invisible on campus.

Schueler, et al. (2009) claimed, “heterosexuality is consistently affirmed in society and campuses throughout the United States through laws, policies, practices, the media (e.g., campus newspapers and television stations), and the acceptance of public displays of affection between males and females” (p. 65).

Racism on campus. Racism on campus is another source of discrimination and tension likely experienced by Black gay men on campus. Bonner and Bailey (2006) noted that both K-12 and higher education contexts are “chilly” at best for African American students, especially for African American males. Many other scholars note the negative experiences Black students have at PWIs (e.g., Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Harper, 2012; Swim, et al., 2003; Iverson & Jagers, 2015). Through overt, covert, and colorblind racism, Black students, including Black gay students, experience various types of racism in college environments. Verbal and non-verbal acts of racism took the shape of outright racist comments and staring in some cases (e.g., Harper, 2012; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Swim, et al., 2003). Feagin and Sikes (1995) noted, “Many white students hold firmly to negative beliefs about black youngsters, views they probably learned before they came to college” (p. 92). I explore these various forms of racial stereotypes, ideologies, and actions here.

Racist actions. Black students experienced racist actions in both verbal and non-verbal contexts, enacted in overt and covert ways on college campuses (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2012; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Solorzano, et al., 2000). Despite the fact that racism often looks different from the Jim Crow era and there are fewer blatantly discriminatory actions today, it is important to recognize that discrimination is still prevalent in society and on campuses. These more subtle forms of racism, which are often unconscious but sometimes overt, are called

microaggressions (Solorzano, et al., 2000). Solorzano et al. (2000) said, “our findings suggest that the collegiate climate fosters more covert or subtle racism within academic spaces and more overt racism within social spaces on campus” (p. 68). It is equally important to recognize that students face discrimination on a daily basis (Swim, et al., 2003). Several studies found that Black students were extremely affected in ways that negatively affected their overall well-being as a result of discrimination they faced (Solorzano et al., 2000).

In their classic study of Black student experience, Feagin and Sikes (1995) noted that several of their respondents “discussed how they became fully aware of what it meant to be black in the United States when they encountered flagrant hostility and discrimination on campus” (p. 92). Some White students practice discrimination (microaggressions), sometimes unintentionally, as in a case where students in a residence hall repeatedly confused a Black woman with her roommate even though they looked nothing alike (Feagin & Sikes, 1995). Although these covert acts are more common, some White individuals act in racist ways with the intention to cause pain, whether it is physical, mental, or emotional (Feagin & Sikes, 1995). Some Black students reported that they felt like they always had to keep their guard up because every time they let their guard down, they were hurt (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solorzano, et al., 2000, Tuitt & Carter, 2008).

More recent scholarship indicated that institutions of higher education are still environments where Black students experience negative treatment. Iverson and Jagers (2015), who argued that racial profiling is a common practice at PWIs, found that the Black men in their study experienced assumptions from college personnel that they were underprepared for college and were likely to commit specific crimes. Even when acts of racism are unintentional or covert, they still have a strong impact on Black students. Intent does not soften the blow of racist

behavior. Though many black students persist, some have such negative experiences that their academic performance is inhibited; they may drop a class, switch majors, or even transfer institutions (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Tuitt & Carter, 2008).

Racist stereotypes and need to prove belonging. Many Black students express that their peers and faculty often assume that they are not intelligent enough to be in college. This assumption takes form in a variety of ways, including the idea that Black students have been admitted to their institutions because of affirmative action policies or because they are recruited athletes who are academically underprepared (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2012; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Quaye, et al., 2015; Quaye, Tambascia, & Talesh, 2009; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2008b; Tuitt & Carter, 2008; Wood & Palmer, 2015). These assumptions from White students, faculty, and staff can have negative effects on academic achievement and often result in Black students feeling they must justify their existence and prove they belong. (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2012; Harper, et al., 2009; Lewis, et al., 2000; Quaye, et al., 2015; Quaye, et al., 2009; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Steele, 1997; Tuitt & Carter, 2008; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Students expressed a range of emotions as a result of these assumptions. Some felt defensive, exhausted, angered, and uncomfortable while other students felt that needing to prove themselves gave them ambition to do well, particularly in classroom environments (Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Swim, et al., 2003; Tuitt & Carter, 2008; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Many Black students experience stereotype threat, defined by Steele (1997) as, “the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant, usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one's self-definition” (p. 616), which may have positive or negative

effects on student outcomes, depending on how the student handles the threat (e.g., Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Black students often experience classrooms as discriminatory places. Some scholars noted that students felt invisible in classrooms and were expected to be intellectually inferior by faculty members and classmates because of stereotypes about their abilities as Blacks (often despite evidence of their capabilities) (e.g., Harper, 2012; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Quaye, et al., 2015; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Additionally, many Black students indicated that they experienced segregation in classroom settings by their peers when asked by faculty to work in groups. Harper and Quaye (2015) claimed that some campuses are becoming increasingly segregated. Black students in several studies discussed how their White peers never wanted to work in groups with them, and even if faculty members forced White students to work with Black students, the White students did not let the Black students participate (Harper, 2012; Lewis, et al., 2000; Solorzano, et al., 2000).

When students are distracted by racism in their classrooms and feel that they must prove themselves as a result of negative stereotypes about Blacks, the power of racism can take away from their learning experiences (Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Steele, 2007). However, Harper (2012) found that Black male achievers in his study learned how to confront peers who asked questions based on racial stereotypes and did not internalize the racist assumptions that others had about Black men. The ability to resist internalizing racist stereotypes is likely one factor that enables Black men to be successful (Harper, 2012).

Pressure to conform to White culture but fulfill stereotypes. Black students may feel like they are expected to try to be White and to fit in, but still conform to racial stereotypes (both positive and negative) (Lewis, et al., 2000; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Stewart, 2015). Lewis, et al.

(2000) said, “Taking the form of direct or implicit insults and demands (e.g., to assimilate, to act out cultural stereotypes, to explain), this push-and-pull generates daily quandaries about whether to resist or conform both internally, with regard to identity, and externally, with regard to behavior and challenge” (p. 80). Black students are expected to give up their identities to adapt to White culture, which entails conforming to the ways that White students dress and interact (Feagin & Sikes, 1995), though Black students still experience surprise from White peers and faculty at PWIs when they do not dress with “sagging pants or a fitted cap or anything like that on, a 5XL White tee with XL hoodie over your head” (Iverson & Jagers, 2015, p. 44).

In conforming to White expectations, students must give up pieces of their identity, including aspects of their background and upbringing (Quaye, et al., 2015). Stewart (2015) wrote about Black participants in zir’s study as performing for White peers. Ze found that Black participants in zir’s study wanted to be looked upon favorably by Whites because they would need to rely on White peers “to achieve their aspirations” (Stewart, 2015, p. 248). These performances included decisions such as what clothing to wear, how to wear one’s hair, and which speech patterns to use around which people. Interestingly, participants in Stewart’s (2015) study cited performing specific types of Blackness for both their White and Black peers and found it more challenging to perform for Black peers.

The impact of the pressure to conform to White culture but still fulfill racial and ethnic stereotypes was sometimes felt in strong ways by students. In extreme cases, students questioned their identity. Some students expressed that they felt that their identity was constantly under scrutiny, and they wanted to deny their Blackness (Feagin & Sikes, 1995). This experience is so damaging to some students that it has a negative effect on their academic performance and success (Lewis, et al., 2000; Solorzano, et al., 2000; Tuitt & Carter, 2008).

Tokenization and essentialization. Black students are often tokenized and essentialized by White faculty, staff, and peers within PWIs. These experiences occur both in and out of the classroom. For example, Solorzano and colleagues (2000) stated:

any negative actions by or deficiencies noted among one or more African American students are used to justify pejorative perceptions about *all* African American students, while the positive actions or attributes of one or a few African Americans are viewed as rare cases of success amidst their racial group's overall failure. (p. 68)

White individuals on campus often tokenize Black students by asking them to speak for all members of their racial and/or ethnic identity group, by putting Black students under surveillance assuming that they will violate university policy and commit crimes, and by assuming that all members of a specific racial/ethnic group have the same experiences (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Harper, 2012; Hurtado, et al., 1998; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Lewis, et al., 2000; Quaye, et al., 2009; Quaye, et al., 2015; Solorzano, et. al., 2000; Tuitt & Carter, 2008; Wood & Palmer, 2015). This behavior often leads to Black students feeling alienated and both creates and maintains an environment where White faculty, staff, and students are unable to see Black students as individuals (Feagin, et al., 1996).

Tuitt and Carter (2008) found that, “The threat of confirming the negative racial stereotype that one is intellectually inferior is enhanced in the classroom by related situational threat in which some black students fear being positioned as the racial spokesperson” (p. 55). As noted, many Black students fear being viewed as intellectually inferior. Being tokenized increases the fear of fitting into negative stereotypes and this fear can have negative implications for these students’ campus experience and may affect the sense of belonging of Black students (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Failure to recognize non-White epistemologies. Across the literature, many Black students speak about how their ideas and voices are not heard or valued in their classrooms. Tuitt and Carter (2008) claimed:

some black achievers read their learning environments as conveying the message – either subtly or overtly – that there are certain ways of knowing, thinking, and demonstrating academic behaviors that are acceptable (i.e., those that mirror mainstream epistemologies regarding how learning should be practiced and achievement demonstrated). (p. 55)

Because of the make up of PWIs, it is rare that Black students will have faculty of color teaching their classes and will have few, if any, students of color aside from themselves in their classrooms (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Feagin, et al., 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Quaye, et al., 2015; Misawa, 2010b). Quaye, et al. (2009) said, “Far too often the onus is put on racial/ethnic minority students to assimilate to predominantly White classroom norms and divorce their cultures and identities from the learning process” (p. 158). It is not uncommon for Black students to encounter White faculty members who do not respect or value their ways of knowing, the ways they talk or write, or the topics that they desire to learn about (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Lewis, et al., 2000). Harper and Quaye (2015) said, “The onus is often placed on students of color to find readings that appeal to their unique cultural interests and bring up topics related to race in class discussions” (p. 6). Students learn about the White world despite the fact that studies have shown curriculum that includes and engages material about the cultural background of students of color is positively related to the success and engagement of those students and can contribute to building positive campus climates (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Lewis, et al., 2000; Quaye, et al., 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015).

Some faculty members pressure students to stay away from topics related to racial and ethnic minorities. Some students even said that they avoid bringing up or doing projects on racial

topics because faculty respond poorly (Feagin & Sikes, 1995). Indeed, the majority of scholars who are studied in coursework at PWIs are White scholars (Misawa, 2010b), or “culturally exclusive” (Wood & Palmer, 2015, p. 9). White epistemologies are seen as valid and scholarly, not those of people of color. When students are in classes where scholars of color are not included in course material, students receive the message that their racial and ethnic communities are not important (Quaye, et al., 2015). Negative classroom experiences can cause Black students to avoid interactions with faculty or their student peers outside of the classroom, which can lead to isolation (Bonner & Bailey, 2006) and negatively affect sense of belonging.

Lack of conversations about racial and ethnic identities. Discussions regarding racial and ethnic identities are avoided at PWIs (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lewis, et al., 2000). This avoidance occurs in classrooms when faculty avoid conversations about racist events that have happened and their implications on current society (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lewis, et al., 2000). One student in Feagin and Sikes’ (1995) study said that he had a faculty member who refused to talk about some of the things that happened during the slavery era because he was afraid that it would upset Black students.

Participants often noted that they felt like conversations about race were avoided both inside and outside of the classroom. Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that “Racial/ethnic and White students alike expressed frustration with the incongruence of espoused and enacted institutional values concerning diversity” (p. 16). Participants said that their institution talked a lot about diversity but did not make any efforts to have any real conversations about racial and ethnic diversity. Students felt like they needed assistance in bringing up these topics, and they did not find that help from faculty or administrators on their campus (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Quaye, et al., 2015). In fact, as Harper and Hurtado (2007) were conducting focus groups,

several participants commented on how that was the first time anyone had ever asked them about racialized experiences on campus.

Black Gay Men

Researchers consistently point out the double burden that Black gay men experience: being Black and being gay and facing both racism and homophobia as a result of their identities (Baylor, 2002; Bowleg, 2013; Collins, 2005; Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Means, 2014; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Misawa, 2010a; Patton, 2011; Rankin, et al., 2010; Smith 1999; Strayhorn, et al., 2010, Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). Collins (2005) stated, “Racism and heterosexism, the prison and the closet, appear to be separate systems, but LGBT African Americans point out that *both* systems affect their everyday lives” (p. 95). As a result of their multiple minoritized identities, it seemed reasonable to assume that Black gay men may face challenges feeling a sense of belonging at their institution because of racism and homophobia. Nadal (2013) claimed that microaggressions directed at LGBT people of color could lead to depression, and that experiencing heterosexism from one’s racial or ethnic community might negatively affect mental health (Nadal, 2013).

Baylor (2002) claimed that making the choice to come out can be complicated for Black gay men. He compared the decision to come out to a cost-benefit analysis where one must weigh the decision to come out “in terms of whether it [coming out] enhances or detracts from one’s position in society at large or other groups to which the individual belongs” (Baylor, 2002, p. 3). In other words, Black gay men must decide if risking their position within their environment is worth coming out (Baylor, 2002; Harper, 2012; Patton, 2011). They are likely to face homophobia in both White and Black communities and racism in LGBTQ+ communities (Baylor, 2002). Baylor (2002) cited Cools (1998) who described the “condition:”

The black homosexual comes to embody a condition of aggravated psychic unease. His skin color exposes him to racism and his gender exacerbates the anxiety he causes the white community. Compounding this marginalization is the fact that these men are 'othered' because of their sexuality. Unlike black men who subscribe to the heterosexual definition of black masculinity the black male homosexual finds little solace from the pressures of racism in his community for there is little or no acceptance of him in his community. This is because he makes more precarious, a masculinity which the black community has always 'engaged in a never-ending battle' to possess in the wider American community... Thus the seeming loss of his masculinity isolates the black gay male and he is left with virtually no community to turn. (p. 131)

Though more campuses now have groups for LGBTQ+ students of color where Black gay men may find a community (Dumas, 1998), Baylor (2002) suggested that even when students find a racially diverse LGBTQ+ group and choose to participate in it, they may jeopardize support from the larger Black community as a result of their participation.

Choosing Gay or Black First

Because of homophobia in Black communities and racism in LGBTQ+ communities, many LGBTQ+ identified Black individuals feel that they have to choose one part of their identity over the other (e.g., Collins, 2005; Patton, 2011; Schueler, et al., 2009). If Black gay persons choose to minimize or keep their LGBTQ+ identity hidden, they will have an easier time fitting into Black communities, but they have to sacrifice a piece of themselves in order to belong to a community (Collins, 2005). Smith (1999) wrote that she is often asked, ““which do you put first: being black or being a woman, being black or being gay?”” (p. 15). Other scholars have discussed individuals having to choose one identity over another, depending on what physical space they are in and where they get their social support (Black versus LGBTQ+ populations) (Conerly, 1996; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Schueler, et al., 2009; Washington & Wall, 2006). Conerly (1996) highlighted the phenomenon that some Black gay men are “gay blacks” or “black gays” as a result of how they prioritize their environments and where they get their social support.

Black first. Several studies found that most Black gay men prioritized their Black identity over their gay identity (Baylor, 2002; Bowleg, 2013; Dumas, 1998; Patton, 2011; Washington & Wall, 2006). For example, Baylor (2002) cited a study completed by Garber (2001) who found that 85% of White respondents identified more strongly with their sexuality as opposed to their ethnicity, but 63% of Blacks identified more with their ethnic background than their sexuality. Dumas (1998) claimed that for Black gay men, “Their sexuality does not exist in binary opposition to their blackness. Rather, the conflict is with integration of sexuality into blackness” (p. 84). He also noted that LGBTQ+ students of color may be more likely to be a part of race based student organizations than LGBTQ+ organizations (Dumas, 1998). In Bowleg’s (2012) study of Black gay and bisexual men, many participants indicated that they were Black first because “racial microaggressions and racial discrimination fortified their view that race was their most salient identity” (p. 11). For these men the racism they felt reinforced the salience of their Black identity and their need for support from the Black community (Bowleg, 2013; Moore, 2010), but these men who prioritized their race did not necessarily neglect their sexuality. Baylor (2002) stated:

selecting ethnicity as one’s master status because it carries with it more costs does not however mean that ‘sexual orientation’ is absent from one’s subordinate statuses. It is still there but gaining benefit of support from the black community cost the subordinating of one’s sexual orientation. (p. 135)

Black gay men felt that it was more important to be racially supported while placing less importance on their sexuality.

Integration of Black and gay identities. Several authors cited the benefit of Black gay men being able to integrate both their racial and sexual identities (Crawford, et al., 2002). In a quantitative study Crawford, et al. (2002) found that Black gay men who were able to integrate both their racial and sexual identities (which was defined as “high sexual identification/high

ethnic-racial identification,” p. 181) “and hold positive self-attitudes toward their racial-ethnic and sexual identities, [were] more likely...to value themselves, protect their health, and experience greater levels of personal commitment” (p. 186). The struggle to integrate both sexuality and race can be challenging for Black gay men, but the satisfaction with self and greater level of personal contentment that Crawford, et al. (2002) discussed may have implications for sense of belonging during the college experience.

Black Gay Men in Higher Education

Over the last two decades, there has been a growth in the scholarly discussion of the experiences of Black gay college students. Rankin, et al. (2010) found that “Respondents of Color were slightly less likely to feel very comfortable or comfortable with their department/work unit climate (75%) and classroom climate (62%) than their White counterparts (78%, 66%, respectively)” (p. 13). Several scholars argue that Black gay and bisexual men must navigate quadruple consciousness at PWIs because of their multiple minoritized identities, specifically their race, sexuality, and the intersection of these identities (Blockett, under review; Mitchell & Means, 2014). The four states of consciousness are “I) White and heterosexual, II) White and non-heterosexual, III) Black and heterosexual, and IV) Black and non-heterosexual” (Mitchell & Means, 2014, p. 29). As a result of their “quadruple consciousness,” Black gay men may cover or code switch in order to be accepted by their peers, which may affect their sense of belonging (Mitchell & Means, 2014).

Some Black gay men claimed that they found it challenging to exist within both Black and gay communities on campus. In Patton’s (2011) study of Black gay and bisexual men at three historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), she found that participants wanted to keep their sexuality quiet because they planned to have high profile careers and feared that prior

knowledge of their sexuality would affect their ability to accomplish their career goals.

Similarly, Means and Jaeger (2013) utilized quare theory, a critical theory used to explore the experiences of queer people of color, and discovered that Black gay men at HBCUs faced challenges and discrimination which caused them to feel some disconnect, though they claimed to have mostly positive experiences. One participant in a study completed by Rhoads (1994) said, “My job is doubly hard. I have to help educate not only the straight community about gay issues but I also have to educate the black community, and that’s next to impossible.

Homophobia is really strong with the black community” (p. 135). Even though Black gay men often start to come out in college, there are few places at PWIs for gay students of color to go where they feel safe because of racism, homophobia, and heterosexism on campus (Blockett, under review; Misawa, 2010b; Strayhorn, et al., 2010).

Poynter and Washington (2005) highlighted a portion of an interview conducted by Mills (2004) that gives voice to the experience of an African American gay male. The student said:

I had been a member of BSA (Black Student Association) my freshman year, but was discouraged when I consistently encountered homophobic attitudes in the organization. My friends and I often laughed at our slogan for it, ‘It’s either Gay or BSA!’ We also couldn’t help but notice the undercurrent of racism within the gay community. It was passive and subtle, but clear. Our white LGBT peers felt as though the LGBT student organization was not meeting their needs because programming and social events were too ethnic or ‘did not reflect who they were or their interests’. (p. 45)

Baylor (2002) noted that many Black gay students choose to avoid participation with LGBTQ+ student organizations, which may not only reduce interactions between Black and White students but may also prevent the creation of support systems. Strayhorn, et al. (2010) claimed that some Black gay men may choose to play down either their race or sexuality for their friends in order to make their friends feel more comfortable. Similarly, Patton (2011) found her participants’ “sexual identities had to be sacrificed before being tolerated” (p. 89).

Some Black gay men feel like they do not belong in Black or LGBTQ+ communities and as a result feel isolated (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013b) explored Black masculinity in their study of BGMUs (Black gay male undergraduates) and found the men in their study sometimes adhered to expectations of Black masculinity, challenged Black masculinity, and/or understood that their masculinity was affected by social forces. The authors (2013b) asserted:

That some Black gay men continually feel compelled to conceal their sexual identity, and perhaps try to compensate for it, to be accepted by their campus peers as *sufficiently* masculine, suggests additional barriers through which BGMUs must persist to be able to affirm a healthy, positive self-conception that successfully integrates their racial, sexual, and even religious identities. (p. 101, emphasis in original)

While Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013b) found that some men in their study intentionally rejected the confines of Black masculinity, indicating that not all Black gay men subscribe to a singular prescription of what it means to be a Black man, it is important to recognize that as a result of campus climates and rigid expectations of Black masculinity, Black gay men may face challenges in feeling a sense of belonging within their institutions.

Classroom experiences. In the classroom, LGBTQ+ students are likely affected by perceptions of negative campus climates (Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Rankin, et al. (2012) found that LGBTQ+ students of color were significantly less likely to feel comfortable than their White peers. This discomfort is a significant issue because attaining an education is the primary purpose for attending institutions of higher education. Misawa (2010b) criticized conventional pedagogy for failing to recognize that Black gay men are likely to have unique pedagogical needs and claimed that faculty members should consider issues of race and sexuality in their pedagogical practice to create more inclusive learning environments.

Homophobia and Heterosexism in Black and African-American Communities

Homophobia and heterosexism are prevalent in Black and African American communities (Bowleg, 2013; Collins, 2005; Harper, 2012; McCready, 2004; Means, 2014; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Nadal, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006). “The topics of same-sex love, homosexuality, men who have sex with men, and bisexuality are historically ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ in the African American community” (Washington & Wall, 2006, p. 174). Scholars cite several reasons for homophobia and heterosexism in Black communities including religion, being gay as a “White thing,” and civil rights comparisons and divisive strategies. I explore these topics in this section.

Religion. One reason cited for homophobia in Black communities is the Black community’s strong ties to religious values (Baylor, 2002; Collins, 2005; Dumas, 1998; Means, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). Washington and Wall (2006) claimed, “The issue of religion is always present in the Black community. Traditional religions such as Islam and Christianity have a major influence on the Black community, even if the individual members do not participate or practice” (p. 182). Black gay men in Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly’s (2013b) study claimed that they learned what it meant to be a Black man in their religious communities. Because Islam and many branches of Christianity see acts of homosexuality as a sin, connections with religion can be challenging for Black gay men. Of note, spirituality is linked with success for Black men in college (e.g., Harper, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015) and faith communities can be sources of both marginalization or support for LGBTQ+ students (Vaccaro, et al., 2015), but Black gay men may struggle with their religious and spiritual identities as a result of their gay identities (e.g., Collins, 2005; Means, 2014).

Covering and Code Switching

Some Black gay men downplay or compartmentalize their sexuality or try to pass as straight as a result of messages they received from others and fear of rejection, especially because of homophobia in Black communities (Collins, 2005, Crawford, et al., 2002; Mitchell & Means, 2014; Moore, 2010; Patton, 2011; Tillman-Kelly, 2015; Yoshino, 2006). Black gay men may also downplay their race because of racism in LGBTQ+ communities (e.g., Blockett, under review; Nadal, 2013; Stroude, 2016). When people cover, they downplay their stigmatized identity to reduce tension and take attention away from it (Moore, 2010; Yoshino, 2006). Yoshino (2006) said, “The reason racial minorities are pressured to ‘act white’ is because of white supremacy. ... And the reason gays are asked not to ‘flaunt’ is because of homophobia” (p. xi). In other words, because of racism and homophobia, people of color and gay people receive the message that they should minimize or “tone down” their identities for the comfort of others, or, as Yoshino (2006) claims, these persons should assimilate to mainstream culture.

For some Black gay men the only way that they have been able to maintain their membership in Black communities is to gain tolerance by downplaying or not being open about their sexuality. Some cited instances of Black gay men being welcome in Black churches as long as they were secretive about their sexuality (Collins, 2005). Yoshino (2006) claimed “albeit with varying degrees of conviction, Americans have come to a consensus that people should not be penalized for being different along these dimensions [race, national origin, sex, religion, disability, and in some states, sexual orientation], however, that does not protect individuals against demands that they mute these differences” (p. x).

A similar phenomenon is code switching. Defined as using more than one language in one session of communication, code switching is often found in communities in which multiple

languages are spoken (DeBose, 1992). Greene and Walker (2004) called code switching a “linguistic tool and a sign of the participants’ awareness of alternative conventions,” which served as “a means of adapting to or negotiating various communication contexts” (p. 435). In other words, Blacks identify and use communication styles that they deem to be appropriate in a given setting; specifically, Blacks understand that Whites do not respect Black English.

In Stewart’s (2015) study on racial identity and performance within Black student communities, ze found that participants were consistently “needing to negotiate and navigate the perceptions of their racially inscribed behaviors, habits, and preferences” (p. 246). Ze claimed that participants negotiated their identities around both Black and White peers and that the ways in which participants acted were not a reflection of the way they made meaning of their identities, but were instead, for the benefit of their peers. Similar to findings of other scholars (e.g., Tillman-Kelly, 2015), participants in Stewart’s study exercised agency in their decisions about if, when, and how they would act out their identities. Ze talked about zir participants putting on a costume in order to perform their identities for the sake of others and having a harder time performing their identities around other minoritized peers. In other words, participants experienced more conflict in performing their Black identities around Black peers than White peers. Stewart claimed that performing race differently around different groups (code switching) allowed participants to “maintain valued relationships with Black peers, while protecting other aspects of self from unwarranted criticism” (p. 253).

Black gay men may code switch in interactions with straight Black peers and with White individuals in order to fit in within their environment and maintain relationships. Stewart (2009; 2015) and Tillman-Kelly (2015) claimed the Black participants in their studies were acting authentically in each performance of their identities and were making a conscious choice about

their performance. It may be the case that Black gay men are being authentic when code switching or performing in each setting they are in and consciously performing their identities.

Being gay is a “White thing”. Some scholars argue that being LGBTQ+ is for White people because mainstream images of LGBTQ+ persons are most commonly White and being gay is not seen as authentically Black (e.g., Poynter & Washington; Collins, 2005). LGBTQ+ representations in the media primarily show White people (Poynter & Washington, 2005). Poynter and Washington (2005) indicated, “individuals of a racial minority might not identify with an LGBT community seen largely as white and thus will not readily accept a sexual identity as LGBT” (p. 43). In fact, when thinking about the LGBTQ+ community, many people automatically picture a White man (Collins, 2005; Conerly, 1996; Poynter & Washington, 2005). Because being gay is seen as a “white thing,” Collins (2005) discussed the idea of black gay people being seen as either Black and gay or gay and Black and described, “LGBT Black people as being less authentically Black. If authentic Black people (according to the legacy of scientific racism) are heterosexual, then LGBT Black people are less authentically Black because they engage in allegedly ‘White’ sexual practices” (p. 106). As a result of being seen as less authentically Black, some Black gay men may choose to “leave” their Black community because they feel that they cannot have open and honest same-sex relationships within the context of Black communities (Collins, 2005).

Black Masculinity

Formal gender role expectations for Black men influence homophobia and heterosexism within Black communities (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Collins, 2005; Means, 2014; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). Black men are expected to be hyper-masculine, tough, hyper-sexualized, and devoid of feminine characteristics (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). Real men are not

gay (Collins, 2005). When Black men do not express masculinity in stereotypical ways they become “the ‘punk,’ the ‘sissy,’ or the ‘faggot’” (Collins, 2005, p. 171) and are seen as “acting White” or “acting gay” (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b).

Black men feel pressure to remain in the closet because they are supposed to get married and have children to continue the Black race (Patton, 2011). Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly (2013b) found that some participants in their study hid their sexuality by engaging in physical activity and claiming that they were engaged in sexual relationships with multiple women, though they were not engaged in relationships with any women. Participants in their study who felt like they were not conforming to standards of masculinity in one area would try to compensate for that “weakness” by exerting an extreme performance of masculinity in another (Strayhorn & Tillman Kelly, 2013b). Some scholars found that while Black gay males in their studies were discriminated against for being gay, the discrimination was intensified when individuals were gender non-conforming, meaning they were not stereotypically masculine. Their lack of hyper-masculinity intensified the stereotypes and discrimination these individuals faced (McCready, 2004; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a). Collins (2005) stated:

Masculinity is associated with use of the body, not the mind. Girls and ‘faggots’ are the ones who submit to the will of the teacher, the principal, and avowedly heterosexual boys. In this context and without developing some alternative frameworks, the more educated Black boys become, the less manly they feel. The alternative of becoming ‘bad boys’ in school may seem like a more realistic option. (p. 176)

Wood and Palmer (2015) also note that one argument for the low rate of Black students in college is that being academically inclined can be seen as a “White thing,” while others claim it is not education that Black males reject, rather, it is the “schooling,” or the practices in place in educational systems that marginalize and alienate Black men (p. 4).

Since being involved in academics is seen as negative, Black men may also avoid being involved in campus activities. Harper (2009) claimed, “if the majority of Black males are disengaged, then most will conclude that engagement is not the ‘thing to do’” (p. 146). Black males are less engaged on campus, less involved in campus leadership positions, and spend less time on course work than their peers (Harper, 2009), despite the fact that being involved in student organizations, holding positive leadership roles, developing relationships with faculty, having strong study skills, having positive peer interactions, and identifying mentors are all factors related to success in higher education (e.g., Harper, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Harris III, 2015; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Harper (2009) also claimed, “Since [Black men] do not see many others who are highly engaged on campus, many Black men conclude that engagement is socially inexpedient and perhaps even feminine – definitely not normative” (p. 144). Since being masculine is so highly valued among Black men, they may try to appear as “bad boys” and avoid engagement on campus to prove their masculinity.

Racism in LGBTQ+ communities

Another form of discrimination that Black gay men experience is racism in LGBTQ+ communities (Blockett, under review; Collins, 2005; McCready, 2004; Nadal, 2013; Smith, 1999; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b; Stroude, 2016; Washington & Wall, 2006). McCready (2004) stated, “race is often viewed as a wedge issue in the mainstream queer community where equal rights activists resist acknowledging the different ways people of color within the queer community conceptualize equality” (p. 138). Smith (1999) claimed that racism in the LGBTQ+ movement contributes to the divide between LGBTQ+ and Black communities because White people in the LGBTQ+ movement assume that people of color have won their civil rights now and have it better than the lesbian and gay community.

Nadal (2013) discussed beauty standards that are set forth in the gay community: White males who are young, able bodied, and thin or athletic. Recently, Michael Sam, the first collegiate football player to come out and first openly gay NFL player, discussed the racism he has experienced in the LGBTQ+ community. He said:

It's terrible. People have told me I'm not gay enough, people have told me I'm not black enough. I don't know what that means. You want to be accepted by other people but you don't even accept someone just because of the colour of their skin? I just don't understand that at all. (Stroude, 2016, para. 4)

Many White LGBT individuals neglect the fact that Black LGBTQ+ people face additional forms of oppression, and scholars argue that the systems of oppression in our society are closely related. For example, Collins (2005) stated:

In the United States, the assumption that racism and heterosexism constitute two separate systems of oppression masks how each relies upon the other for meaning. Because neither system of oppression makes sense without the other, racism and heterosexism might be better viewed as sharing one history with similar yet disparate effects on all Americans differentiated by race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. People who are positioned in the margins of both systems and who are harmed by both typically raise questions about the intersections of racism and heterosexism much earlier and/or more forcefully than those who are in positions of privilege. As African American LGBT people point out, assuming that all Black people are heterosexual and that all LGBT people are White distorts the experiences of LGBT Black people. (p. 88)

White LGBTQ+ people often fail to recognize the multiple oppressions that LGBTQ+ people of color face and get caught up in their own privilege and racism instead of working towards equal rights for all. Washington and Wall (2006) stated, "the discussion of race [in the White gay community] is often minimized by a pseudo-understanding of all oppression because of one's status as a sexual minority" (p. 176). By failing to recognize the oppression of LGBTQ+ people of color the White LGBTQ+ community fails to fight for the equality of their entire movement.

Summary of the Literature

This literature review situates my study on the sense of belonging of Black gay men at PWIs within existing scholarly literature regarding sense of belonging and the experiences of and issues affecting Black gay men. I discussed the use of literature that utilized additive and intersectional approaches to understanding multiple identities. Next, I discussed the importance of studying predominantly White institutions. I then examined topics relevant to the conceptual framework and definition of sense of belonging I operationalized for this study. Finally, I explored relevant literature on experiences Black gay men. In the next chapter I discuss the methodology I used to conduct this study and analyze findings.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview of Methodology

In this qualitative study I explored the experiences of 16 Black gay men who were students at three predominantly White four-year institutions of higher education in the Midwest. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. Do Black gay men feel a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions?
2. If Black gay men do feel a sense of belonging, what processes contribute to sense of belonging?

I conducted a social constructivist, anti-deficit study in which I interviewed 16 self-identified Black gay men who were students beyond their first year of higher education at a PWI. Using intersectional and anti-deficit lenses, I sought to understand how and where students who felt a sense of belonging perceived, felt, and sensed that belonging in their social and academic environments as well as the process they went through to feel a sense of belonging. I created the proposed interview protocol (Appendix A) by utilizing Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Sense of Belonging framework, Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging, and other relevant literature explored in Chapter Two.

Research Paradigm

The qualitative paradigm was most fitting for this type of study because it allowed me to understand the nuances and complexities of the experiences of Black gay men in college and their sense of belonging. Merriam (2009) wrote, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). I wanted to understand, through the eyes of participants, if they felt a sense of belonging and if they did, how they developed it, and where

they perceived, felt, and sensed belonging. By learning about participants' college experiences and how they expressed fitting in, I was able to better understand the experiences that helped and hindered the participants feeling a sense of belonging at their institution.

Social Constructivism

I used a social constructivist (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009) lens to conduct this study. As noted in Chapter One, I paid careful attention to how individuals perceived, sensed, and felt a sense of belonging, which involved listening carefully for participants' views of situations that happened and how they made meaning of those events (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) claimed, "Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. They are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others...and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (p. 8). Based on literature related to Black gay men, it seemed that both historical and cultural norms such as homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and sexism were likely relevant to their experiences and how they made meaning of both those experiences and their identities (e.g., Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Misawa, 2010a, 2010b; Rankin, et al., 2010; Silverschanz, et al., 2008; Swim, et al., 2003; Waldo, 1998). Charmaz (2000) stated, "Constructivism assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings" (p. 510). I looked for a "pattern of meaning" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8) from the experiences that participants shared with me as I looked to further understand and make meaning of how and if participants felt a sense of belonging at their institution.

I interpreted the meanings of the experiences of these men while being mindful that my own background and experience shaped my interpretations (Creswell, 2009). Researchers

operating from a social constructivist worldview acknowledge that their personal background and experiences shape the way that they interpret what they find (Creswell, 2009). As I discussed in Chapter One, as a White lesbian woman from a different generation, I needed to be mindful of the ways that I interacted with participants. I was also cognizant of the way I viewed and interpreted the experiences that participants shared with me. While I could not completely avoid that my “personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2009, p.8) shaped how I approached every piece of this study, I tried to be mindful of my privilege as a White person. In an effort to represent the experiences of Black gay men both respectfully and accurately, I tried to maintain an awareness of how my differing experiences may have influenced the ways that I interpreted the experiences of participants.

Anti-Deficit Research

I also pursued and viewed this project through an anti-deficit lens. Harper (2009) stated that he views anti-deficit achievement theory, which he identified while completing his National Black Male College Achievement Study as, “an informative view of how Black males navigate social settings, such as schools and colleges, despite all we know that is stacked against them” (p. 148). Using an anti-deficit approach allows researchers to learn from engaged and successful students in order to better serve students in future theory, research, and practice. Harper (2009) continued:

It [anti-deficit achievement theory] counters the *orientation* (focus on stereotypical characteristics associated with the culture of disadvantage and poverty), *discourse* (lack of preparation, motivation, study skills, blaming students and/or their backgrounds), and *strategies* (compensatory educational programs, remedial courses, special programs, all focused on fixing the student) associated with the ‘deficit cognitive frame’ that Bensimon (2005, p. 103) describes. (p. 148, emphasis in original)

Indeed, Harper and Quaye (2015) argue that is the responsibility of institutions of higher education to help each student get engaged instead of looking at students as “at-risk” (p. 11). In

this study I acknowledged the challenges that Black gay men faced but also looked at what helped these men feel a sense of belonging within their institutions. While some participants struggled in their environments at times, it is important to recognize what went well for these students that led them to persist through at least their first year of college.

Strayhorn (2012) used an anti-deficit lens to focus on sense of belonging instead of experiences of alienation in order to be aware of what influenced positive change for students in higher education so that his research might affect policy and practices to make experiences better for students. Harper and Quaye (2015) claimed, “One of the most effective ways to improve student engagement is to invite those who are the least engaged to share their knowledge and experiences” (p. 8). By approaching these students to learn about their knowledge and experiences instead of focusing on what is “wrong” with them, scholars and practitioners are better able to understand what it is about their environment that has led to their lack of engagement. For those students that one might consider “successful,” it is important to consider the things that led to their success to aid scholars and practitioners who work towards improving programs and policies in higher education. Harper (2009) said, “Instead of always striving to ‘fix them [Black male students],’ I argue that institutions can learn much from Black male achievers about what worked well, which could guide institutional efforts to engage more Black men” (p. 148). The idea of focusing on what worked well for students can be applied to a variety of student populations in terms of improving institutional policies and practices, and I applied it to Black gay men in the context of this study.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was another framework I used in designing, interpreting, and analyzing this study. Dill and Zambrana (2009) claimed, “Intersectional analysis begins with the

experiences of groups that occupy multiple social locations and finds approaches and ideas that focus on the complexity rather than the singularity of human experience” (p. 2). Individuals hold multiple identities which intersectionality recognizes are both “separate and inextricably fused” (Renn, 2010, p. 9). In exploring the complexity of human experience, one of the tenets of intersectionality is to examine not only individual experiences but also structure and systems of inequality within society (Jones & Abes, 2013), though “the unit of analysis is the individual situated in larger social locations” (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012, p. 702). As one considers systems of inequality, one must pay attention to larger systems of power and oppression and how they are present in both society and within local contexts where individuals exist. Structures and systems of inequality affect various social identities that individuals have (which also affect one another) and affect various outcomes of individual lives (Strayhorn, 2013).

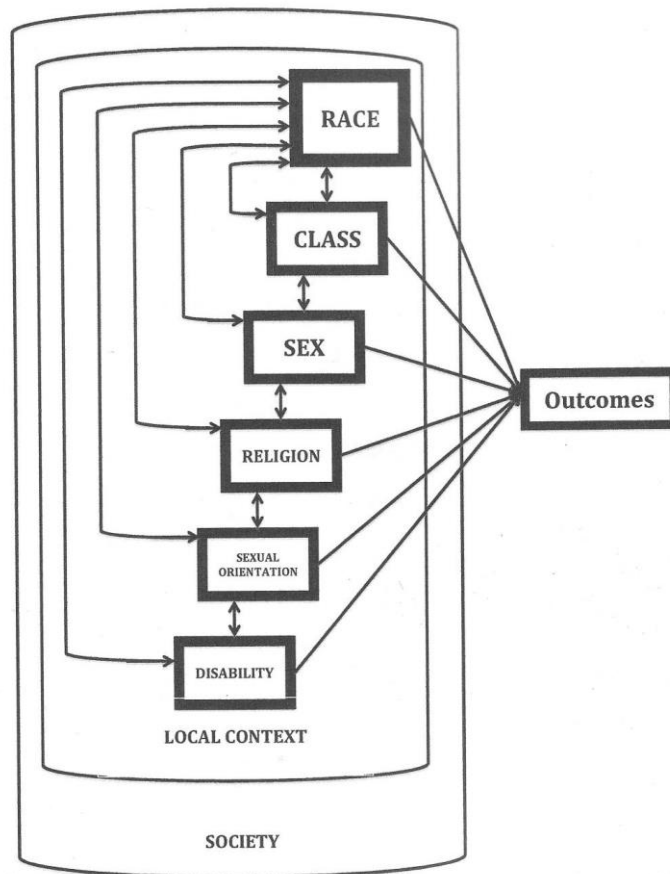


Figure 3.1. Intersectional Approach (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 14)

Though intersectionality emerged from women's studies, some scholars have begun to explore intersectional topics within higher education. In relation to higher education, Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) claimed:

intersectionality centers analysis on how students' experiences are enmeshed in systems of power and inequality. This analysis results in foregrounding an issue (e.g., sexual health, campus violence, academic achievement, campus community) rather than demographic categories and how understanding such an issue is

enhanced by looking at the intersections of race, class, gender and other social structures. (p. 589)

In the context of this study I was sure to foreground sense of belonging at the intersection of the identities that Black gay male participants identified as salient. It was clear that race and sexuality were identities that would be considered in this study; however, I was aware of other salient identities that affected the experiences of students (e.g., class, gender, religion).

Considering other salient pieces of participants' identities was essential because "We are not passive 'recipients' of an identity position, but 'practice' each aspect of our identity as informed by other identities we claim" (Shields, 2008, p. 302).

For participants in this study, being Black and being gay were not the only identities that the men claimed as salient, and it was important to understand that not only Black and gay identities affect one another. There were other pieces of identity that interacted to create what one might consider to be their holistic identity. Renn (2010) stated, "A student's sexual identity development, therefore, cannot be truly understood apart from his or her gender, racial, social class, or other significant social identities" (p. 9). Intersectionality was a promising framework for looking at the experiences of Black gay men because it allowed me to consider each student as a "fully three-dimensional, developing person in an ever-changing context" versus a "two-dimensional student" as is the case with many student development theories and research on students (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 590).

In their autoethnographic intersectional study, Jones, et al. (2012) found that individuals grappled with what it meant to be authentic because their environments were constantly affecting the way they viewed their identities and what was most salient. Jones, et al. (2012) stated, "social identities were deeply meaningful to our senses of self, but the process of self-definition became more complex and fraught with tension when we encountered the influence of greater social

context” (Jones, et al., 2012, p. 710). Participants also talked about making decisions about what pieces of themselves they shared in their external environment based on the context they were in and how comfortable they felt based on that context. They also mentioned that they were aware of their privileged and oppressed identities as they made decisions to disclose pieces of their identity. Participants talked about how living with “authenticity lay in day-to-day, moment-to-moment negotiations and decisions about managing who we are, given the current context” (Jones, et al., 2012, p. 711). For some participants, “performing appropriately” in specific environments was viewed as living authentically because it allowed participants to survive and maintain important relationships (Jones, et al., 2012).

Jones, et al. (2012) concluded, “authenticity necessarily involved fluidity as we negotiated multiple identities depending on the time and place and the influence of power and privilege” (p. 715). While some may argue about whether this view of authenticity is inaccurate, it is certainly fitting within the context of intersectionality as one considers the intersection of individual identities within a given context and as fluid identities change over time. Jones, et al. (2012) claimed that some participants struggled with the concept of self-definition. Perhaps it is the case that some individuals with multiple identities, like Black gay men, have the ability to have situational identities that help them to be more resilient and flexible as they navigate environments where they choose to disclose parts of their identity or “perform appropriately” (Jones, et al., 2012, p. 712).

Jones et al. (2012) claimed, “authenticity was not in choosing one part of our identity over another – it as in the way we made meaning of it for ourselves at a given time” (p. 715). Literature discussed in Chapters One and Two illuminated the struggle that Black gay men faced, feeling like that had to choose their Black or gay identity over the other (e.g., Conerly, 1996).

Through an intersectional lens, participants may make meaning of what seems to be a forced choice in a way that allows them to feel authentic in the context and environment.

Dill and Zambrana (2009) stated that intersectional analysis is characterized by four theoretical interventions:

(1) Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory; (2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized; (3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression; and (4) Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions. (p. 5)

I used these characterizations of intersectional analysis as I worked to interpret the experiences of participants and make recommendations for both practice and policy in higher education. In the case of this study, the minoritized identities of Black gay men were highlighted, including those identities that made participants different from one another. Renn (2010) claimed:

By focusing closely on individual experiences – intersectional research seeks not to create a model of identity development but to learn what commonalities *about intersectionality* exist among the uncountable varied ways of being a student and experiencing higher education. The point is not to write a theory of Black lesbian identity development, but to understand more about how intersecting identities work in the lives of students (some of whom are Black lesbians). (p. 10)

The characteristics that make Black gay men different from one another were imperative to recognize as these characteristics may have contributed to their experiences in both positive and negative ways. Having said that, it is also important to understand the “commonalities *about intersectionality*” (Renn, 2010, p. 9) that exist as these commonalities may draw attention to systemic power that leads to oppression.

Calling attention to the ways that power contributes to oppression inherently provides opportunities to discuss social change. Naming forms of power and learning about the ways

power creates and perpetuates systems of oppression is necessary to eliminate various forms of oppression and create more socially just campuses and societies. Jones and Wijeyasinghe (2011) claimed, “Intersectional researchers describe the framework [intersectionality] as enabling the interrogation of structures of power and privilege while also illuminating the complexity of the lived experiences of marginalized groups” (p. 19). The final chapter of this dissertation will be dedicated to discussing the implications of the findings of this study including the complexity of the experiences of Black gay men as well as how power creates oppression for Black gay men. In working to move towards more socially just campuses, I suggest ways that researchers and campus administrators and practitioners can be aware of the complexities of individual experiences and interrupt power that creates and perpetuates oppression for students, specifically Black gay male students.

Sampling and Design

I used purposeful maximum variation sampling (Merriam, 2009) in searching for participants. Merriam (2009) stated, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). In terms of seeking maximum variation, I searched for “widely varying instances of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). I sought out participants by contacting a wide variety of campus departments and by posting flyers on campuses. In selecting research sites I chose three sites with similar characteristics. I elaborate on both participant and research site selection in the following sections. See Table 3.1 for a list of site and participant selection characteristics.

Institutional Characteristics	Participant Characteristics
Four-year Predominantly White Percentage of in state students Programs, services, and policies relevant to diverse student groups	Black gay male Finished with first year of college

Table 3.1. Institutional and Participant Characteristics

Site Selection

I initially planned to use one predominantly White four-year institution of higher education in the Midwest as the location where I would solicit participants; however, I was not able to recruit enough participants at one institution. As a result, I selected three institutions with similar characteristics. I conducted interviews with participants and attended relevant events on campus during the 2013-2014 academic year. I also spent time in key campus locations such as the student union and other locations where students spent time. Since scholars (e.g., Tinto, 1993) indicate that students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging at four-year institutions, I selected only four-year intuitions for this study.

In using an intersectional lens for analysis, it was helpful to be able to consider the local context of participants from the perspective of three institutions. I was also mindful of the percentage of in-state students at the sites because doing so allowed me to be more aware of geographic mindsets in relation to things like race and sexuality. I selected institutions based on the presence of LGBTQ+ and Black student support services such as resource centers and student organizations. Additionally, these centers and organizations served as locations for me to recruit participants. I also selected sites that included sexual orientation in their non-discrimination statements. I was interested in understanding how and if these resources and policies affected the sense of belonging of Black gay men.

I conducted my study at Mid-City State University (MCSU), Greenfield State University (GSU), and Shady Pine State University (SPSU). All three institutions had both campus resource centers and student groups for Black students and LGBTQ+ students (separate organizations, none of the sites in this study had a group for queer persons of color [QPOC]). MCSU, GSU, and SPSU all have non-discrimination statements that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ persons, which scholars suggest affect student perceptions of campus climate and values (Hong, et al., 2016; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2014; Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Table 3.2 shows the breakdown of student bodies at the sites of this study.

MCSU was originally established in 1849 as a normal school to educate teachers, but over time became a college and then a university, which currently has more than 300 majors. It has a relatively new student union and library, and one of the university's major lecture hall buildings recently received a major renovation. MCSU is primarily a commuter campus and is located close to a major state institution with over 40,000 students. In recent years there had been some violent crimes surrounding campus, which participants were aware of. Several participants indicated that of the students who lived on campus, many went home on the weekends because they felt like there was not anything to do on campus. At the time of the study, the student body at MCSU was composed of over 23,000 students, of that, 22% of the student body identified as Black or African American. Additionally, 80% of students came from within the state (NCES, 2012).

GSU was established in 1892 to meet a need for more teachers in its state. It offers over 200 academic programs and recently established a medical school. Its location is geographically isolated from other major cities, but is situated in a relatively large college town. Some participants indicated they did not always feel comfortable off campus because of their

identity(s), but that the campus itself typically felt like a safe place. GSU has a mixture of older and newer buildings, of which the library and education building are new. Several participants indicated that there was not a lot to do there on the weekends except for party, however one participant in particular talked about how he learned that there were a lot of fun things happening on campus on the weekends. At the time of the study, GSU had over 27,000 students, of which, 7% identified as Black or African American, and 94% of students were in-state students (NCES, 2012).

Finally, SPSU was founded in 1910 to educate teachers and started offering four-year degrees in 1929 and graduate degrees in 1947. It is located in a college town about an hour from one of its state's major cities. The campus has a large student union that was recently renovated and was a popular place for students to hang out. Several participants indicated that many students left on weekends and one student indicated that there was not a lot to do on the weekends if students did not want to party. SPSU is nationally recognized as one of the top public universities in the country and offers over 200 majors. SPSU's student body of over 17,000 students was composed of 86% in-state students. Eleven percent of students at GSU identified as Black or African American (NCES, 2012).

Institution	In-State Students	Black or African American	Enrollment*	Carnegie Classification
Shady Pine State University	86%	11%	17,000	RU/H: Research Universities (high research activity)
Greenfield State University	94%	7%	28,000	DRU: Doctoral/Research Universities
Mid-City State University	80%	22%	24,000	Master's L: Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)

Table 3.2. Research Site Characteristics

* Enrollment numbers are rounded in order to maintain participant confidentiality.

Participant Selection

As mentioned previously, I initially intended to recruit participants at one research site. I used all of the recruitment methods described below at the first institution (MCSU). When I added SPSU and GSU as sites for this study, I repeated each step at each institution. I recruited Black gay male participants by contacting student affairs professionals in LGBTQ+ and Cultural Centers, professors in African American Studies, Women's Studies, and LGBTQ+ Studies, and leaders of LGBTQ+ and Black student organizations at all three institutions. I sent staff, faculty, and student leaders a solicitation by email (see Appendix B). I also posted flyers on all three campuses on multiple occasions (see Appendix C) in an effort to recruit participants with a wide variety of experiences and involvements, and I left quarter sheet advertisements in LGBTQ+ and cultural resource centers (see Appendix D).

In addition to searching for participants who identified as Black gay men, I initially included the criteria that participants must be in at least their third year as a college student. Hurtado and Carter (1997) stressed, "not only the nature of the integration construct [is important] but *when* it is measured during a student's career state may affect the results and interpretation" (p. 338). Based on Hurtado and Carter's (1997) study and Sense of Belonging Model, their findings indicated that students were likely to feel a sense of belonging by their third year if they indicated feeling a sense of belonging at all. I was unable to locate enough participants using these criteria. As a result, I changed the criteria to include second year college students. It should be noted that one participant, Tyrell, was a rising second year student who had just completed his first year of college at SPSU and planned to return to his institution the following academic year.

Using criterion sampling, defined by Miles and Huberman (2004) as “all cases that meet some criterion; useful for quality assurance” (p. 28) was important in the context of this study. In this case using criterion sampling meant selecting students who identified as Black gay men who had completed their first full year as students. Despite the fact that I was unable to recruit participants in their third year of college or beyond, all 16 men in this study still felt a sense of belonging at their institution.

Since I was unable to find enough participants by reaching out to student affairs professionals, faculty, and student organizations, I utilized snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I asked participants who agreed to be a part of the study to let their peers who fit the study criteria know about my study by forwarding them the solicitation email (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I asked current participants to reach out to potential participants instead of reaching out to students myself because I wanted to respect the privacy of students and because I understood that some Black gay men are not open about their identity and may have therefore been uncomfortable being contacted by a researcher. I also canvased all three campuses with flyers and quarter sheets containing information about my study, and I had the opportunity to announce my study at events on MCSU and GSU’s campuses.

Data Collection

I completed two semi-structured interviews each with 16 Black gay men. I pretested my interview protocol (Appendix A) to consider both the length of my interview protocol and to assure that participants were likely to understand the questions. I also wanted to make sure that my questions were structured in a way that would allow me to collect meaningful data related to my research questions, conceptual framework, and relevant literature. First, I asked participants to fill out a brief questionnaire in order to get some basic information about them, such as their

chosen pseudonym, city where they grew up, and eligibility for Pell Grants (which served as a proxy for understanding their socioeconomic status) (Appendix B). After reviewing participants' rights through my IRB consent form (see Appendix C), I was sure to ask participants if they had any questions prior beginning the interview. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded for later transcription. Second interviews with participants were conducted within two weeks of the first interview. At the beginning of the second interview I briefly went over the consent form again to be sure participants were aware of their rights.

Information about participants is detailed in Table 3.3 and in brief participant biographies below. Interviews averaged one hour and four minutes in length. The longest single interview was over an hour and 45 minutes, with Jo'El. The shortest single interview was just under 18 minutes, with Tyrell. My goal was to reach saturation or redundancy (Merriam, 2009) to be able to highlight both the commonalities and differences among the experiences of students. I knew that I reached saturation when "no new information [was] forthcoming from new sampled units" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202), meaning that I began to hear themes repeated by participants without new emerging themes developing. Merriam (2009) claimed that knowing how many participants one will need when starting a project is difficult and that researchers should be open to adjusting the number of participants they will need to reach saturation as their study progresses, which is why I sought more participants than the original 12 to 15 I had intended to interview for this study. Instead, I interviewed 16 participants.

Participant Biographies

Corey

Corey was a 21-year-old student at Mid-City State University who had just completed his fourth year. He had one more year to go before he graduated. His major was chemistry and he was also pursuing a minor in math. Corey was involved with his campus' Korean and Japanese

Student Associations. He worked with the Office of International Students as an orientation guide for new international students. When asked what parts of his identity were most important to him he said that he was a Black university student, chemistry major, gay, and had been a teacher in Korea. Corey said his campus was very diverse and he felt accepted on his campus.

Greg

Greg was a 19-year-old sophomore at Shady Pine State University. He has a dual major, public relations and ethnic studies. Greg was very involved in his campus' Black Student Union (BSU) and served on their executive board. He had also been involved in student government, and served as a tour guide for prospective multicultural students. Greg was a member of the Shady Pine Leadership Institute, a program that gave him a full ride for four years and offered him many resources on campus, including mentorship and leadership education. Greg said his most important identities were his ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender and socioeconomic status (SES). He identified as a Black gay man who is from a middle class background. He said Shady Pines tried to be more diverse in numbers, but did not necessarily support diverse students once they arrived on campus. He had seen improvement in his two years at SPSU.

Jerome

Jerome was a 22-year-old junior at Mid-City State University. He first attended another institution in the south and later transferred to Mid-City, which is geographically close to where he grew up. His major was psychology. Jerome was a member of Korean, Japanese, and Turkish student associations on his campus. He also participated in student government, NAACP, and was a member of the honors college at his institution and his campus' LGBTQ+ student organization. Jerome said his most important identities were gay, Black, a dancer, and a self-

identified mini-psychologist/student. Jerome said he perceived Mid-City as having a high acceptance level and said that he felt safe on campus. He said that people tended stick to their own groups.

Jieron

Jieron was a 21 year old senior at Mid-City. He had one or two more semesters of coursework to complete before graduation. Jieron was a communications major with a minor in HR management. He lived off campus every year except for one during his time as a student. Jieron never got involved in any student organizations, but volunteered to be a mentor through his campus' LGBT Resource Center. Jieron worked a lot of hours every week at Mid-City's library and had personal and professional connections with student staff and full time staff at the library. He said his most important identities were that he was spiritual, sarcastic, Black, gay, middle class, overweight, and a performing arts lover. He said his campus was very diverse and he felt like he could be himself on campus.

JJ

JJ was a 21-year-old fourth year student at Greenfield State University. He had just recently returned to Greenfield State from Navy Reserves training and changed his major from marketing to engineering, which would extend his time in school for at least two years, potentially three. Before leaving for training, he was involved in hall council, German club, American Sign Language (ASL) club, and student government. JJ's most important identities were his religion, his race (Black), and his sexuality (gay). He said that Greenfield State was a small school and that the people were nice. He said that Greenfield State was like a family and he felt comfortable and accepted on campus; however, he was no longer sure he wanted to stay at GSU since he returned from Navy Reserves training.

Jo'El

Jo'El was a 24-year-old sixth year student at Mid-City State University who had just graduated with a major in what is called individualized study program. He had recently applied to graduate school and was waiting to hear if he had been accepted. Jo'El was involved in several organizations throughout his time at Mid-City including American Choral Directors Association, gymnastics club, French club, NAACP, a co-ed fraternity, and was a peer mentor through Middle City's LGBT Resource Center. His most important identities were being male, his sexuality (he did not know what his sexuality was) background, "just a person," Black, and from a large, predominantly Black city in the Midwest. Jo'El said Mid-City was very diverse and that it was easy to meet people. He said that he generally felt comfortable and that he had noticed that his campus tried to make being gay ok, but not being Black.

John

John was a 22-year-old fourth year student at Mid-City State University majoring in Management and Human Resources. He had one more year to go before he graduated. John was a member of a social fraternity, National Society of Collegiate Scholars, and the poetry society within BSU. He was also very involved with the LGBTQ+ community, Women's Center, and Residence Life. John said the most important parts of his identity were that he was Black, a gay man, gentleman, and his smile and vibrant personality were important parts of his identity. John said that he had seen both love and hate on his campus, but overall he felt very comfortable and thought that campus was very accepting. He said that campus was very diverse, but it could have used some improvements because he sometimes heard people say things that were racist.

Jordan

Jordan was a 25-year-old sixth year student at Mid-City majoring in hotel and restaurant management. He started there in 2006 and had attended several other intuitions, which he either transferred to or was co-enrolled at since then, but he always returned to Mid-City. He had never gotten involved in any student groups; however, he felt like he could have joined any of the groups on campus if he had wanted to. Jordan worked full time off campus as the manager of a pizza shop. Jordan identified as a Black gay male and noted that he was spiritual. He said that Mid-City was very diverse and accepting, though he had heard people using the word fag. He also said that campus was very social, but said that he was not social. He preferred to keep his social relationships off campus.

Justin

Justin was a 20-year-old junior at Greenfield State University majoring in Journalism with a public relations concentration. He was member in his campus' acapella singing group, a social fraternity, worked with Pride through his job at the LGBT Resource Center. Justin's most important identities were that he was a gay man of color, religion, and being an extrovert. Just said that his campus was "67-70%" in terms of diversity. He said that everyone was friendly and he felt accepted, but noted that classroom environments and faculty were very heterosexist. He was also bothered by the frequent presence of a preacher who was on campus and yelled at students.

Kenny

Kenny was a 20-year-old sophomore at Greenfield State University majoring in integrative public relations. He had transferred to GSU from a very small institution in the Midwest at the beginning of the academic year I interviewed him. Kenny was involved with the

Public Relations Student Society of American on his campus. When asked what his most important identities were Kenny first said Black male, and then Black gay male. He also said that he is inherently pessimistic so he worked on being positive and used mediation as a tool to be more positive. Kenny was happy with the diversity on his campus and felt comfortable and accepted. He said that little things happened, like remarks from homophobic residents on his floor, but he said people have to stay positive and not let those things get to them.

Kris

Kris was a 21-year-old second year student at Greenfield State University majoring in psychology. He entered with 64 credits because he was in an early college program before attending GSU. Kris was involved for the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) and volunteered in a program that brings high school sophomores who are at risk of dropping out to GSU to talk with them about their fears and interests as well as a program where college students go and have lunch with an elementary school student weekly. Kris was also a facilitator of a leadership program for undergraduate students at GSU and a student assistant in the psychology department. Kris said his most important identities were that he was Christian and spiritual, a man, biracial, fashionably savvy, and an occasional marijuana user. Kris was comfortable on his campus because he was comfortable with himself; however, he said that GSU could have improved campus for diverse students. He also noted the effects of the preacher on campus that yelled at students and noted that some of his peers had never met a Black or Spanish person prior to attending GSU.

Matthew

Matthew was a 22-year-old fifth year student at Mid-City State University majoring in Japanese language and culture. Matthew was a member of the Japanese Student Association

(JSA) on his campus and was involved in Pride during his first year at MCSU. Matthew said his most important identities were his race, sexuality, gender (male), his major, and being a member of JSA. He also said that being a feminist and being a feminist thinker were important parts of his identity. Matthew said that MCSU was very accepting and that there was a group for everyone on campus, that everyone could find a place.

Raheem

Raheem was a 19-year-old sophomore at Greenfield State University majoring in Human Resources Management. Raheem was involved in SHRM, and was a participant and facilitator in two different leadership initiatives on campus. He was also a member of a social fraternity and was very involved with the career services office at GSU. Raheem had been in the process of considering transitioning to alumni status within his fraternity because he did not feel like it was a good place for him. He said that his most important identities were being a leader, preppy, gay, and Black. Raheem said that GSU embraced diversity and that he felt comfortable, included, and accepted. However, he said that he felt like some people assumed that he was not smart because he was Black.

Timothy

Timothy was a 21-year-old junior at GSU majoring in recreation and event management. Timothy participated in a leadership event for incoming students because he had to as a recipient of a multicultural scholarship he received which covered his tuition for four years. He was involved in Pride, and hall council. Timothy was also involved with volunteering. He was required to volunteer for his scholarship, but he frequently volunteered more hours than he needed to. Timothy identified as African American, homosexual, male, spiritual/Christian, and able bodied. He said that GSU was friendly and noted that diversity was growing on campus. He

also noted the preacher on campus that would yell at students and that he was often the only Black person in his classes. Timothy had been a member of a social fraternity, but after one of his friends who was in the organization graduated, he no longer felt a connection with the fraternity and he went to alumni status.

Tyrell

Tyrell was a 19-year-old student at the end of his freshman year at Shady Pine State University majoring in popular culture. Tyrell was a member of a social fraternity and had been involved with Shady Pine's student radio station but stopped that involvement so he could commit to his fraternity. Through his fraternity, he also served as a representative with the interfraternity council and participated in SPSU's dance marathon. When asked what his most important identities were Tyrell said that he did not like labels, but that being African American and a man were important to him. He also said that music was a big part of his identity. Tyrell said that SPSU had a good vibe, was social and uplifting. He said that people were really friendly and that he liked the size of the student body because he could meet someone new every day, but also see people that he knew. He felt that SPSU was welcoming for diverse students.

Vaughn

Vaughn was a 21-year-old junior at Shady Pine State University majoring in Spanish education. Vaughn was a member of the Shady Pine Leadership Institute, served as a diversity peer educator, health and wellness peer educator, and was in the World Student Association. He said he sometimes attended BSU and SPSU's LGBTQ+ student organization meetings if he was interested in the topic they were discussing. Vaughn identified as Black, a Black male in college, and gay. He also said that being a student in college, a student of color, and a male were important identities. Vaughn said that SPSU was a communal place where he felt "pretty

comfortable.” He said that the university did a good job of providing safe spaces for diverse students, but that the campus as a whole was not a safe space. He has heard people say the “N word” and there are very few queer people of color on campus.

Name Chosen	Age	Year	School	Major and (Minor)	Identities as enumerated by participant
Corey	21	4	MCSU	Chemistry (Math)	Black university student, chemistry major, gay, was teacher in Korea
Greg	19	2	SPSU	Public Relations and Ethnic Studies	Black gay man, middle class background
Jerome	22	3	MCSU	Psychology	Gay, Black, dancer, self-identified mini-psychologist/student, an example towards other people, friend
Jieron	21	4	MCSU	Communications (HR Management)	Spiritual, sarcastic, Black, gay, middle class, overweight, and a performing arts lover
JJ	21	4	GSU	Engineering	Religious, Black, gay
Jo'El	24	6	MCSU	Individualized Studies Program	Male, sexuality (he does not know what his sexuality is), background, “just a person,” Black, from a large, predominantly Black, metropolitan city in the Midwest
John	22	4	MCSU	Management - Human Resources	Black, gay man, gentleman, smile, vibrant personality
Jordan	25	6	MCSU	Hotel and Restaurant Management	Black gay male, spiritual
Justin	20	3	GSU	Journalism (public relations concentration)	Gay man of color, religion, an extrovert
Kenny	20	1	GSU	Integrative Public Relations	Black male, and then Black gay male, pessimistic (working on being positive)
Kris	21	2	GSU	Psychology	Christian and spiritual, man, biracial, fashionably savvy, occasional marijuana user
Matthew	22	5	MCSU	Japanese Language and Culture and Apparel, Texture, Merchandising	Black, gay, male, his major, being a member of JSA
Raheem	19	2	GSU	Human Resources Management	Leader, preppy, gay, and Black
Timothy	21	3	GSU	Recreation and Event Management (Communications)	African American, homosexual, male, spiritual/Christian, able bodied
Tyrell	19	1	SPSU	Popular Culture	African American, man, music
Vaughn	21	3	SPSU	Spanish Education	Black, a Black male in college, gay

Table 3.3. Participant Characteristics

Data Analysis

I used a method similar to grounded theory as the analytical framework for data analysis. In this section I describe the processes I used in performing data analysis. The steps involved were transcription, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. I then discuss how I created the sense of belonging model.

Transcription and Coding

The first step in data analysis for this study was to transcribe interviews. Transcription aids in ensuring an accurate representation of interviews and participants. During and after transcription I checked transcriptions for accuracy. As I read the interviews to check for accuracy, I also read for a “general sense” of the information and start to reflect and take notes on the meaning of student experiences (Creswell, 2009, p. 185). Though transcription is not required for grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I felt it was the best way for me to understand, interpret, and analyze data. I also wanted to ensure that I was understanding the full context of participant experiences and able to provide meaningful examples to describe relevant findings. I uploaded all transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative coding software, performed line by line coding, and later used NVivo’s query functions to highlight passages relevant to themes I was exploring.

Constant Comparative Method

As I proceeded with interviews, I utilized the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) wrote, “constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (p. 30). In using this method, I analyzed interviews as I completed them to look for emerging categories of data. As I progressed with future interviews I explored emerging categories and

sought additional information relevant to these categories while still using the proposed interview protocol to elicit new information from participants.

Analytical Framework

I used a process similar to grounded theory as the analytical framework for this study. In doing so, I was able to identify themes that were central to participant experiences related to sense of belonging and create a model that illustrates the process the 16 Black gay men in this study went through to feel a sense of belonging. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), “The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research **method** that uses a **systematic** set of **procedures** to **develop** an inductively derived grounded **theory** about a **phenomenon**” (p. 24, emphasis in original). In this case, I inductively developed a grounded theory about the sense of belonging of Black gay men. Additionally, grounded theory is used to “build a theory that is faithful to and illustrates an area under study” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). Grounded theories are created to be used for analysis in new research. In other words, theories are developed so that other researchers may use them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In developing a theory, researchers must use concepts by grouping similar data and assigning conceptual labels to the groups. These concepts “are related by means of **statements of relationship**” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 29, emphasis in original). In other words, the researcher must interpret the data into conceptual groups and then determine how the groups relate to one another. In order to analyze data, grounded theory uses three types of coding including open, axial, and selective coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990) stressed that “lines between each type of coding are artificial” (p. 58) and that the three types of coding may happen at any point during data analysis. Additionally, rigid adherence to the three types of coding in

sequence is not necessary to create a grounded theory, and in fact, flexibility is likely necessary in order for the process to work (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Open Coding

The first step of coding in grounded theory is open coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990) stated, “During open coding the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data” (p. 62). Creswell (2009) stated “coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (p. 186). Specifically, I utilized thematic open coding as I worked towards making meaning of the information contained within participant interviews. Glesne (2011) stated, “in thematic analysis you must make connections among the stories: What is being illuminated? How do the stories connect? What themes and patterns give shape to your data? Coding helps answer these questions” (p. 194). Strauss and Corbin (1990) stressed the process of discovering categories. They stated, “the process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena is called *categorizing*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 65). Categorizing is done through the creation of conceptual labels as the researcher reviews data and then groups concepts that refer to the same thing. One way to complete open coding is by performing line-by-line coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In using this method of analysis, I read each transcript line by line within paragraphs and labeled concepts that I saw as relevant to making meaning of the sense of belonging of participants as well as other interesting phenomena. I created a list of concepts and then went on to the next step of coding: axial coding.

Axial Coding

In using open coding, one separates data into categories. In axial coding, one “puts those data back together in new ways by *making connections between a category and its subcategories*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97, emphasis in original). In other words, one compares and combines initial categories and subcategories, which will eventually be main categories. Subcategories are also used in axial coding, which are used to specify categories by considering things like the context, strategies, and consequences of initial categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I identified subcategories by looking at my initial list of categories and considered how the initial list of categories related to one another. Some initial categories became subcategories as I performed axial coding. I also developed a code I entitled “attributions” in order to explore the causes and processes participants described as relating to phenomena.

Another central component of axial coding is relating subcategories to a category. Strauss and Corbin (1990) said, “*In axial coding the nature of the questions we are asking are really questions denoting a type of relationship*” (p. 107, emphasis in original). I compared the categories and subcategories I had developed in order to understand their relationships and categorize the phenomena that initial categories and subcategories were referring to. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), I utilized inductive and deductive thinking in order to understand the relationships between categories and subcategories. This part of the coding process is what makes theories using this process grounded as researchers propose and then check the relationships they identify (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this study, I looked for pieces of individual experiences that were most relevant to this study, the categories and subcategories I had identified, to determine the ways the experiences that were shared by participants fit together or, in some cases, did not fit together within categories and subcategories (Glesne, 2011). As I

proceeded, I compared codes and subcategories from each interview to see how codes related to one another (Charmaz, 2000). I tested these connections between categories by repeatedly referring back to the data to ensure that the connections I had made between phenomena were consistent with what the data illustrated (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the final step in creating a grounded theory in which the researcher puts categories and subcategories together in terms of their relationship to one another. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define selective coding as “The process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, and filling in the categories that need further refinement and development” (p. 116). In this study, the core category was sense of belonging, and selective coding was used to determine how other relevant categories related to it in terms of the process of how students came to feel a sense of belonging. In other words, I determined which categories were factors in participants feeling a sense of belonging and how they related both to one another and to sense of belonging.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) discussed “explicating the *story line...relating subsidiary categories* around the *core category...relating categories...validating those relationships* against data...[and] *filling in categories* that might need further refinement and/or development” (pp. 117-118, emphasis in original) in creating selective coding, and they noted that researchers often go back and forth between these steps rather than doing them linearly. I first identified themes relative to participant sense of belonging and then created an initial model by creating a story line and relating the main categories I had identified in relation to the core category, sense of belonging. I then mapped participants along the initial model I had created and made adjustments to make the model more accurate. In other words, I used the data to test the initial model. I also

filled in categories when there were gaps in the model. This was an iterative process, as there were several categories that throughout interpretation, analysis, and writing were removed from the model and other categories that became subcategories. Using peer reviewers to talk through various categories and their relationships with one another was also helpful. For example, initially the step of the model developing relationships and finding fit/place were separate steps. By talking with peer reviewers, I was able to determine that these two phenomena were part of the same step of the model and were more appropriate as one category.

Developing the Sense of Belonging Model

In this section I describe the process I went through in relation to working with the data from this study. First, I reviewed interview transcripts for errors and also to get a sense of the data. I paid attention to how students described belonging, how they knew when they belonged somewhere, and the factors that affected their sense of belonging. I then developed a preliminary model of sense of belonging that focused on the process that participants went through to feel a sense of belonging and mapped each participant on the model to see their individual paths. Next, I mapped all participants on the model (see Figure 3.2). I noted the trends and most and least common paths that students went through as they developed a sense of belonging. The result is a model of sense of belonging that represents the experiences of the 16 Black gay men I interviewed (see Figure 3.3). As stated previously, this was an iterative process and the model changed as I repeatedly reviewed the model in comparison with the data.

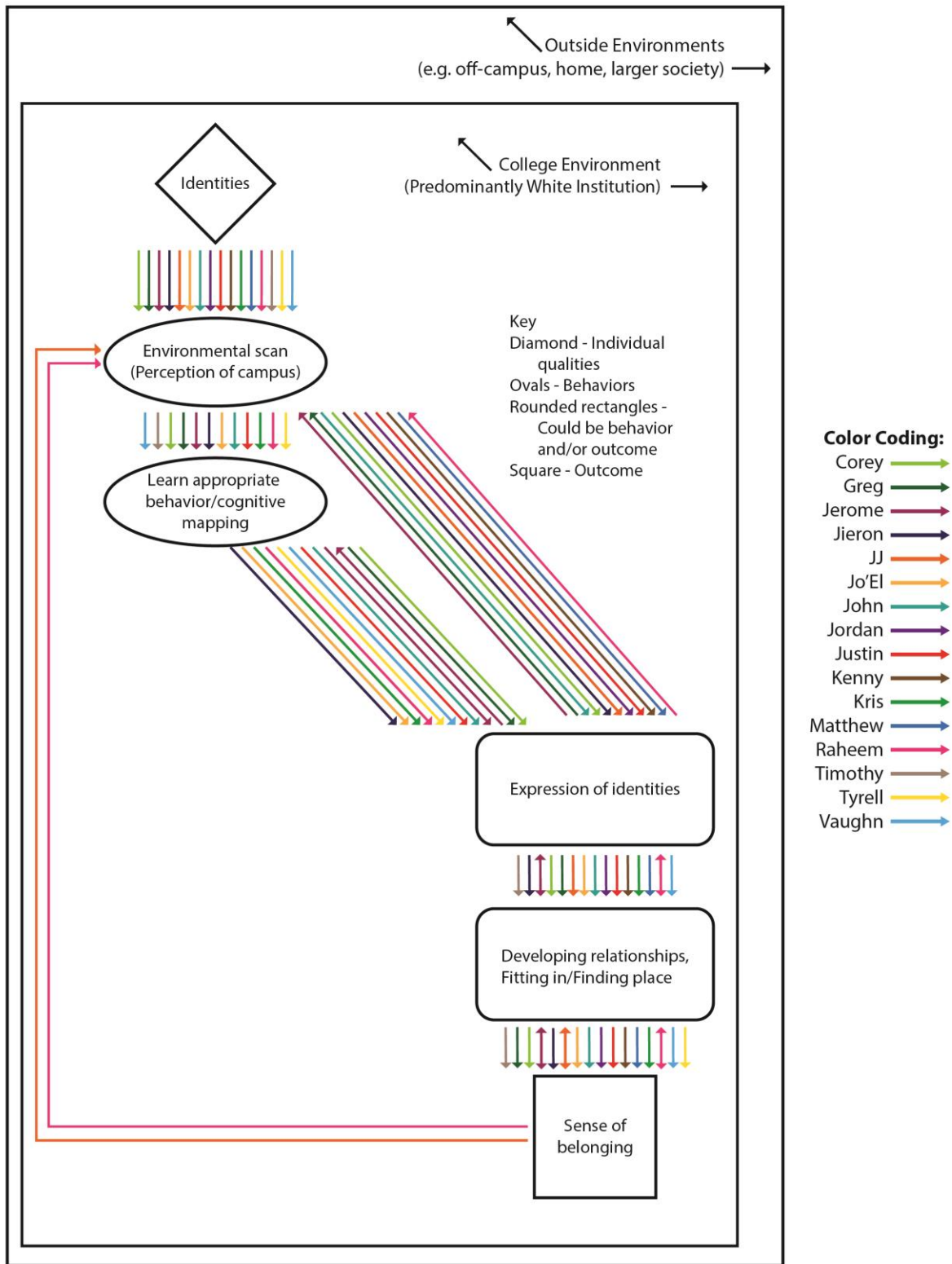


Figure 3.2. Sense of Belonging Model with Participants

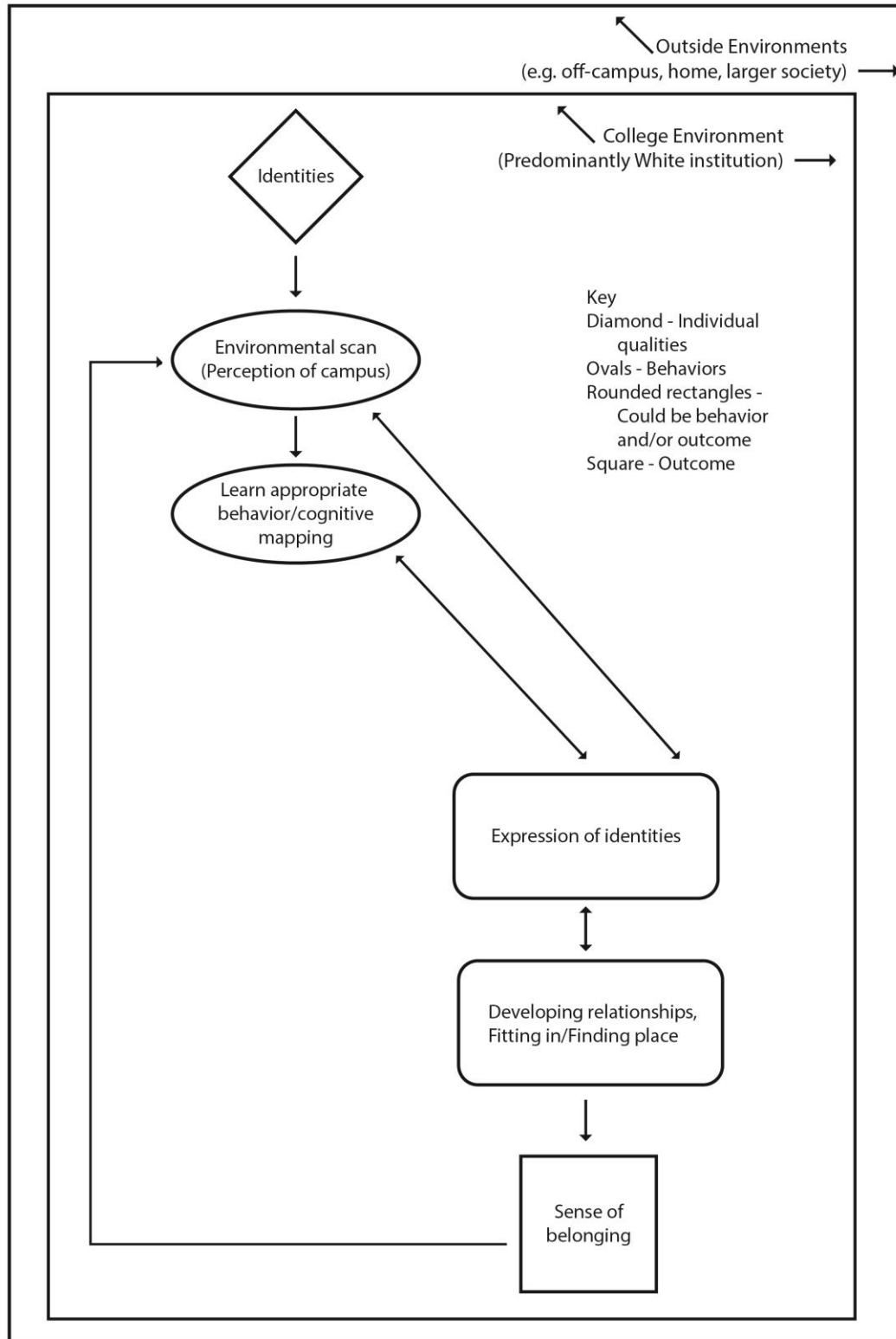


Figure 3.3. Sense of Belonging Model

Ethical Considerations

Before proceeding with this study I received approval from Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that I was in compliance with their policies and practices. I received IRB approval for my pilot study (Gonyo, 2012) on this topic; however, the scope of that study focused on the overall experiences of Black gay men, whereas this study focused on their experiences in relation to feeling a sense of belonging. I made the appropriate updates as necessary through the IRB process in order to be in compliance and to ensure ethical practices in this study.

In terms of communicating with students and protecting their confidentiality, I conducted all communication and stored all information for this study on my password-protected personal computer. I was not required to have the consent form signed by participants because this study was determined to be exempt, but I was sure to review the consent form with all participants prior to conducting interviews and stressed that participants had the right to decide not to continue with the study at any point for any reason. I reminded participants of their rights again before we began their second interviews.

I let participants select the location of their interviews so that interviews could be conducted in an environment where they felt comfortable and were confident that their confidentiality would be maintained. Surprisingly, many participants selected very public locations and did not seem to be concerned about who was around them while they shared their experiences. I also gave students the option to select a pseudonym that I would use throughout this study and I attempted to remove information that could be personally identifying.

Ethically, it was important that I was constantly aware of my positionality in the researcher role of this study. I was aware of my privileges and made every effort to honor the

experiences of participants. Some participants may have felt vulnerable as they talked with me about their marginalized identities and difficult experiences they faced. I wanted to be respectful of their vulnerability and do everything in my power to ensure their confidentiality and to help them feel more comfortable as they shared their experiences. As was the case with my pilot study (Gonyo, 2012), participants did not articulate their identities as Black and gay (or any other social identities) as intersectional. I address this phenomenon in later chapters.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

Various terms such as reliability, validity, and generalizability in qualitative research are used to describe the idea of ensuring the validation of studies, to know one has created trustworthy analytical interpretations (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2011). Because reliability, validity, and generalizability are typically associated with quantitative research, some scholars struggle to identify terms that are more relevant to qualitative work or to creating a meaning for the words reliability and validity in a qualitative context (Janesick, 2000). Merriam (2009) used the word trustworthiness to reference validity and reliability in ways that are appropriate within a qualitative context. For this study I utilize the word trustworthiness generally but embrace terms like validity and reliability as they are considered in qualitative contexts.

Creswell (2009) explains that “Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (p. 190). For the purpose of this study, I used several of Creswell’s (2009) suggestions for reliability. Specifically, I checked transcriptions for errors and used comparisons of data with codes and memos to avoid drifting in code definitions.

Additionally, I followed several suggestions by Creswell (2009), Glesne (2011), and Merriam (2009) for the purpose of validity and trustworthiness. I made use of thick descriptions by providing the perspectives of the participants in the form of direct quotations and examples of experiences they encountered (Creswell, 2009). Scholars also suggest that researchers clarify their biases and positionality, which influence how they make meaning of their data (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009). I was mindful of my biases and positionality as I progressed with this research study and used honest self-reflection where appropriate. Another technique used to increase validity in qualitative research is to present negative or discrepant information (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2011). This means that I provided experiences of participants that did not necessarily fit within a theme that emerges.

A final measure for validity that I utilized is peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009). This technique involved talking to a peers about emergent findings to ensure that they resonated and made sense to the debriefer who may have had unique interpretations of the information I shared with them (Creswell, 2009; Janesick, 2000). Janesick (2000) claimed qualitative validity has to do with “description and explanation of whether or not the explanation fits the description” (p. 393). What is important here is that the interpretation that the researcher has makes sense and seems feasible. Merriam (2009) stated that in this case one is looking for an outsider to agree that “given the data collected, the results make sense – they are consistent and dependable” (p. 221). Using peer debriefers who had different interpretations than those I had also helped me to be aware of and question my biases as I interpreted emerging themes and the sense of belonging model I created. In discussing my data and model with peer debriefers, both my initial coding scheme and sense of belong model changed. As a result of

their feedback and unique perspectives, I collapsed codes because of their similarity, which made the sense of belonging model more representative of the experiences of participants.

Finally, in order to work towards triangulation, I reviewed documents and attended events on campus that seem relevant to the experiences of participants. For example, I reviewed the institutional websites to look for various supports for Black gay men. I also looked at institutional policies that may have affected the experiences of Black gay men such as the institutional non-discrimination policies. While I was on campus, I spent time in central locations on campus such as the student union, and I looked for campus publications, like campus newspapers, to try to get a better understanding of the environment of the institution.

Limitations

In this section I discuss some of the potential limitations of this study. I was mindful of these limitations as I proceeded in order to minimize their effect on the outcome of the study. The main limitations for this study were my positionality, positionality of peer reviewers, recruitment methods, institutional selection, and lack of longitudinal data.

My Positionality

As I discussed in Chapter One and earlier in this chapter, I am a White lesbian female researcher, from a different generation than the participants, who interviewed and interpreted the experiences of Black gay men. As an outsider, inherently, my personal experiences and biases came into play and an effect on the way I conducted all aspects of this study. While some scholars would argue that an outsider perspective is sometimes helpful to consider things that insiders might take for granted, others might argue that there are things that I completely missed or was not able to understand. I think it is important to recognize my positionality was both a potential limitation and a potential strength of this study.

Positionality of Peer Reviewers

I utilized three peer reviewers for this study. All three peer reviewers are White, which is a limitation of this study. One peer reviewer is a White cisgender, heterosexual male and two are White women, one of whom identifies as a lesbian and one of whom identifies as queer. While all three of the reviewers engage in self-reflective practices regarding their identities and try to act in anti-racist and anti-homophobic ways, they are still White and cannot speak to the experiences of Black persons. Additionally, though two participants identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, no peer reviewers in this study were gay men, and as a result, may not understand the experiences of gay men. Having no Black gay men as peer reviewers is a limitation of this study.

Recruitment Methods

By using convenience sampling and recruiting participants through student affairs officers, faculty, LGBTQ+ and cultural centers, student organizations, and flyers around campus, there may be portions of the Black gay male population that I was unable to reach. If students were not engaged in LGBTQ+, cultural resource centers, or student organizations, it was likely that I was unable to get in contact with them by only reaching out to these campus resources. Black gay men who are not engaged in these centers or organizations may have different experiences on their campus than men who are engaged with these student services. My findings may be limited because I was only able to interview students who were utilizing services that may have been helpful in their ability to feel a sense of belonging. However, I tried to minimize this limitation by posting flyers around campus and using snowball sampling. I know that at least one participant contacted me after he saw a flyer on his campus. Despite my best efforts, I may not have reached students who did not feel a sense of belonging at their institutions because they

were not engaged with campus resources related to their Black or gay identities or were not connected with other Black gay men at their institution.

Institutional Selection

Student resources and experiences often vary by institution. By limiting myself to three institutions within a relatively small geographic region in the Midwest, my findings are likely not representative of the experiences of all Black gay men in higher education. While I selected institutions with varying characteristics, there are certainly some institutional characteristics that I simply was not able to include. As a result of not being able to have a greater variety of institutional characteristics, I may not have heard or been able represent all characteristics of campuses that may relate to the sense of belonging of Black gay men.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEMES RELATED TO SENSE OF BELONGING

Overview of Themes

This chapter serves as a review of major themes identified in performing a thematic analysis of the data. All of the themes illustrated in this chapter are factors participants discussed in relation to their sense of belonging. The themes most commonly related to belonging in this study were positive experiences in student workplaces, positive experiences with faculty, the role of university programs, the importance of friend groups, involvement in student organizations, Black masculinities, intersectionality, covering and code switching, and not wanting to make others uncomfortable.

Positive Experiences in Student Workplaces

Ten participants indicated that having worked within a specific department or unit on campus was a positive experience for them. Participants often cited these workplaces as settings where they developed important relationships with faculty, staff, and peers. These individuals and departments often served as safe spaces for participants where they felt supported and valued. For example, Vaughn named residence life at SPSU, where he served as a resident assistant, as a place he felt like he had developed relationships and found a place where he fit, Justin discussed the Office for Diversity and Inclusion at GSU where he worked for the larger umbrella office and the campus LGBTQ+ Student Services Office, and Corey identified the Office of International Students where he served as an orientation leader for new international students. Though JJ and Matthew held jobs off campus, their workplaces were places where they connected with other students attending their institutions.

All of the participants who talked about their job talked about how it played a role in their developing relationships on campus. For example, Kris worked at the front desk in his residence

hall. He said that because of where his job was he saw everyone who came in and out of his building, which allowed him to get to know people. Similarly, when I asked Jerome how he met people in his residence hall, he said:

that was also really easy because when I started working on campus it was like a way for me to meet actual people. So I actually know most of the residents by name and I still do. So. Which is another good thing about my job because you actually sit there and you have discussions with them and they actually develop like an attachment and they feel safer and I get people coming to my room asking me random questions that they should be asking the RA instead of me and I'm like, "well I'm not the RA, but if I had to give you advice I would say go do this."

Because Jerome worked in his residence hall and his job involved sitting out where people could see him, he met a lot of his peers and developed relationships with them. Jo'El said that he developed a close relationship with one of his bosses. He said, "So, uh, my old boss at the time...she's very, like, all in your stuff. And we all called her Mom 'cause she's a mom, and whenever we had problems, we asked her 'cause she's a mom." Jo'El liked that he could go to this boss to talk about things and also recalled a time where she wrote him a recommendation letter and brought it to campus when she was on maternity leave. Timothy, John, and Vaughn had jobs as resident assistants on campus. They talked about developing relationships with their bosses, their RA staffs, and with their residents. These men talked about the residents on their floors as people they spent a lot of time with and with whom they had close relationships.

Positive Experiences with Faculty

A number of students were pleasantly surprised when they learned that it was possible to develop relationships with faculty on their campus and that there were faculty who were genuinely interested in them as people. While some participants described negative experiences they had with faculty members, there were more positive examples discussed than negative ones.

Jieron's professor Caroline got him connected with several campus resources that he did not know existed, like the student health center and LGBTQ+ Resource Center.

Some students represented faculty as people who limited their interactions with students to office hours or during their workdays, while others had meals or coffee with students, and others went out for drinks with students. Participants had different reactions to the ways that faculty interacted with them. For example, Jo'El and Jerome thought it was cool that they could go out for a beer with faculty while John was taken off guard by the idea of drinking with a faculty member. John said a faculty member had asked if he was of age and when they found out he was 22, they suggested going out to a bar. John said, "that's inapro-pro, but ok, maybe, I guess so."

Jordan, who lived off campus and did not develop many relationships on campus, had one professor with whom he had developed a particularly strong relationship. He said:

she's just really, like—you know, we communicate a lot through e-mail now since I don't have any more classes with her. But it's just always—like, she's a motivation to me. Like, she made me feel really confident and not even just in school, where, like, she just made me confident as a person. Like, I was just always open with her as far as, like, you know, other experiences I was having in college and my sexuality, and, like, it—it was somewhat personal, but not personal to the point where it was, like, inappropriate...It was just personal to where I felt like she was there for me with the decisions I needed to make.

Jordan was happy to have met this faculty member whom he maintained a relationship with, despite the fact that he was not taking classes with her anymore. He counted on her for support and guidance. This relationship was especially important for Jordan because he did not have a lot of connections on campus.

Role of University Programs

Six participants specifically cited university programs as opportunities that helped them get a feel for their university, develop relationships on campus, and begin the process of feeling a

sense of belonging. Four of these participants, Kenny, Jo'El, Raheem, and Timothy, talked specifically about various types of orientation programs that they attended as new students.

Raheem (GSU) attended a pre-orientation event for new students that focused on leadership development. This event was especially important for him and he said:

I just never really felt included [before attending the event]. I've never really been around a diverse group of people that much. I mean, you know, it's just so embracing and accepting. I've always, everywhere I go, you know, before I came here, I would always feel judged or I would always feel like somebody's watching, somebody you know, is gonna tell me I need to change something or I need to do something a certain way. But here I just wasn't. Like I could think for myself and I've never really done that before.

Raheem began to feel like GSU was a place where he belonged during orientation because he felt like it was an open and accepting environment. Jo'El was very surprised that he made friends at orientation. He said, "I didn't think I was gonna like anyone or meet anyone. So, you know, you sit in the auditorium and they tell you everything that's going on, welcome to [MCSU]. I'm like, 'Can we get this over with?'" He then talked about how new students were broken into small groups and how he got to know and become friends with people over the four days of orientation. He said he had remained friends with the people he met at orientation throughout his college experience.

Greg and Vaughn both talked about the Shady Pine Leadership Institute (SPLI), which had a summer bridge component. Greg said that he developed strong relationships with his peers in SPLI because they went through the summer bridge program together. He said:

there were some areas where it kinda negatively affected my transition as well, like when the year actually started because I felt like I had known-, because I felt like I had known a lot of people in the summer, I feel like I didn't really need to, you know, spend a lot of time like making new friends. So I would hang out with the people I met during the summer and then I would meet some-, their, like you know, their new friends and I think I'm a pretty friendly guy, so I mean, like I was still like meeting new people like in classes and so but I don't think I put a lot, like a really big effort into, into like meeting new people.

Because Greg had already developed relationships over the summer, he initially held back from meeting new people because he had already made connections, but once he got more involved in student organizations, he began to branch out and take the time to get to know more people. Programs like orientation and SPLI served as sites where students developed relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff and helped them feel like they fit in at their institution, or at least within a group at their institution.

Importance of Friend Groups

All of the participants indicated that they had a small friend group at their institution that was important to them and affected fitting in, finding place, and sense of belonging. While Jordan kept his personal life off campus, having a friend group was important to him and gave him a connection to the area of MCSU. Kenny said that he had found a friend group at GSU's orientation when he first transitioned at the beginning of the year but that he "always questions if he's in the right group." He considered himself nomadic because he was often meeting new people and assessing them as friends. Corey said that his friend groups were mostly international students and women. He said:

in some of my groups it's actually looked at as a plus to be gay. Like, mostly because...I have a lot of friends who are girls and they talk about boys and so I'm able to talk about boys and so they look at it as a plus, you know, and so like in a lot of ways I think being gay is good, you know looked at as a plus, and so you know, being, being looked at as...like you bring a benefit to a group, that, that, that definitely means you belong because I mean like what...what I'm equating belonging to is being wanted and um...like when you are, when you are um, seen as being a benefit to a group, I would say wanted, and therefore you belong.

Corey clearly articulated that he felt like he belonged in his friend group and that part of the reason he belonged was because his gay identity was part of his bond with his female friends. While Tyrell did not specifically use the terminology of friends, his friend group seemed to be his fraternity brothers, as those were the people he said he spent his time with and that he

maintained the strongest connections with. Jerome talked about his friend group as a strong support for him. He said, “Like I feel really like involved with my friends because of that and like I always can go to them with anything and I don’t feel like they would say, ‘no I’m too busy for you,’ or ‘I don’t really want to hear you complaining about this today.’” Participants counted on their friend groups on campus and these groups played a large role in their sense of belonging.

Corey, Greg, and Vaughn all had friend groups on campus but specifically noted the importance of their high school friend group. They maintained these relationships despite having been in college for at least two years. Their high school friends often served as sounding boards for things that they were experiencing at their institutions and sometimes served as way for them to view things more positively, which positively affected their sense of belonging.

Involvement in Student Organizations

Many participants indicated that joining student organizations played a large role in their sense of belonging at their institution and for some, attending groups where they did not know anyone led them to develop new relationships. Some organizations that participants joined were social fraternities, some had to do with academic majors, some had to do with identities, and others were related to participant interests. What all of these organizations had in common was that they served as a place for students to develop relationships with others on campus who shared similar interests and/or identities and to find a place where they fit on campus. For example, Justin got involved in organizations that he found socially appealing and that fit with his interests. For him, these were a social fraternity and an acapella group at GSU. Others, like Jerome, Jo’El, Matthew, and Vaughn, got involved in organizations related to their social identities. These men became involved with their campus’ LGBTQ+ group or Black Student Associations.

Tyrell had not really developed relationships with many people on campus until he joined the SPSU radio station. He found that he could sit and talk about music, one of his passions, for hours with the other members of the station. Tyrell said, “I’m like, ‘these are my people.’ Like this is, this is what I’ve been waiting for. A group of people to talk about music with and know what they’re talking about.” Joining a student organization helped Tyrell develop relationships with peers on campus who shared interests with him. He then joined a social fraternity, which later became his main social network and where he developed strong relationships with his brothers.

For Corey and Matthew, both Japanese majors, being a part of the Japanese Student Association at MCSU was a large part of developing relationships on campus. They were drawn to the organization by their major, but their participation supported not only their academic success but also their social development. In fact, Matthew said that the Japanese Student Association made up most of his friend group. When I asked him about a campus resource that he found helpful, Matthew said:

I’m really involved with the Japanese Student Association and they were a big way of how, they’re just like kind of my campus identity in terms of like, I’ve been going there every year. Like I’m the vice president this year, like so all my friends and like my friend group kind of revolves around that.

Similarly, Kenny, an Integrative Public Relations major, who had just transferred to GSU at the beginning of the academic year, noted that he had not really connected with a group of friends socially that he was sure of, but that he really found a place for himself in his campus’ chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). He said, “I’m happy I found it [PRSSA] actually. That’s probably the only thing I’m consistently in right now, that I can say that I’m gonna be in next year.”

A variety of student organizations served as places where students fit in, found their place, and developed relationships. Involvement in student organizations was a large factor in participants feeling a sense of belonging. Fraternities were major sites for participants in finding their place and developing relationship (no participants joined a Black Greek letter organization). Thirteen participants said they had, at least at some point in time, fit in and found their place within a social fraternity. Justin helped his fraternity go from a colony to a chapter. He said he never thought he would join a fraternity as a gay man, but he stumbled across this group and said:

There's just something different about them and I think it matched my different because me, I understood that like I was different and um, I, I just think we're all different. I don't know if that makes sense. Like me and my brothers um, and that's something that's like really unique about our group. But, (deep breath) I don't know. I just felt this, there was a time where I just knew that it was right um, for me...but when I found this group of, this small group of guys that were trying to, bring this group back to campus, I guess they just made me feel very accepted and it wasn't about my race or it wasn't about my sexual orientation, or my mannerisms, or like my femininity, or mix of my masculinity. It wasn't about that. It was about me as a person and what I wanted to do as a leader on campus and I wanted to do um, while still having fun, cause I mean it is a social, we're not like academic or anything like that, but we're also doing like normal, I guess, like college stuff you know.

The type of student organization in which participants were involved did not seem to make a difference in terms of the result of the involvement. In other words, participants described student organizations as places where they formed friendships, found a place, something that made them feel more connected to their institution, and a factor in their sense of belonging.

Black Masculinities

Several participants talked about the ways in which their expression(s) of masculinity affected their sense of belonging. As discussed in Chapter Two, there are often strong and rigid expectations of what it means to be a Black man. Some participants struggled to express their sexuality because they did not want to appear as weak or feminine, which are characteristics that

do not align with stereotypical ideals of Black masculinity. Most participants seemed to arrive at their university with an understanding of the ways in which they were expected to behave as Black men. Several men talked about receiving these messages when they were children, in high school, and in some cases, explicitly from their parents. Because some participants went to college at the same institution as some of their peers from high school, they often felt like the presence of these peers was a reinforcement of expectations that they behave within the rigid expectations of Black masculinity. Some participants felt like they had to live within the confines of stereotypical Black masculinity even though they had not received any messages indicating that was the case at their university. In many cases, the messages they received prior to attending college stayed with them and it seemed that they did not dare test the water to see if there was room to express masculinity in any other ways.

Kris gave examples of both a group that made him feel comfortable being himself in juxtaposition to a group where he felt like he had to hide his sexuality. Kris described how he was more comfortable with women and his close friends, but he continued to explain how he found himself acting when he was around Black straight men. He said:

I find myself like deepening my voice or trying to avoid any forms of being feminine at all. Like it's like I, I respect them, but I don't want them to view me as being weak and submissive and I still want their respect, so I feel like I need to be on their same accord in a way.

Kris felt that it was necessary to cover his sexuality and act in ways that were consistent with the expectations of Black masculinity in order to maintain the respect he had gained from Black straight men. Kris was conscious to try to exude strong Black masculinity in order to keep his relationships with these men; he was code switching in that he knew the acceptable language to speak around other Black men, which was with a deep voice and no feminine mannerisms. He also said that he perceived it to be even more important for him to act in a more masculine way

because he was short. Because he could not change his height and he thought his stature would influence the way others viewed him, particularly by Black straight men, he thought acting in a more masculine way would lead the men to look at him more positively.

Kris also shared a specific example of when he was working with a gay friend who called him out for acting differently when Black straight men came around. His friend said, “why are you like, kinda like two different people right now?” Kris had been singing Lady Gaga before the men approached, and when they came closer, Kris spoke in a deeper voice and was shaking hands with them. Kris said, “it’s like...a respect thing not to throw it in their face, but, even though this group of people, they knew, but I didn’t want to like be overly flamboyant. I still wanted to like keep that respect with him.” He felt like expressing his sexuality, which to him meant anything aside from stereotypical masculinity, would have caused his Black straight male peers to lose respect for him. Kris saw acting more stereotypically masculine as his way of showing these men respect.

Kris continued:

I just feel like I don’t wanna like show signs of being weak because I know in the African American community, like some, you know, you would maybe be viewed as weak or not manly because they like men and I don’t wanna be viewed in that regard because like I feel like I, I am a man, but just because I choose to love a man shouldn’t mean anything, but...I...it just makes me feel uncomfortable and it was really weird.

I asked Kris how he thought these men would react if he acted differently, meaning not masculine. He seemed to struggle to explain how he acted. He said, “I mean, I don’t necessarily like act different. It’s just like, certain things that I’ll do.” Later in our time together I asked Kris if he felt like he could be himself on campus and he said, “Without a doubt. I feel like I really don’t get shit from anybody for just being myself.” Based on Kris’ overall feelings about his campus (that it was a positive environment) and saying he could be himself in contrast with the

way he acted around Black straight men, it was clear that context was really important for Kris in choosing how he would act and interact with others. Kris covered his gay identity around Black straight men because he wanted to maintain his relationship with them, and acting in a way that was not consistent with Black masculinity would jeopardize his relationship with these men.

Kris went on to say that if these men saw him singing Lady Gaga and moving his head back and forth, they would not be likely to greet him. Kris indicated that he did not care how White men perceived him and also that he did not think that White men cared how he acted because they never said anything about it or seemed to react when he was fully himself. Kris noted that within the Black community, Black gay men who were flamboyant had it the hardest, followed by those “in the middle,” and then the Black gay men who could blend in, the masculine ones, did not get picked on like flamboyant gay men. Kris said he also learned at home that acting flamboyantly was negative. He recalled his mother once saying, “I’m really happy you’re not one of those fairies.” Kris perceived the importance of his behavior based on context because of messages he received from the Black community, both peers and his parents, but also from the lack of reaction he got when he chose not to cover up his sexuality around White men. In other words, Kris felt like expressing his sexuality, meaning being open about his sexuality and acting in ways that were less masculine, would cause Black straight men to feel uncomfortable, to look at him negatively, and potentially cut ties with him. Kris thought that not acting in ways consistent with Black masculinity would negatively affect his sense of belonging.

Intersectionality

While some participants (e.g., Jerome) described how they experienced their identities intersectionally and were intentional about bringing all of the parts of their identity together in all of their experiences, the overwhelming majority of participants did not express their identities

intersectionally. Some participants said that some of their identities were not relevant in some settings. Others felt like they were not able to express parts of their identities in certain settings because of the messages they had received both inside and outside of the institution, as is consistent with minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995) and will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. Several participants talked about receiving negative messages regarding their identity(s), most commonly their race and sexuality. Several participants received messages from their families, from their peers, and/or from society at large, that being gay was a bad thing. Some participants received messages about their racial identity and what they were and were not expected to be able to do and who they were expected to be and not be from sources like society at large, peers, and faculty members.

Some participants chose to ignore the messages they received about their sexuality and/or race, while others were very aware of the expectations placed on them because of their identity(s). It is important to note that participants received messages about their identity(s) long before they arrived at college and these men took these messages to their institution with them. Some participants, like Jerome, made conscious decisions to ignore the messages they received about their identities because they realized that it was important that they expressed themselves intersectionally and brought all of who they were into everything they did. While some participants felt free to express their identities regardless of their setting, many participants felt like they had to cover or code switch certain identities in specific settings as matter of being polite or for their personal safety because they expected others to have negative feelings or reactions to their identity(s), which might have affected their sense of belonging.

Covering and Code Switching

As a result of messages participants received outside of their campus setting (often prior to attending college), perceptions of their campuses, and learning what they perceived to be appropriate behavior at their institution, some participants covered or code switched pieces of their identity(s). In some cases participants chose to minimize or hide their identity(s) because they thought doing so was appropriate, while in other cases, it was because they thought they needed to in order to be safe. Participants gave examples of times they covered or code switched, as defined and explained in Chapter Two, around various pieces of their identity, particularly their race and sexuality. Some participants talked about expressing identities in certain situations based on what they thought was expected of them, which varied by the setting they were in and whom they were around.

Some participants consciously made the decision to hide or minimize pieces of their identity because of the setting they were in. Raheem talked about times when he felt like he had to cover his sexual orientation or his Black identity:

But, you know, if I'm like here, or around people who aren't gay, I would, I just don't, you know, I don't really talk about it much 'cause they, it wouldn't interest them. And another thing, as far as me being Black...sometimes I feel like I can't...I have to be perfect. And the reason I say sometimes I feel like I have to be perfect is because I feel like I'm always judged. I feel like people are waiting for me to mess up because I'm Black. 'Cause I'm a Black guy. And I'm just, I'm supposed to be this, I'm supposed to be basically this, this like ignorant...person, you know, that's not capable of pretty much doing anything. And, you know, and (laughs) that's not me. But, I feel like, it's the pressure on me even more when I mess up or when I do something. It affects me. And it affects my culture, it affects all types of things and that's something that is really hard for me to deal with 'cause it's always, I'm always just under pressure.

Raheem said he learned that he was supposed to be “not smart, ghetto, loud, and in jail.” He said he heard that message from both Black and White people before arriving at GSU, but also in on campus environments. Raheem experienced White people telling him that he was “different.”

When he asked what they meant they would say things like, “Oh, you’re not, um, you know, you don’t, um, you don’t act like an animal” or, “you’re a civilized Black man.” While Raheem mostly took what his peers said as a compliment because he had seen Black men behave in ways that made him different from his peers, their comments took him off guard. Participants often saw covering or code switching as behaviors they needed to engage to gain and maintain the respect of peers, faculty, and staff, and something that sometimes allowed them to develop and maintain relationships.

Result of covering or code switching. When participants talked explicitly about covering or code switching, I asked them how it felt when they made the decision to hide or minimize one or more of their identities. Participants responded in a variety of positive and negative ways, but several participants also said that the way they felt varied based on why they decided to cover or code switch. The concepts within minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995) are especially relevant when talking about covering and code switching, specifically when understanding the ways participants felt about their decision to hide or minimize their identities in order to fit in within their setting. For example, Vaughn (SPSU) said:

It depends on why I’m doing it because if I am doing it, like I said, a place where I feel very strong Black masculinity, I’m not doing it because I want to, I’m doing it because I feel like I have to. I, more so out of like a fear whereas if I’m silencing myself on religion because they are people who are more religious than I am, I’m just doing it out of respect and...I don’t feel bad about that. Um, but I would feel bad if I had to do it out of fear because I feel like I’m not stepping up to the plate. Uh, so, depending on the reason I would say, it changes.

Vaughn hid his identities in settings where he perceived strong Black masculinity for his safety as opposed to feeling like he had to be polite. In other settings, he hid identities because he wanted to be polite to others who were more religious than him because he thought his sexuality might have made them feel uncomfortable. The reason for covering his identity made him feel

differently depending on the situation he was in. When he was being respectful, Vaughn felt good about his decision to cover up or minimize his identities. When he was covering out of fear he felt like he was “not stepping up to the plate,” meaning he felt like he should be standing up and doing more for himself and other Black gay men.

John had a hard time deciding when he should be open about his sexuality and when he should not. As previously mentioned, this was particularly relevant on his residence hall floor during his first year at MCSU. John said:

it [being gay] put me in a very awkward place because I didn't know how to talk to people about um, like my sexuality or even like talk to people when I was wearing my sexuality on my sleeve, you know, it's very difficult be-, like not wanting to hurt somebody and not wanting, and...wanting to be yourself at the same time.

John experienced discomfort as a result of not knowing whether he should cover his sexuality or not and in what circumstances. He attributed the discomfort during the time he spent on the all-male floor to ideals of masculinity that he received before and after arriving at college and perceived stigma of his sexuality. He said that the men put on harder facades and were less emotional than women.

At another point in the interview John talked about adding and subtracting parts of his identities based on the situation he was in. I then asked John how it felt when he had to hold back identities. John said:

(laugh) Um, it hurts. It's...it's definitely, I feel like sometimes I'm, I'm being a coward because I'm not able to express myself around them and I'm an adult, you know, I'm a grown man and I'm not able to be myself around my family and I think that makes me less of a man because I always say I'm a man first and then all else comes second to that and I feel like it makes me less of a man to not be able to express myself around them.

John struggled with his decision to not be out about his sexuality in certain situations, but his fear of rejection based on assumed stigmas that others held about his sexuality caused him to continue to do so, despite the fact that it made him feel bad about himself. Choosing not to be out

was clearly difficult for John and an ongoing issue that he thought about. John wanted to bring all of his identities together intersectionally, but the fear of rejection caused him to continue to hide or minimize his gay identity in certain settings. Minority stress theory is very relevant for John who expected others to hold negative feelings about his sexuality and was aware of his behavior in different settings because he did not want to receive negative reactions about his sexuality.

Jerome talked about how he tried to hide his sexuality in high school and that doing so had a negative effect on him. He indicated that he was constantly policing his own behavior in high school. He recalled hanging out with the football players at his high school and trying to emulate their walk because he felt like he had a “strut,” which meant that he felt like he was not walking like a straight man. Jerome clearly experienced minority stress and covered his sexuality while he was in high school, but he decided to be out at MCSU. He said:

I feel like if I wasn’t out and I was in college and I was still doing that [covering his sexuality] I’d feel like everyone was looking at me and trying to figure out who I was. Like I felt like, I’d feel like all these barriers were like being forcefully pushed while now I’m just like there aren’t really any barriers unless I need one up.

Jerome said that he felt like his overall experience at MCSU was better than it would have been if he had decided to continue concealing his gay identity and that he had actually met more people because of his openness and involvement in MCSU’s LGBTQ+ community.

Making Others Uncomfortable

As discussed in the previous section, another theme that came up while performing analysis was that participants did not want to make others uncomfortable because of their identity(s). Several participants talked about how they changed their behavior and tried to hide or minimize their identity(s) because they did not want to make the people they were around feel uncomfortable. Participants were most likely to try to hide or minimize their sexuality, however

there were other parts of their identities they sometimes felt that they should minimize. Vaughn (SPSU) said:

Depending on who I'm around, I'll do it [minimize or hide my identities] all the time. If I, you know, I won't talk about gay stuff if I'm with a bunch of straight people because I don't want to make them uncomfortable. If I'm with a bunch, of, if I'm around a bunch of White people I won't talk about you know, I won't talk as much about you know, being Black because I don't want to make them uncomfortable. So I think, I mean, that happens a lot just, you know, where I'm at. Not, it's not that I won't do it, but it's more so, you know, me not trying to make the other person uncomfortable unless there's a situation where I have to like bring it up.

In these examples given by Vaughn, he was very mindful of the environment he was in and made a conscious decision not to bring up pieces of his identity in order to not upset others, as a matter of manners. This meant that Vaughn was not able to express his identities intersectionally in some settings because he thought doing so would cause others discomfort.

John felt similar to Vaughn. He said he never walked into a room and said, "hey y'all. I'm gay! And I like boys! You know, and vaginas have teeth!" Instead, John felt like there were times that it was important to him that he did not make other people uncomfortable as a matter of manners, and as a result, he chose to minimize his sexuality. John said:

I like to be aware, you know, of other people because sometimes when you show them certain parts of your identity it makes them uncomfortable and I don't want to make people feel uncomfortable. I don't want people to, and, and it's not saying that you know...that I should just go out of my way to make them feel comfortable, that I should hide certain parts of me, you know, for their comfort, but along the same vein, if I can help it, then sometimes I won't just blast the air with all of my identity.

John seemed to pick and choose the times that he was open about his sexuality and times where he downplayed or hid his sexuality. He struggled with the idea that he should have to hide himself for the sake of other people's comfort, but at the same time, he sensed that there were times that hiding his sexuality was the right thing to do. John felt like he needed to consistently hide his gay identity his freshman year when he lived on an all men's floor. John said that

because of his sexuality he did not know how to approach the men on his floor; he did not know how to interact with his peers in an intersectional way because of messages he received about Black masculinity and homophobia prior to arriving at his institution. Some participants were able to articulate why and when they were hiding or minimizing their identity(s) and also talked about the various ways they felt when they did so, which I discuss at greater length in the following chapter.

In this chapter I illustrated the major themes identified in completing a thematic analysis of the data. Participants talked about positive experiences in student workplaces, positive experiences with faculty, the role of university programs, the importance of friend groups, involvement in student organizations, Black masculinities, intersectionality, covering and code switching, and not wanting to make others uncomfortable, as factors related to their sense of belonging. In the next chapter I describe the sense of belonging model, how participants moved through the model, and discuss how the themes in this chapter relate to the model.

CHAPTER FIVE: SENSE OF BELONGING MODEL

Developing the Sense of Belonging Model

Existing literature discusses student experiences and descriptions of sense of belonging (e.g., Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Haussman, et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Samura, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). While Hurtado and Carter (1997) described *factors* that lead to sense of belonging, I did not identify any existing literature that described the *process* of how one develops a sense of belonging. In answering the research questions:

1. Do Black gay men feel a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions?
and
2. If Black gay men do feel a sense of belonging, what processes contribute to sense of belonging?

I developed a sense of belonging model for Black gay men at PWIs.

Description of the Sense of Belonging Model

Beginning with their identities, all Black gay men in this study conducted an environmental scan to assess their campus climate, expressed their identities, developed relationships, and found at least one place on their campus where they felt like they fit in. Some participants also went through the process of learning appropriate behavior and making sense of the environment (cognitively mapping) at their institution. An important feature of the sense of belonging model is that it exists within multiple environments, both within the institution that participants attended and other environments outside of their institution like with their families, in their high schools, and larger society. This means that participant experiences within their college environment were affected not only by what happened at their institution, but also by

messages they received outside of their institution both before and during their attendance. Scholars claim that an important component of intersectionality, both generally and within higher education, is the role of the environment within which individuals exist (e.g., Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012; Strayhorn, 2013; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). In the context of this study, one environment is the university each student was attending, more specifically, a public PWI in the Midwest. In Chapter Two, I reviewed relevant literature about PWIs and common experiences of Black students at these institutions as well as common experiences of LGBTQ+ students on college campuses. Other environments include off-campus settings including the city in which each university is located, any other community in which participants were involved, including their home communities, high schools, and families, and larger society. I highlight student perceptions of their environments when I describe the Perception of Campus/Environmental Scan portion of the model below. I also discuss the salient ways in which participants discussed off-campus settings in relation to their experiences on campus. In Figure 5.1 (page 119), two boxes are drawn around the model to represent both on- and off-campus environments that participants identified as being related to their sense of belonging.

This model is specific to Black gay men because they have at least two minoritized identities. While literature clearly identifies and describes chilly campus climates with instances of racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and sexism for Black and gay identified individuals (e.g., Iverson & Jagers, 2015; Rankin, et al., 2010; Swim, et al., 2003; Woodford, Han, et al., 2014), this study found Black gay men are still able to feel a sense of belonging at PWIs. This model may also be applicable to other individuals with multiple minoritized identities, which I discuss in Chapter Seven, however this study specifically explores how Black gay men feel a sense of

belonging at PWIs.

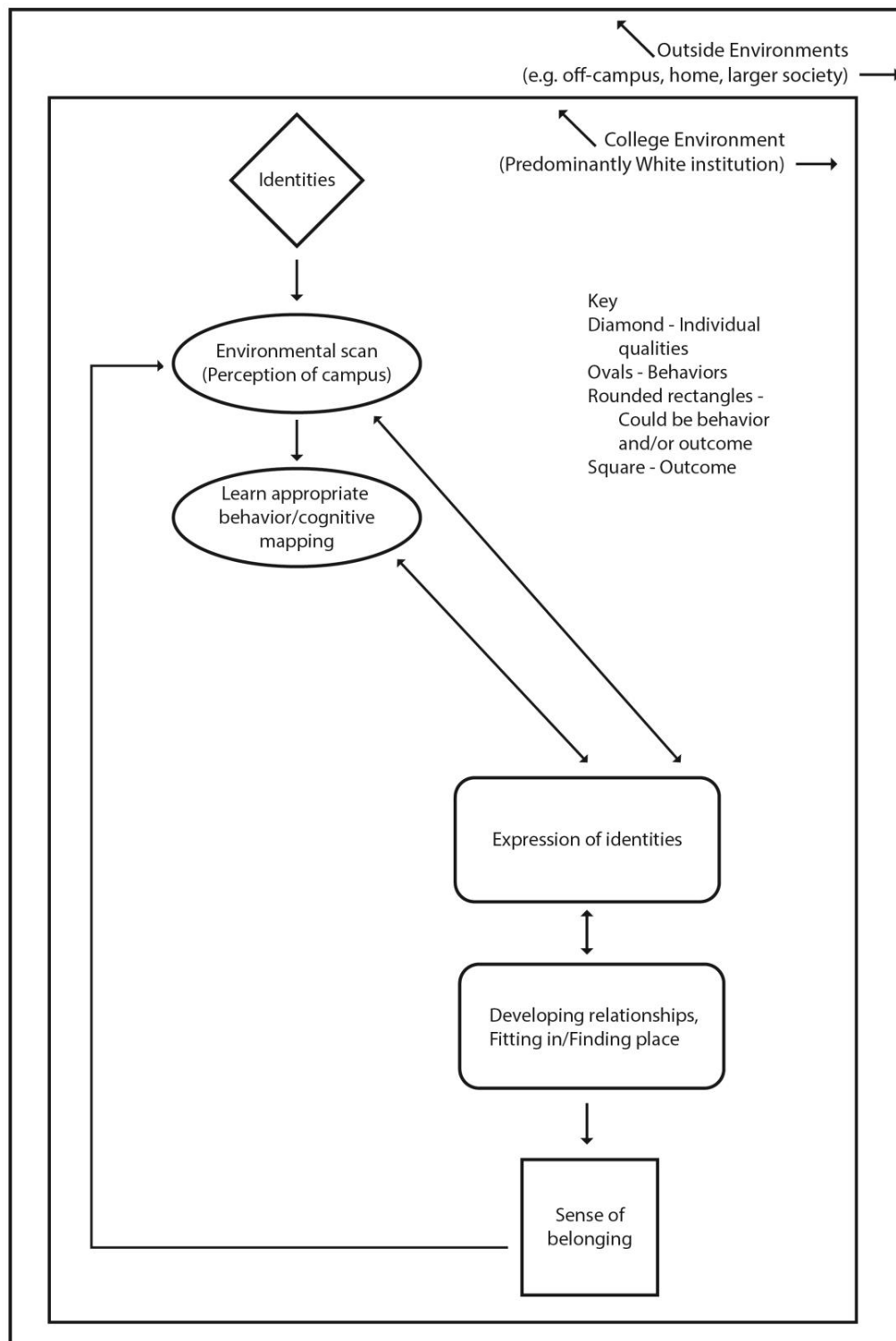


Figure 5.1. Sense of Belonging Model

The model contains four different shapes: diamonds, ovals, rounded rectangles, and a square. The diamond (identities) represents **individual qualities**. The ovals represent **individual behaviors**. The rounded rectangles (expression of identities, development of relationships, and fitting in and finding place) can be either **behaviors or outcomes**. For example, developing relationships with peers can be an active behavior or an outcome of participant behavior. Developing relationships can also be an outcome because doing so may be a result of having expressed identities. Finally, the square (sense of belonging) is an **outcome**. As mentioned previously, there are two large boxes around the model that represent on- and off-campus environments.

The arrows between these shapes indicate the directions that at least some participants moved through in the model. Many times these arrows represent themes discussed in Chapter Four. For example, participation in student organizations often served as a way for students to learn more about their institution and develop friendships. Participants did not have to follow each arrow and some participants went back to previous parts of the model, while others continued to progress. Additionally, there were some individuals who went directly from environmental scan/perception of campus to expression of identities. The individuals who did not go through learning appropriate behavior/cognitive mapping made intentional decisions about the way they were going to express their identities, sometimes prior to arriving at their institution. For example, while JJ was not out to everyone in his life, especially outside of campus, and he had just started coming out in the months prior to being interviewed. He was working towards being “100% willing to let everyone know” about his sexuality because he thought that was important to be himself, to be able to express his identities intersectionally. JJ was mostly affected by the messages about sexuality he received prior to arriving at college, and

consistent with minority stress theory, was worried that people would reject him because he was gay; however, he did not feel the need to learn what he thought was appropriate behavior at GSU because the messages he received about being gay were received long before his arrival at GSU and he knew that he wanted to be out while he was in college. Jordan talked about being “unapologetically me” because he thought it was important to bring his identities together. While he was aware that there were times he needed to be aware of his personal safety, he made decisions about expressing his gay identity based on the setting he was in. Jordan learned that there were homophobic people who wanted to hurt gay people prior to arriving at MCSU. He took that message with him into each environment he entered and made decisions about expressing his identities based on whether he thought he was physically safe or not; however, Jordan expressed his identities intersectionally unless he was in a situation in which he feared for his safety.

There were participants who proceeded through the model from environmental scan and learning appropriate behavior/cognitive mapping before they made it to expression of identities. Some students followed both paths of the model. In other words, in some contexts or instances they went directly from environmental scan to expression of identities, while in other contexts or instances, they followed the process to learning appropriate behavior and cognitive mapping before expression of identities. For example, Corey talked about how he prioritized his identities based on what he thought was expected of him in each given setting, but he also talked about how he was “a little too comfortable” in some settings on campus. Jerome talked about how important it was to him that he was able to bring all of his identities into everything he did, but he also talked about feeling out his friends who were international students because he did not know how their cultural background might affect their feelings about gay people. Next, I

describe the steps of the sense of belonging model and how participants moved through the model.

The Steps of the Sense of Belonging Model

In this section, I describe each part of the model. I also provide examples of the ways that participants described their experiences as they relate to each step in the model. Participants varied in the ways they went through the model. Some participants, including Jo'El, went through the model to learning appropriate behavior and cognitive mapping before they went to expression of identities, while others like Matthew, went directly from environmental scan to expression of identities. Additionally, some participants, like Corey, followed both paths, through to learning appropriate behavior and cognitive mapping directly to expression of identities, though they did so in different scenarios. For example, Jieron was comfortable expressing his identities in his major classes (communication classes), but he was not comfortable doing so in classes outside of his major. The first step of the model is identities, which I discuss next.

Identities

As part of the interview protocol I used (Appendix A), I asked participants to tell me about the parts of their identity that were most important to them. Participant responses are recorded in Table 3.1 (on page 70). The words I used in the table are the exact words used by participants. For example, Greg said that he was a Black gay man from a middle class background. JJ identified as religious, Black, and gay. Jordan said his most important identities were that he was a Black gay male who was spiritual. Finally, Timothy said he was an African

American homosexual male who was spiritual and Christian, and able bodied. In the sense of belonging model (Figure 5.1, page 119), identities are indicated by the diamond shape.

Twelve participants included non-social identities as they talked about what pieces of their identities were important to them. For example, Jieron talked about being a performing arts lover, Kris talked about being fashionably savvy and an occasional marijuana user, and Raheem talked about being a leader and preppy. While John talked about being Black and a gay man, he also said that his smile was an important part of his identity. Similarly, Matthew said that his race was important, but his majors (Japanese Language and Culture, and Apparel, Texture, Merchandising) and the student organizations he belonged to were important because they affect “the classes you take and who you are involved with socially.” The two most common identities that participants identified as being salient were sexuality and race.

Sexuality. One especially salient identity for participants was their sexuality. It was interesting that the majority of participants (14) specifically listed their sexuality as an important identity, because they talked about their sexuality in different ways. For example, of Jo’El’s salient identities was his sexuality. While other participants used the terms gay and homosexual (except for Tyrell and Kris who did not consider their sexuality to be an important piece of their identity) to describe important parts of their identity, Jo’El used the term sexuality because he was not exactly sure what his sexuality was. Jo’El dated both men and women and had not found a term he was comfortable consistently using to express his sexual identity, though he was interested in participating in a study about Black gay men.

Kris clearly expressed why he did not consider sexuality to be an important identity. He said that everyone had a sexuality and that his mother taught him that he did not need to go around announcing his sexuality. Kris said that his mom used herself as an example for why

sexuality was not an important part of one's identity. His mom said, "straight people aren't going around like, straight women aren't like, 'I'm straight, I love dick! Like hey, like you know, I'm straight!'" As a result, Kris said, "I just felt like it's not something to like throw up in people's face." Kris said that if someone asked him about his sexuality he would tell them that he was gay but that he did not bring the topic up because he felt it was inappropriate. Because of the message that Kris received from his mom, he minimized or completely held back his sexuality unless he was directly asked. As a result, Kris did not express his identity in an intersectional way.

Race. Several participants talked at length about their Blackness in terms of their identities and how other people perceived their Black identity. Corey talked about his pride in being Black and having dark skin and stated that he felt like Black was beautiful. He felt he would not have gotten certain places in his life if there had not been times when people were looking for diversity he was able to bring. Corey experienced his Blackness in positive ways and perceived others also saw his Blackness as positive. Tyrell said he did not like to be put into boxes, meaning he did not like to use labels to describe him. With regard to his Blackness, Tyrell expected people to, at least initially, associate him with negative stereotypes of Black men, particularly a "loud, ghetto, like, gang member." It was very important to Tyrell that people got to know him for who he was as an individual. He said:

if you're gonna get to know me, I would like for you to like me. I would like for you to not like me for who I am than to like me for something I'm not and I would just like, I'm straightforward and I like to, give people like, what they probably don't expect and just show them that I'm not what you think I am.

To follow up on what Tyrell said about stereotypes, I asked him if it was important to him to be seen as his own Black person. Tyrell said, "Exactly. Yeah...don't put me in a group. Like if you're gonna categorize me, do it accurately; not just or what you think you see and what...looks

as if every other Black person does. It's... 'cause it's not true." Raheem also associated stereotypical Blackness with being "ghetto, ignorant, and outspoken" and said those things were not positive. He said it was "a shame" when Black people associated themselves with those qualities. He said he tried to be a "prime example of his culture" by not acting in those ways.

Participants like Tyrell and Raheem heard clear messages about what members of their racial group should be like and were clear they did not want to be associated with these negative stereotypes. As a result, participants were sure to listen and look for cues in their environment about how others perceived both their race and their sexuality and were determined to prove themselves to be different than the stereotypes they had heard about their identities. Participants took cues about what the environment they were in might be like from the messages they heard around them. After this step in the model, taking their identities into consideration, participants performed an environmental scan of their institution to get a sense of the campus climate. Based on minority stress theory and intersectionality, it makes sense that Black gay men would want to get an understanding of their environment and while this behavior is likely not unique to persons with minoritized identities, researchers claim that persons with minoritized identities are more likely to be vigilant about assessing their environments because they fear rejection and discrimination (e.g., Meyer, 1995). Several participants, like Kris, whose mother was very clear that she did not want him to act like "one of those fairies," learned long before arriving at their institutions that there was a time and place for them to express their identities and it seems logical that they would want to learn where and when they could express their identity(s). Many participants discussed sitting back and getting a feel for their campus and how their identities might be perceived on campus.

Environmental Scan and Perception of Campus

Participants gave a sense of how they perceived their campus climate at several points in their interviews, which helped in gaining a broad understanding of how they felt about the overall climate at their institution. Environmental scan and perception of campus are represented by an oval in the sense of belonging model (Figure 5.1, page 119). Participants were most likely to give clear descriptions of how they felt about their campus' climate when asked about their experience at new student orientation, their comfort level on campus, the ways they felt that their campus was or was not a good fit for them, whether they felt like they belonged at their institution, and what they thought their campus was like for diverse students. Participants described both their overall feelings about their campus and specific examples of what made them feel the way they did about their experiences. Perceptions of campus climate and individual experiences were both important to participant sense of belonging.

The specific examples that participants identified in relation to their perception of campus were sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Participants generally thought of their campuses as a positive place overall. For example, at MCSU Corey talked about having a positive experience at his new student orientation at MCSU "even though" he was open about being gay, and he later shared with me that he felt comfortable holding hands with his boyfriend on campus. Corey said, "I've never once felt like I was, I wasn't welcome or like people weren't nice to me or I felt like I was being judged for either my skin color or my, my sexuality. I never felt that here [at MCSU]." Jerome also stated that MCSU was very accepting and that he felt safe. He liked the environment at MCSU because he felt like a lot of people knew each other, did not judge each other, and were accommodating "for people of other cultures and different races."

Jerome also said the LGBTQ+ community at MCSU was “perfect” because everyone was so close. Echoing the sentiments of Corey and Jerome, Jieron said:

It’s [MCSU] very diverse. It’s past Black and White. Past Indian or American. Past gay or straight. Past um, you know having a disability or not having a disability...to me it’s just a diverse type of thing. Everyone comes, well not everyone, but we have a little bit of everybody. Like we have gothic people, we have not gothic people. We have the dancers, and then we have the painters, and then we have the teachers of course. It’s just so diverse beyond our majors because this one girl, she says she was from Washington State and I’m like ‘what the hell are you doing here?’

When specifically talking about his experience on campus in relation to his sexuality, Jieron said that he perceived the campus as an accepting environment. One factor in Jieron’s perception of campus was a faculty member who came out in one of his classes. He said it made him feel like he could relax in that class and did not have to worry about what his peers thought about him. He also said that he was told the former student government president was gay, which led him to believe the campus was accepting because a gay man could be elected into that position. As Jieron paid attention to the cues he saw and heard, specifically about lesbian and gay people on campus, he began to perceive his environment as positive for lesbian and gay people.

While Corey, Jerome, and Jieron felt the campus climate was very positive overall, Jo’El expressed some hesitation about the climate when it came to Black students at MCSU. Specifically Jo’El was not always clear whether his institution was a positive or negative environment for students of color. He said he questioned whether some of the things he and his Black peers experienced on campus were a result of their racial identity. For example, Jo’El said, “a lot of the times it feels like we’re [Black students] always being watched or we’re always gonna be assumed that something’s gonna happen.” Jo’El described how when Black student organizations, such as BSA, Black Greek letter organizations, or NAACP held large events on campus there were police present, even though the Black organizations had not requested their

presence. Because police were not present at predominantly White events, Jo'El and his peers perceived that the police presence at "Black events" was based solely on the race of those involved in these on campus events. Jo'El explained:

So it's a lot of events that they're there, and it makes us feel uncomfortable 'cause all of us already have...our culture has experience with police, and it's not pleasant. So for them to be at every event without us asking them to be there makes us feel, like, 'Are they afraid somethin's gonna happen?' It just, it starts a lot of drama.

Jo'El also explained that it was hard for the Black student organizations to get space on campus. He said Black organizations got placed on "the back burner" and were often bumped from spaces because another organization had paid for the space, whereas the student organization would have gotten the space for free. Jo'El had also seen instances of Black students being "written up" by RAs for incidents that he perceived would not have been documented had the incident involved White students. As a result of these examples Jo'El shared, he and many of his peers questioned the campus climate for Black students at MCSU. While Jo'El still felt mostly positive about MCSU, he had experienced enough things and heard about enough things from his peers that he questioned whether MCSU was a safe space for students of color.

Several students at both GSU and SPSU talked about street preachers on their respective campuses who would yell at students and tell them they were going to hell for various reasons. Students at both institutions had visceral reactions to these preachers and talked about how bad the preachers made them feel. Justin explained that the preacher at GSU often caused him to feel like he did not belong when he was near him. He talked about intentionally walking around where he knew the preacher would be on campus just so that he could avoid him. Justin felt that the message the preacher shared caused "internal harm for a lot of people on campus."

Vaughn talked about having recently seen the preacher at SPSU for the first time since he had come out. He said that seeing the preacher since he had been out actually made him feel

worse. Vaughn said, “I felt more so like it [the message of the preacher] was directed towards me at that point than I had actually felt, ever felt being closeted, which was, it was interesting. But usually when they come it’s not a fun experience.” Vaughn said he was able to “blow off” the preacher because he did not really have a religious identity, but the preacher’s message clearly still affected his experience on campus.

From this point in the model (environmental scan/perception of campus), some participants went on to learn appropriate behavior and map out their campus’ social, academic, and physical spaces, while others went on to expression of identities. As discussed previously, participants had different reasons for why they went in the direction they did within the model and their decisions were, at least in part, based on messages they received about their identities from off-campus environments prior to arriving at their institutions and how they decided to express their identities as a result of those messages. Participants also received cues that they were expected to behave in certain ways in certain spaces on campus. Participants then went on to make sense of spaces, groups, and individual people so that they understood what was expected of them in that setting.

Learning Appropriate Behavior and Cognitive Mapping

After participants got a feel for the campus climate, they began to make sense of their institution’s social, academic, and physical spaces (cognitively map their campus, see Attinasi, 1989; Hurtado & Carter, 1997), they made meaning of the campus and learned about what they perceived to be appropriate behavior. This step of the sense of belonging model is represented by an oval in Figure 5.1 (page 119). At this point in the model, participants were still figuring out the campus and developing relationships, other important factors in cognitive mapping. Gaining an understanding of campus environments gave students an idea of how they were expected to

behave in specific spaces on campus and how they were going to navigate campus. Additionally, it is important to note that as students began to develop relationships and identify where they fit in, some of them changed the cognitive maps they initially developed. In fact, cognitive mapping and learning appropriate behavior could both be continuous processes. For example, Justin talked about having several faculty members at GSU who were heterosexist. While Justin might have identified some classes as safe spaces, he may have changed his view of different spaces on campus and different university community members over time.

For many participants, their understanding of campus was, at least initially, informed by messages they had learned about their identity(s) prior to arriving at their institution. For example, participants may have learned how Black men are expected to behave and that being gay is looked at negatively, and how non-Black persons expect Black persons to behave, which likely affected how they viewed campus settings. Participants may have made assumptions about their institutions based on the messages they received in environments outside of their institution. Participants may have also, at least initially, navigated the campus and their interactions with others based on those messages. While some participants had experiences in classrooms and other settings that they read as indicators of how they should behave, it is inevitable that the way participants read their environments within their institutions was influenced by the ideas they had already developed prior to college. It may be that, at least in some cases, participants were in settings where they could have expressed their identity(s) safely, but they did not because they internalized racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas from larger society and prior experiences and assumed that others at their institution would have negative views of their identity(s).

Several participants talked about acting in ways they felt were appropriate based on the situation they were in. Tyrell (SPSU) said:

I act according to the situation. Like if I don't, I don't really know you I'm more like, I'll watch what I say and I won't be as loud and as outgoing, but if I know you and like we have good connection, good relationship, and it would just be, everything is just out the window. Like we can be loud and I say whatever comes to mind because I know that you know what I mean.

Corey echoed Tyrell's feelings when he said, "I feel like every situation has a priority, like you know, every situation has an identity that you need to figure out what needs to come first, you know...per that situation." I asked Corey how he figured out which identity was a priority in situations at MCSU, whether that understanding came from what he thought other people were expecting or of what he thought was important. He explained that he prioritized his identities based on what he thought others expected of him. In other words, as Corey mapped out his environment, he perceived that he was expected to act in specific ways in certain settings. He gave an example of MCSU's LGBTQ+ student organization. Corey said he perceived the group to be "very open about everything." As a result, he felt like that was the space on campus where he was least concerned about prioritizing himself.

Jieron said that he did not really know how diverse MCSU was or how many campus resources were available to him until he moved on campus. Through his jobs on campus and connecting with faculty, Jieron learned more about campus resources. For example, one of his faculty members told him about MCSU's counseling center, and staff members at the library told him about other things like student services. He also learned about different resources from spending more time in physical spaces on campus. Jieron's experience indicates that commuter students may have a different experience in terms of learning appropriate behavior and cognitive mapping compared to students who live on campus.

In juxtaposition to Jieron's experience as a commuter, Matthew had been attending Japanese classes at MCSU since he was in high school. He learned what was expected of him in

terms of college level classes and also how he was expected to behave in relation to his identities. Because of his presence on campus, he had already started to gain an understanding of what MCSU was like as a campus and had started to meet people. While Matthew continued to learn more about what he perceived to be appropriate behavior on campus and continued to refine his cognitive map of campus, he had already learned a great deal from attending classes and meeting people in those classes.

Greg had somewhat different experiences than many students in this study. Greg attended a summer bridge program at SPSU as part of the Shady Pine Leadership Institute (SPLI). He said that during the bridge program he took a course on diversity and leadership, which helped him understand how privilege and oppression affected how people go through society. Greg felt like he had an understanding of how privilege and oppression affected the way he interacted with others from the beginning of his college experience because he was more aware of how he “navigate[d] through society.” Greg felt his understanding created positive social interactions. He noted that his peers who were also students of color may not have had the same positive social interactions because they did not understand the ways privilege and oppression operate and thus were less sure of how to navigate interactions with others. Greg also gained an understanding that his race was more prominent because at SPSU that was what made him most different within the PWI environment, as opposed to his sexuality being more prominent at his high school, which was predominantly Black.

Timothy was part of a multicultural scholarship program at GSU. He said that through some of the educational components of his scholarship program he gained a greater understanding of different races and cultures on campus. Timothy learned that GSU was trying to be a safe space for multicultural students and that he was expected to be accepting of others.

He said that he was much more open minded as a result of attending educational workshops that were a part of his multicultural scholarship. Timothy was another student for whom developing relationships changed the way they viewed campus. He said that he had friends who showed him positive things about campus. Timothy specifically noted that GSU was known for being boring on the weekends, but his friends showed him that there were many things to do on campus, which changed how Timothy viewed campus social and physical spaces.

As participants spent more time on campus and paid attention to what they perceived to be appropriate behavior and cognitively mapped their campus, identifying places where they felt like they should act in specific ways, they began to understand their campus environment in relation to their identities. Participants then went on to express their identities. Depending on the messages they received, participants chose to express their identities in different ways, or, in some cases, they made the decision to cover and/or code switch their identities. Through the process of creating cognitive maps, some participants identified parts of campus where they felt like some of their identities were irrelevant, and therefore, did not think about those identities while they were in those settings. Several of the themes identified in Chapter Four were central to participants moving from learning appropriate behavior/cognitive mapping to expression of identities. As participants started developing initial relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, getting involved in student organizations, having positive experiences in their workplaces, and participating in large campus programs, they gained a clearer understanding of how they were expected to behave. As a result of their initial experiences and understanding expectations of them, they started making decisions about which identities they would express in which spaces because of the messages they received and the way they felt in specific spaces on campus. Participants had both positive and negative experiences based on their identities which affected

where and when they expressed those identities. For example, when one of Jieron's faculty members came out in class, it signaled to him that it would be safe for him to come out in that class. Experiences like Jieron's in this classroom often served as indicators of which identities it was safe to express when.

Expression of Identities

Participants decided how they were going to express their identities based on their perception of the campus climate and their specific setting they were in within their campus environment at any given time. As mentioned, experiences and messages participants received before college also affected the choices they made about expressing their identities. Their decisions were also based on other factors discussed in Chapter Four, including, for example, developing initial relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, having positive experiences in their workplaces, expectations of Black masculinity, and not wanting to make other uncomfortable. Their decision to express their identities was also likely, at least in part, based on their perceptions of how they thought others around them would react to their identity(s). In the sense of belonging model (Figure 5.1, page 119), expression of identities is represented in a rounded rectangle. As discussed above, some participants went through the process of learning appropriate behavior directly to expression of identities, while others went through the process of learning what they considered to be appropriate behavior at their institution generally and in specific settings within their institution before expression of identities. The majority of participants went through both paths of the model. In other words, after participants performed their initial environmental scan and developed a perception of the campus climate, they expressed their identities based on their perception in specific spaces. In other spaces,

participants took the time to cognitively map their campus and learn what they perceived to be appropriate behavior for specific places and around specific groups of people.

When participants chose to hide or minimize specific identities, it was because of their perception of their environment, what they thought was appropriate for the setting, or out of fear that others would have negative views about their identity(s), which is consistent with minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995). When participants were concerned about what others might think about their identities, they also thought about characteristics others might have assumed one should have as a member of their identity group. For example, Greg said that when he was a theater major his peers assumed that he would act in a specific way and like specific things because of the large, predominantly Black, metropolitan city he came from.

Some participants made conscious decisions to cover or code switch parts of their identities, while freely expressing other parts of their identities. Many participants were aware of when they were covering or code switching and were able to give examples of specific instances or types of settings where they chose to hide or downplay identities and also types of settings where they felt like they could openly express all of their identities. Tyrell said:

I honestly feel like I do it a lot where I, like, closet myself. I mean, the only time I really, like, feel open is when I go to, like [campus LGBTQ+ student organization], but that's pretty much the only time that I feel like I'm, like comfortable with being my complete self and not just, like, bits and pieces.

Tyrell said he was able to express pieces of his identities all the time, but he was aware that the only time he could express all of his identities was at SPSU's LGBTQ+ student group meetings. Tyrell felt like he was able to experience and express his identities intersectionally when he was in a setting where he felt like he could be open about his sexuality, but he kept that part of his identity hidden away in other settings.

Jieron talked about making the decision of whether to express his identities or not in the context of large class discussions when topics that were relevant to his identities came up. He said that he sometimes chose to respond considering only some parts of his identity, intentionally leaving parts of his identity out to protect himself. Jieron described what he thought about when his peers said something that was directly related to one of his identities. He said:

do I take this and react to this as just a guy? Or do I take this and react to this as just a gay person? Or do I take this as a Black person? It's, and you know sometimes I have to take it and just take it as a regular guy and not bring, you know, my other identities or like, the other parts of me into it. Because then I would take it a different way or if someone says something to me as you know, as a homophobic like, comment or something, then I have to say well, do I take this as just homophobic or take this just being rude as just a regular guy?... If I leave, if I just take oh, Jieron's a gay male and leave race out of it then it's kind of, well you know, it will come as, or the race of it won't be brought into it. Or if I just say I'm just a male under 21, then I won't have to worry about it being homophobic or racist. It's very hard to prioritize it because it's like, like in my outside life as much as I would like, like I do my work, I'm Jieron.

Jieron often went through these internal dialogues with himself when he was faced with class discussions that were related to parts of his identity. I asked Jieron what would happen if he responded as his whole self, as completely Jieron, who was being transparent about who he was and he said:

It gets so personal and then every part of me, if it's me trying to prove a point, then every part of me will be hurt. If I just, if I just respond to it as just a Black male then the other part of me, it won't take it that personal. You get what I mean?

Jieron indicated that by not always being open about his identities, he was able to feel like he was protecting himself because he was worried that people in his classes would have negative views about his identity(s). For him, deciding to respond to his peers as his whole self made him vulnerable because he knew he would internalize what his peers said that was related to his identities. In the classroom context Jieron made decisions about openly expressing his identities based on how vulnerable he wanted to make himself and if he was willing or able to handle

being hurt as a result of what others might say or think about him. Jieron thought that if his peers knew about all of his identities or if he spoke based on his identities they might think negatively of him. As a result, Jieron was very conscious of the identities he brought forward in classes and those that he did not bring forward and was not able to express himself intersectionally in many classroom settings.

Jordan said that he thought it was important to be able to bring all of one's identities together and that when one suppresses themselves, "it could be very detrimental to you emotionally." He then went on to articulate how for some time when he was growing up he was not able to completely be himself as a Black gay man and how hard that was for him. While Jordan thought it was important for people to be able to express themselves and their identities openly, he was also aware that society was not always accepting. He said:

Our society can be very hateful, so you just have to be aware. Like, not saying, "Don't be who you are;" it's just, "Be aware of your surroundings." You know? 'Cause sometimes you can be in danger and not even know you're in danger.

Jordan was very clear that it would be ideal for individuals to be able to openly express their identities. However, his reality was that he also had to be aware of his personal safety because some people are hateful and expressing his gay identity had the potential to put him in danger.

Some participants talked about consciously hiding or minimizing identities. Others talked about how important it was to bring all of their identities together, but gave examples of times they felt like they could not bring all of their identities together. Another group talked about how important it was to express all of their identities without giving examples of times that they hid or minimized identities. Jerome was very aware of the ways he expressed his identities and consciously tried to bring his identities together in different ways within his life. Jerome said:

I think it's really important for them [identities] all to like merge together. Like, I try really hard not to like separate myself and say well, when I'm dancing I just want to

focus on dance. I try to incorporate things from like my own life into the dance.

While Jerome said he was mindful of his interactions with international students he was meeting for the first time because he was not sure how their cultural background affected their views of sexuality, he was clearly very intentional in the ways that he intersectionally brought his identities together. Overall, participants were very clear about when they were deciding to openly express all of their identities and when they were not. Some participants talked unmistakably about instances when they chose to cover or code switch their identities based on the environment they were in at any given time and why they made the decision to express their identities in the way they did. Participants made intentional decisions about the expression of their identities. In other words, they decided which pieces of their identities they could express in which settings on campus.

After deciding how they would express their identities, participants went on to identify individuals with whom they wanted to develop relationships. Participants also identified spaces on campus where they felt like they had a place and fit in. These decisions were made based on how they felt about specific settings and how they felt about their interactions with others. Having positive interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, like those discussed in Chapter Four, often led to individual to go on to develop relationships with individuals with whom they had positive interactions. Many participants also went on to join groups and spend time with people and in places where they felt most comfortable based on their perceptions of the environment and where they felt most comfortable. For example, because Jieron had such a positive experience working in the library and the staff were very friendly with him and watched out for him, he began to feel safe in that space and develop relationships with staff members. Regardless of whether participants went directly from environmental scan to expression of identities or

learned appropriate behavior before expressing identities, participants all went on to developing relationships and finding a fit and place on campus.

Developing Relationships and Finding Fit/Place

Developing relationships and finding a fit/place was an important step in the process of participants feeling a sense of belonging, which is represented in a rounded rectangle in the sense of belonging model (Figure 5.1, page 119). As described in Chapter Four and earlier in this chapter, participants developed new relationships as they scanned their environment. However, those relationships typically became more solidified and additional relationships and spaces on campus were identified as positive as participants were on campus longer. Every participant in this study identified at least one place where they felt like they found a fit or place on campus.

This portion of the model can be applicable anywhere on campus; in social, academic, or work settings. Participants identified nine domains in which they developed relationships, found fit and place on campus, several of which were identified in Chapter Four. These domains included with faculty, staff, and specific departments on campus, at their jobs, as part of a university program, in student organizations, friend groups, communities on campus, specific physical spaces (e.g., residence hall), or as a whole at their institution. In this chapter I discuss faculty, staff, and departments, communities on campus, physical spaces, and participants who discussed having connections in more than one of these areas. Based on the experiences of participants, it did not matter with whom they developed relationships or where they found a place; rather, what mattered was the fact that they developed relationships, had individuals on campus to whom they felt like they were connected, and had safe places they could go. Participants felt like they could depend on these people, groups, and places, which were all essential pieces to their sense of belonging at their institutions.

Jordan was the one participant for whom developing relationships only tangentially affected his sense of belonging. Jordan did develop a friendship with his roommate during his freshman year, who also happened to be a gay man. He said, “although it was strange, I felt more comfortable with being on campus because it was just someone else who was like me. And we, like, became friends, and we actually hung out a lot.” When Jordan moved off campus and got a full time off campus job after his freshman year, he made the decision to keep his social life off campus. He did note that he has a strong friend group off campus but that not having friends at MCSU did not affect his sense of belonging at his institution.

Faculty, staff, and departments. Some participants claimed that their strongest relationships were with faculty, staff, and specific departments on campus. Thirteen participants said they had developed relationships with at least one faculty or staff member, which affected their experience on campus and sense of belonging. The primary way that this happened was through jobs that participants held on campus. Ten participants specifically cited their jobs as places where they developed relationships with other students, staff, and faculty. For example, Jieron said that his main relationships at MCSU were the full time staff who he worked with at the library. Jo’El said he learned early on that developing relationships with faculty and staff was important, particularly relationships with staff. As a result of developing relationships with staff Jo’El felt like they had his back and that he was supported. He said, “I can say I have like a family and a home here.”

Jieron talked about his experiences as a commuter student and the importance that faculty and staff played in his experience at MCSU. He said:

I didn’t know how much that the people who work on campus, like the professors and staff and faculty, how much they really pay attention and care. And if you just say something to them, or you know, confide something to them, they can lead you to the right direction and I never thought of that. I was just like, “oh professors, they just want

to teach and get the paycheck and just get on with it.” But you have those professors, like my professor from freshman year, Caroline, and my professor from last year, like they actually do care.

Jieron also noted the importance of the staff in his workplace in his overall campus experience.

Jieron said:

the staff, specifically here at the library, they’ve like always looked out for me ever since I started working here and um, they kind of, they, if I’m like having a bad day and I come to work, they pretty much know me. Because normally I’m like, “Jieron!,” but if I come in like “blah,” they kind of like know.

Jieron said that the staff in the library were an integral part of his support system. He said they were there when he needed them, and he always felt like he could talk to them about anything, including issues related to his sexuality.

Community. Some participants talked about specific campus communities as sites where they developed relationships and found a fit. The most common community that participants talked about were their residence halls. Nine participants specifically talked about their residence halls and several of these men talked about these communities as the first place they started to develop relationships when they started college. Some participants specifically talked about developing relationships with the other men in their suite, while Raheem talked about meeting people in his entire building. Jordan talked about his residence hall floor as a place where he developed strong relationships during his first year. He said:

It was like a really good experience. I had no problems, ‘cause I lived in [residence hall], and it was just...it was nice. It was somewhere where I felt comfortable calling it home. Like, I didn't feel uncomfortable at all. I liked it. Even the fact that I was gay didn't even matter. Like, they were all really cool.

Greg, Jerome, and John said that the LGBTQ+ community was also a place where they found a place and developed relationships. None of these men were consistently engaged with LGBTQ+ student organizations but indicated that they found both the presence of these

organizations and their connection with the larger LGBTQ+ community at their institutions to be strong connections for them. Jerome talked about how individuals in the LGBTQ+ community at MCSU would reach out to others to go have dinner together. Jerome said:

Like everyone knows everyone and like even if we don't know someone is within the community as either an ally or a member, everyone like, no one judges anyone here. That's what I've noticed. And we're all so close, like we'll go out and we'll say "I'm going to dinner with such and such" and then eventually seven other people join in and it's just from like one person saying, "oh do you guys just want to go?" and they're like, "sure why not?" So you get random invites to do different things, so it's really cool.

Jerome loved that he could count on his friends when he needed them, but also that he was a member of the larger LGBTQ+ community at MCSU. Feeling a connection with a community on campus played a large role in the sense of belonging of participants.

Physical spaces. Four participants mentioned specific physical spaces where they felt like they fit and found a place on their campus. Corey felt especially comfortable in the student union because that is where he and his friends would gather and hang out. He also felt comfortable there because he could safely be affectionate with his boyfriend. Corey said:

so usually my friends hang out in the student center, we'll go and like hang out over by Starbucks and so I'll go over by Starbucks and I'll just be like (high pitch), "look everyone! This is my boyfriend!" You know and then everyone will be like, "we know, Corey. It's your boyfriend." (both laugh) And like, I mean...I don't feel uncomfortable at all. I feel actually a little bit too comfortable, you know. I, I've become one of those couples where it's just like, "ok. We understand you're a couple." You know?

Having the student center as a place where he could feel comfortable was very important for Corey's experience at MCSU.

For Jieron, the library was a comfortable place because he worked there and had relationships with many staff members. Kris and Tyrell both said they felt a connection within their residential communities. Greg said that Black spaces were very important to him. When I asked Greg where he felt most accepted at SPSU he said, "in Blacks-, in Black Student Union

meetings or just in Black spaces in general is when I feel the most accepted on campus.” Though Greg did not indicate that gatherings with his Black friends had to take place in a specific location, the relationships he formed with Black friends served as a place where he felt like he fit. In other words, when Greg was with his Black friends, he felt like that was a space he fit in and the geographic location of that space was irrelevant.

Institution. There were several specific things participants talked about when they talked about why they felt like they felt a sense of fit and place within their institution. I will discuss the two most common themes here: major and size of institution. Jerome and Kris indicated that MCSU and GSU had very strong psychology programs, which was the major they had both selected. Because of the strength of the program, Jerome was disappointed when he found out he might not be able to attend MCSU for graduate school in psychology. He had heard that the American Psychological Association does not allow students to do their undergraduate and graduate work at the same institution. Kenny also commented on the strength of his academic program and said, “I am in one of the best public relation programs in America and you know, because of things like that, I mean, I don’t regret coming here. I love being here.” John, Kenny, Kris, and Matthew also said that their major was a place where they fit on campus and developed relationships. John said:

Um, it’s [MCSU] also a good fit because my major is on point. Um, like I love studying management here. Like the college of business is one of the best colleges on campus and I will go to bat for it and probably punch somebody in the face if they say otherwise and they don’t want to agree with me. (laughs) But um, the education you receive here is just amazing and a lot of people they don’t, like, they overlook it or they don’t think that it is, you know, Ivy League degree. And it’s not, you know, you’ll never get that. But you’ll, you’ll get an education that is amazing.

John continued and talked about how he really liked his management courses and professors who he had developed relationships with. Additionally, Corey, Jerome, Jieron, JJ, Timothy, Vaughn,

and John said they fit in their classes. John joked that he did not fit in statistics classes because he was bad at the subject, but other than that, he loved his courses. Jieron specifically indicated that he liked the classes within his major, communications and his specialization, human resources management. He noted that he was most likely to open up and be himself in his major classes because he felt comfortable with his professors and peers.

JJ, Tyrell, Corey, Jo'El, Kris, and John noted that their universities were a good fit for them and they felt like they belonged because of the size of their institution. Corey (MCSU) said:

there's a lot of ways in which I feel like this is my school, like I belong here. Um, mostly because um, I love the size of it. It's not too big, it's not too small. Um, I kinda get overwhelmed with [large land grant institution in the Midwest] campus because it's so big and everything and because it's, this is a smaller school, smaller population and I like that, too. Um, and I feel like with a smaller population comes a smaller group of friends, a smaller closer group of friends that I have and so...I just, I really don't feel like if I, if I had gone into like any other um, university I would not, I wouldn't be where I am today and I wouldn't be as happy as I am today.

Since all of the institutions in this study had student bodies between 17,000 and 28,000, it was interesting to hear participants make the claim that their institutions were small. However, most of the students who said their campus was small went on to juxtapose the size of their institutions with flagship state institutions with over 40,000 students. Participants noted the differences in class sizes, amount of physical space, and potentially more partying taking place at larger institutions, which would distract students from coursework.

Multiple connections. Many participants found multiple places on campus where they fit in, found place, and developed relationships. For example, Kris identified his residential living community on campus and his major, psychology, as places where he belonged. Vaughn said he fit in many places on campus including on his RA staff, with his residents, in SPSU's LGBT+ student organization, BSU, classes, and SPLI. He noted that his closest relationships were among a few close friends on campus, his residents, his peers in SPLI, and friends from high school.

Greg was another participant for whom having multiple connections on campus was beneficial.

He said:

I feel valued by um, members of different organizations that I'm a part of. I feel valued by members of the Black Student Union. I feel valued by members of my scholarship program that I talked about the last time. I feel valued as a student, um, I feel like those three, those three areas of the university that I mentioned, I feel like they wouldn't be the same if I, if I weren't there. Because they make me, they make me feel that way so it's a good, it's a nice feeling. So I do feel like I belong.

Jerome felt a sense of belonging in his major, psychology, within MCSU's LGBTQ+ student organization, within residence life, with faculty whom he had developed relationships with, and with his friend group. All of these men said that they had developed relationships and felt like they fit at their institution and had a place there. Participants also said that their multiple connections on campus helped them feel like they had a sense of belonging.

Participants discussed faculty, staff, and university departments, their jobs, university programs, student organizations, friend groups, specific communities, physical spaces, and their institution as places where they developed relationships, felt fit, and place at their institutions. Additionally, many participants sited several of these sites as places where they fit, found place, and developed relationships. Participants all cited the relationships they developed, feeling like they had a place at their institution, and places where they fit in that led them to feel like they had a sense of belonging at their institution. In the next section I discuss participants' sense of belonging at MCSU, GSU, and SPSU.

Sense of Belonging

Participants consistently described feeling a sense of belonging in ways that are consistent with extant literature (e.g., Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Haussman, et al., 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013b). For example, John said:

I think I belong here because I provide something that's unlike anybody else who goes to school here. I, I like to bring sunshine on rainy days and gumballs when people are serving like, liver, and I like to be that person that people want to be around and so yeah.

John was confident that he brought something to MCSU that no one else could bring. All of the participants in this study felt a sense of belonging at their institution. However, two participants doubted their sense of belonging at the time of their interviews and had moved back to an earlier part of the model. I will discuss these participants, JJ and Raheem, later in this section. Sense of belonging is depicted in a square in the sense of belonging model in Figure 5.1 (page 119).

Participants clearly described both the things that made them feel like they belonged at their institution and how it felt to them to belong. For example, when I asked Matthew if he felt like he belonged at MCSU he said, "Um, definitely. I would say that just because, like, I found my group that I feel really comfortable in and so because of that I think that, yeah that's kind of all I need to feel." For Matthew, finding his group was one of the biggest things that made him feel like he belonged at MCSU. Jo'El felt similarly. He described his group at MCSU as being like family to him. He said:

I guess that's where that feeling of I belong here, that I can just, you know, like family. You turn around to your family at any random time in life, you're just like, "Mom, Dad." They're just like, "What do you want now?" But they'll, you know, they'll have something for you or some advice or something. So that's what I feel here [at MCSU].

Jo'El and Matthew were not the only participants for whom finding a group made them feel a sense of belonging.

For John, part of what made him feel like he belonged in a group was when group members took their academics seriously and were friendly. In this case, John referred to his fraternity. He said:

We [fraternity] take our education very seriously and that's important to me with an organization that I join. Um, but the guys are also, like they're friendly, they're easy to get along with, and they're not pretentious bastards, which, I really appreciate, because

you always have those chapters where they seem very pretensions...but if we produce fraternity men um, that have so many different personalities and one of them isn't that they're jerks or that they aren't tool bags, douche bags, or assholes (laugh), if, if those aren't the characteristics then I belong there. That is where I need to be and I think that's when it came full circle for me.

For John, it was clear that the personalities and values of individuals within a group were important to him. He had to feel like people were friendly and shared values with him in order to feel a sense of belonging. John described the environment of residence life to be similar to that of his fraternity, which was another place where he felt like he belonged at MCSU. The connections that John made also made him feel like he belonged at MCSU as an institution.

Jordan, the participant who decided he wanted to keep his personal life off campus, also expressed a sense of belonging at MCSU. When I asked him if he felt like he belonged at MCSU he initially struggled to answer, he said:

The only reason why it's difficult to answer these questions is 'cause I keep my life very separate from campus. ... The times I feel belonged—or I feel like I belong is, like, just when I'm in class, participating with other students and professors and getting feedback from professors. ... Like, I just feel like it's [MCSU] a very open environment. Like, all the resources that I have access to and different people I have access to. Like, I'm just—I'm able to do anything that the next person is able to do. Like, it's not—you know, luckily, we're past the days of, like, segregation 'cause it's not—I don't feel separated from anybody else. Like, if I wanna go take a certain class with so-and-so, I can. Nobody can tell me, like, "No, you can't take that class because you're Black" or "you're gay" or whatever.

Jordan's response was interesting in that he answered the question by acknowledging that he did not take advantage of campus resources but that he knew he could if he wanted to because he felt confident that he would not be discriminated against because of his identities. He continued on and said that even though he was not a member of student organizations, he did not feel like he would be kept from participating in student organizations if he wanted to. For Jordan, having the ability to take advantage of campus resources and be an active participant in organizations if he wanted to made him feel like he belonged at MCSU.

When I asked Vaughn what made him feel like he belonged at SPSU he said it was being an RA. Upon asking him what about being an RA made him feel like he belonged, he shared an experience he had with his residents after he had been turned away from donating blood because he was a man who had sexual contact with another man. Vaughn posted his deferral letter on his door for others to see. The response from his residents was what made him feel like he belonged.

A lot of residents, my residents, you know, told me that that was terrible. That you know, I couldn't, the fact that there, 'cause they were not aware that you know...the FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration]...doesn't allow men who have sex with men to donate blood. And they're like, "well that doesn't make sense. It's not um, it's not fair!" And I, I never got the, I've never been in a situation where I got the affirmation for or...you know, what I was thinking about ideologies like that. So it was interesting to have other people who I, I don't want to call them my mentor, my mentees, but who I uh, help, you know to kinda help me as well. So you know, I think the partnership that my residents and I shared was uh, pretty beneficial.

In this instance the people whom Vaughn mentored helped him, and he realized that he was in a partnership with them. Vaughn realized he felt a sense of belonging with his residents within the community he played a primary role in creating.

Participants moving from sense of belonging to an earlier sequential step

As mentioned previously, two participants, JJ and Raheem, said they felt like they had a sense of belonging at their institution at one point in time, but at the time of their interviews, they were both doubting their belonging. Both men were students at GSU, though their reasons for doubting their sense of belonging did not necessarily have anything to do with their specific institution. Their circumstances could have been relevant to students at any institution.

When I asked Raheem if he felt like he belonged at GSU he said:

Mm...yes and no. And I say that because, um, the majority of times I do, I feel like everything is good, I feel like I'm ok, I feel like, you know, life's great. But, sometimes, I feel like I'm beyond [GSU]. I feel like my mindset and the things that I wanna achieve and, you know, my goals, I feel like are way beyond [GSU]. I feel like [GSU] is a good starting point, but I don't feel like, I at all don't feel like [sic] this is where I'm gonna end

up.

Raheem seemed to think that he would finish his undergraduate degree at GSU, but he was not sure. His feelings about his institution were further complicated because he had once felt like he belonged in his fraternity, but he had started doubting that belonging, too. Raheem had felt like he was supported for who he was within the group, including his ambitions and his identities. He indicated that as time had gone on, he felt less and less supported because of his ambitions and his identities. Raheem said:

I feel like I don't fit in because, you know...like my mind, my mind is, is just kinda different than theirs. And you know, the things that I want and, you know, the ways that I speak, or because of my ambition. Or, you know... I feel like I'm really gonna be somebody and, you know, and sometimes, from what I've been told, like, sometimes...that scares certain people or, you know, they, they're just like, "Well who do you think you are?" And...I get that a lot sometimes in my fraternity. And you know, it didn't used to be like that but I just started getting this, like the more that I'm starting to really achieve my highest point, I'm just starting to get less and less support. ...Um, some of the guys...they're just making me feel like, they'll make me feel like I'm different or make, reassure me and let me know like, "you're black, you need to know that" or whatever. And, you know, like I've heard things like, "Oh, yea Raheem, like you stick out like a sore thumb," or "Oh, Raheem, yea, we took a picture of you, we can't see you," you know, things like that. And you know, things like that really bother me 'cause that's something I kinda...I wasn't sure if that's something that would be a problem, like, you know, oh I'm Black. Most of them are White, you know, I didn't care, you know, but I didn't think that they would either.

Raheem felt like his fraternity brothers were consistently devaluing him because of his ambitions and because of his Black identity. As a result of the microaggressions he experienced, Raheem no longer felt like he belonged and was considering going to alumni status within the fraternity because he did not want to associate with these men any longer, and he did not want to pay dues to belong to an organization where he did not feel comfortable. However, Raheem said that he was going to wait another year to make his final decision because he had committed to living in the fraternity's house for the following academic year. In Chapter Six I will describe JJ's process of moving back to a previous step in the model.

Differences in Going Through Sense of Belonging Model

Figure 3.2 (page 91) portrays the ways in which participants took different paths through the sense of belonging model. As discussed earlier in this chapter, some participants went right to expressing identities after they completed their environmental scan. Other participants went from environmental scan, to learning appropriate behavior, and then to expression of identities. Some participants went down both of these paths depending on their context. Ultimately, all 16 participants felt a sense of belonging at some point during their time at their institution. In the following chapter, I show three specific examples of three participants, Timothy, Greg, and JJ, going through the sense of belonging model to illustrate the differences in participant experiences.

CHAPTER SIX: TIMOTHY, GREG, AND JJ'S PATHS

In an effort to further illustrate the sense of belonging model and the different ways that participants can move through the model, in this chapter I describe the paths that three participants, Timothy, Greg, and JJ, took in the sense of belonging model. While all three men felt a sense of belonging at their institution, they had different factors that affected the way they felt about experiences. To learn more about Timothy, Greg, and JJ, see Table 3.3 in Chapter Three (on page 84).

Timothy's Sense of Belonging Path

Timothy was a 21-year-old student at GSU majoring in recreation and event management with a minor in communications. He recently finished his third year at the time of his interviews. He identified as an African American, homosexual male who was spiritual (from a Christian background) and able bodied. Figure 6.1 illustrates Timothy's path in the sense of belonging model (on page 161).

Environmental Scan

Timothy was shy when he first arrived at GSU. He did not know how to go about meeting people and he took some time to get a feel for his environment. During Timothy's first year, he lived on a floor where people would stop by, say "hello," and ask him to hang out. He was surprised that people were so friendly. Timothy said:

I didn't feel like no one wanted to talk to me so I just kinda like, I left my door open but I just kind of sat in my room and um, I'd sit in my room a lot of the time and then I realized that people like, stopped by, I'm like "hey." They'd stick their head in the door and like, "oh hey, I'm so and so" and, you know, people were just, one of the girls just came in and was like, "oh so what are you doing" and I was like, "nothing, just like getting my Wi-Fi set up." And she was like, "oh, come sit in the hallway with us." I'm, you know, she just kind of helped me build that bridge to make friends on the floor. It was pretty, I mean it was hard at first, but it was easier once someone else was there to go with me.

Timothy began to come out of his shell over time and then found himself hanging out in the common areas of residence halls to meet new people. He said, “the easiest way I made friends was just in the lobby, like at the main lobby and just watch people walk through and, like, talk to them or whatnot. Um...I just kind of had friends all over the place.” His environmental scan of GSU helped him to learn that just hanging out and being willing to say hello enabled him to meet people all over campus and to develop friendships. As a result, he learned that GSU was a friendly place where it was easy to meet people.

While Timothy’s experiences in his residence hall were positive, his experiences in classroom environments and on campus were mixed. Timothy said that GSU claimed to be diverse, but he felt like it was not diverse. He learned that all honors students were White and they lived in one part of campus, “multicultural students” lived in another area of campus, international students lived in another, and “Black ghetto students” lived in the apartment building. Timothy noticed he was often the only racially minoritized student in his classes, and he felt like no one wanted to sit next to him. In some cases, he was the only male, which also made him feel uncomfortable. As a result of his environmental scan, which consisted both positive and negative experiences and perceptions of campus, particularly within classroom environments, which I discuss at greater length below, Timothy went on to learning appropriate behavior at GSU.

Learning Appropriate Behavior

Timothy talked about having to get used to the way others around him talked, especially professors, because he was used to people using a lot of slang words. He said there were times that he did not understand the words professors were using, and he was afraid to ask questions in classes because he thought his questions were “dumb.” He did not want to fit into negative

stereotypes about Black men, particularly the stereotype that he could not be smart because of his Black identity. Timothy took a fashion class, and he noticed when the professor asked for examples of celebrities to do group activities, the class only used examples of White celebrities. He recalled a time when he wanted to use Beyoncé as an example and he was shut down by both his peers and the professor, who selected a White celebrity instead. In classroom environments like these, Timothy learned that his Black identity was not valued or respected because he did not always understand the language that others were using, was used to speaking in slang (which others did not do), the things he was interested in learning about were not always respected, and he was afraid of fitting into negative stereotypes that others had about Blacks. Timothy determined that the appropriate behavior in these settings was for him to keep to himself because there were times he felt like he was clearly not welcome in some classroom spaces.

Despite having negative experiences in some of his classes, Timothy learned that the majority of faculty members at GSU were very helpful and that it was important to communicate with faculty members to make his experience more positive. As discussed in Chapter Four, this is consistent with the experiences of several participants. He felt like most faculty members were willing to help students who reached out for assistance. Learning that most faculty members wanted to help students made Timothy feel more positive about his experience at GSU and enabled him to develop relationships with some of his professors. Timothy learned that while there were some classes that he was not comfortable in, there were more classes in which he felt supported and valued by the faculty than classes where he felt like faculty were not supportive. Timothy acted in whatever way he thought he was expected to in classroom spaces. In classrooms where he felt like his professors supported him, he would participate; however, in classrooms where he felt like he was not supported or welcome, he would keep to himself.

At the time of his interview, Timothy was working as a summer employee at GSU in a job that required him to do manual labor like moving things from building to building. He said that he worked with other men who were all physically stronger than he was, and he either knew they were or perceived them all to be straight. Timothy felt uncomfortable at his job and said, “And I mean, too, I’m gay so they just like, they don’t want to have nothing to do with me. And then we just don’t like the same things.” Because of the way Timothy perceived his coworkers and his environmental scan, he thought that being out at work would be unwelcome, he decided that he should closet himself in the workplace, and he talked a lot about covering his gay identity. These two parts of the model, learning appropriate behavior and expression of identities, were especially salient for Timothy. Timothy paid close attention to his environment in order to figure out how he was supposed to act in a given space, in this case, his workplace. He said he was uncomfortable almost all of the time in his summer job and that he was just doing the job to get a paycheck. He said that continuing to hold the job was manageable for him because he only worked eight hours a day, and he also had weekends off. For Timothy, managing his discomfort was possible because he knew his time in the job was limited, he was able to mostly keep to himself, and because he needed the paycheck that he was earning.

Timothy also felt nervous about expressing his sexuality in his RA position, though he did not indicate that he knew being out would not be accepted in that space, he was worried that his residents would not accept his sexuality. He talked about how he and the other RAs on his staff sent postcards to their residents prior to move in so that residents would know who their RA was when they arrived and about closeting himself within his RA role. Timothy said:

Like, on the postcard I, I pose and act in a more masculine, like, straight way. I mean, it’s how some people act more straight acting, what I consider masculine. Like I, that’s a moment where I closet myself and...whoever gets this postcard can’t, like, automatically assume that I am [gay] before they meet me. Or like, opening day where I’m meeting

parents...I try to be more masculine where it's just like, "Oh, do you need help, like, heavy lifting? Like, do you need to, like, take these up the stairs?" I don't know, just say like if a female is having a breakdown and she's crying, I never will sit there and cry with her, but I'm like, "oh, I can go get you someone else on staff?," and I will go get a female that can relate to her. Or like, when we were opening the front desk and I'm...we were welcoming families to come in I'm just...like I will try to refrain from...I guess more...like, feminine gestures that I do that I don't really notice that I do. So I guess that's a time where I...learn how to...like, one of the cases where I closet myself.

Timothy decided to come out to some of his residents later in the year, and they were surprised because he had "come across as a straight man." He also said that some students figured out his sexuality because as the year went on he slowly let his guard down or sometimes just let himself be himself. To Timothy that meant he stopped covering and put less effort into hiding the things he did that might cause someone to think he was gay, and he was not always conscious of making sure he was acting in a masculine way.

After talking about closeting himself or covering his sexuality, I asked Timothy how he decided when he was going to closet himself. He said:

I pretty much just like observe my, like, surroundings first and just kind of see or listen. Um, I just kind of pretty much figure out, like if it's work I'll try to figure out what is expected of us, and then that's pretty much how I'll figure out. This is appropriate. This is not.

Consistent with minority stress theory, (e.g., Meyer, 1995), Timothy typically assumed that people would not be accepting of his sexuality, so he would try to get a feel for how those around him might perceive his sexuality. In some cases, like classroom environments, he made similar assumptions about how others felt about his Black identity.

Timothy also talked about minimizing his sexuality when he was around his fraternity (Interfraternity Council, not Black Greek letter organization) brothers. Sometimes Timothy's fraternity would have social events with sororities. He said those events were uncomfortable for him because his brothers would talk about women being attractive or wanting to date women, but

he had no interest in dating them. He said sometimes he would see guys from other fraternities that he thought were cute, but he did not say anything because he thought it would have made his brothers feel uncomfortable. As Timothy thought about telling his brothers that he found a guy attractive he said, “I can’t say that out loud. So it kind of made me feel as though, like, I...they never said I couldn’t, but, to me, in my head, I felt as though it would have been awkward.” As discussed in Chapter Four, Timothy was afraid his brothers would feel uncomfortable if he were to be vocal about his sexuality. While his brothers knew he was gay and seemed to be fine with his sexuality, he did not want to say anything that might have made for an uncomfortable situation with his brothers. As a result, Timothy covered his sexuality in that he did not express his attraction to specific men.

Though Timothy’s fraternity brothers never directly said anything to indicate they would have felt uncomfortable or awkward if he made a comment about finding a man attractive, they consistently had events with sororities and talked about their desires for women. The heterosexual message Timothy got from the way that his brothers talked about women led him to think that they would have felt uncomfortable if he talked about men the way they talked about women. After spending some time in the fraternity and having his closest friend in the fraternity graduate, Timothy started to feel lonely, and he realized that he did not really feel like he fit with the fraternity. As a result, he switched his status to alumni, which meant that he was still a member of the fraternity, but he was not an active dues paying member. Because he did not want others to judge him because of his Blackness or his sexuality, he often covered those identities in an effort to minimize any discomfort others might experience because of his identities, so that others did not perceive him as “dumb,” and so that he did not get himself into any situations that might be uncomfortable for him. As Timothy navigated various environments on campus, he learned what

he perceived to be appropriate behavior in each setting based on what others expected of him and moved on to the next part of the model, expression of identities.

Expression of Identities

While Timothy closeted himself most of the time, he came out to people over time as he got to know them. He had a really hard time with the decision to cover his identity as a gay man at GSU. While he felt it was necessary to cover his sexuality in order to protect himself and be accepted, it clearly hurt him to act in a way that was not consistent with who he truly saw himself to be. Timothy said:

It's a bit hard to do at first, um, 'cause I know in my heart that I'm, like, putting on a face that's not really me. And um, it kind of makes me feel as though...I'm hiding who I really am. Like, when people first walk in, their first impression of me is what I want them to know about me. It's not something that I just want you to...like, you think this is me and it's really not. You know? So I feel like I'm just kind of putting on, like, a fake show of who I really am. Like...posing...more as a straight man than on me being gay. Like...if someone comes to me and explains oh, how someone's cute [a woman] and I'll be like, "oh." Like I won't say anything or, like, in my head I'm just like, "yeah." Maybe like Channing Tatum's fine in my head and I'm just like, "don't say anything." I'll just come and giggle. Or, I feel like for me...a giggle is the way I will cover it up. It's just like, "haha, that's funny," or I will walk away...It just makes me feel...I don't know. I mean, it's...it's not a good feeling that I get. It's just...I feel like I'm just acting and I'm putting on a show. Like that's...literally what it feels like is that I'm being scripted to do something and this is what I'm doing and then when I go to my room it's where I take off...I take off my, like, character...to uncover who I really am, which is different.

Timothy struggled with the decision of whether to cover or hide his sexuality on a consistent basis. While he did not want to hide his sexuality, he wanted people to like him, and he was concerned that being open about his sexuality would cause people not to like him. Though Timothy typically chose to be open about his sexuality after getting to know people, he wanted people to get to know him without knowing about his gay identity before he risked being open about that piece of himself. Timothy feared that his peers might reject him if they learned about his sexuality before getting to know him. As Timothy chose the times and places he expressed

his sexuality and his Blackness, he moved on to the next step of the model, developing relationships and finding places where he felt like he fit. In many cases, his ability to be open and express his identities was directly related to factors discussed in Chapter Four including having positive experiences in his workplace and with some of his faculty members, which led him to want to develop relationships with peers, faculty, and staff.

Developing Relationships and Fitting In/Finding Place

Timothy talked about his experience applying to be a resident assistant (RA) and getting that position as major events that helped him feel like he had a place where he fit and made him feel like he belonged at GSU. Timothy said he felt like his identities of being Black and gay were both respected throughout the application process and specifically by the woman who ended up hiring him; he felt like he fit in and had a place on his staff. It was important to Timothy that he was accepted and had a supervisor that he felt he could count on. Timothy talked about how he perceived his supervisor's decision to hire him. He said:

Like I, I felt like it wasn't just, "ok, I need to fill this spot." It was, "ok, this is what you bring to the table and this is how I plan to like bring it out" or like, "I think you would be a great asset to this team and this is how you can help them," you know, instead of just being like, "ok well you know, you just fill in this spot. I just needed someone to like take the spot and I really didn't care who it was." I don't like something like that.

Timothy felt like he was hired for his identities, his personality, and how he fit into his staff. As a result of feeling like he was hired for who he was, as opposed to just picking a warm body to fill a spot on a staff, he felt a sense of belonging on his staff.

Timothy also shared an example of a time he was walking on campus and someone screamed "the N word" out of their car while driving by. Timothy said that he ignored all of these negative incidents because they are "not a battle [he] can win," and he felt like he was not ready to handle issues of racism without support. Despite these negative experiences, Timothy

developed relationships with many people who he felt like he could count on including his friends, hall director, resident assistant (prior to him becoming a resident assistant), and multicultural advisor. Timothy also depended on his family as a support system, even though they had not gone to college and did not always know how to help him. These people served as buffers against negative messages he received about his presence as a Black gay man at GSU and allowed him to continue to develop positive relationships and cognitively map the campus to continue to identify people that he wanted to develop relationships with and to identify places where he felt like he found a fit. Timothy also joined several student organizations where he felt comfortable. He felt most comfortable in GSU's LGBTQ+ student organization, which he identified to be the only place on campus where he was able to be completely himself all the time. Timothy was able to express himself intersectionally when he was at the LGBTQ+ student group meetings.

Another major factor in Timothy's ability to develop relationships, find a place where he fit at GSU, and ultimately feel a sense of belonging, was his multicultural scholarship program. The scholarship program utilized a cohort model and students were required to maintain a certain grade point average, complete a specific amount of community service hours, and attend various multicultural events on campus. He was able to develop relationships through his scholarship program and also said that he became more open minded as a result of attending programs about various types of diversity. Timothy's scholarship was also a major factor in his decision to stay at GSU. He had originally wanted to be a nurse, but GSU did not have a nursing major. He struggled to find a major that he was interested in and almost left the institution, but he stayed because most of his education was being paid for by his scholarship. Because Timothy was able to develop relationships and identify places he felt like he fit, he felt a sense of belonging at GSU. As discussed in Chapter Four, having positive experiences in his

workplace, experiences with faculty, scholarship program, student organization, and developing a close friend group were central factors that led to Timothy feeling a sense of belonging at GSU.

Sense of Belonging

Timothy talked about a time he knew he felt like he fit and had a place at GSU. He explained that there was a drag queen who came to campus to do programming, like drag bingo and the annual campus drag show, who would always ask how many straight men, straight women, gay men, and lesbians were in the audience. As the drag queen announced each group, people who identified in that group would raise their hands and cheer. At the show one year a crowd member had a negative response when the gay men were called upon and cheered. The drag queen then confronted the crowd member and talked about how the LGBTQ+ community and allies needed to support each other. The audience had a positive reaction to the drag queen's retort to the negative crowd member. In response to this Timothy said:

I felt like everyone in the room kind of like clapped. Even the straight people in the room were just like a sense of support, like helped me feel like I belonged there. And I just, ever since then, whenever the show comes, I just feel like I have to go, like I have to take my friends to go because even if you're not gay or a lesbian there are parts of the message that can like, you know, extend to everyone in the room.

For Timothy, hearing other GSU students in the room who cheered when the drag queen talked about how important it was to support LGBTQ+ people made him feel like he belonged in that space and at GSU. Timothy's involvement with his multicultural scholarship program and his relationships with faculty, peers, and his residence hall staff helped him to find places where he felt like he belonged at GSU, and ultimately, develop a sense of belonging. Next, I describe Greg's progression through the sense of belonging model.

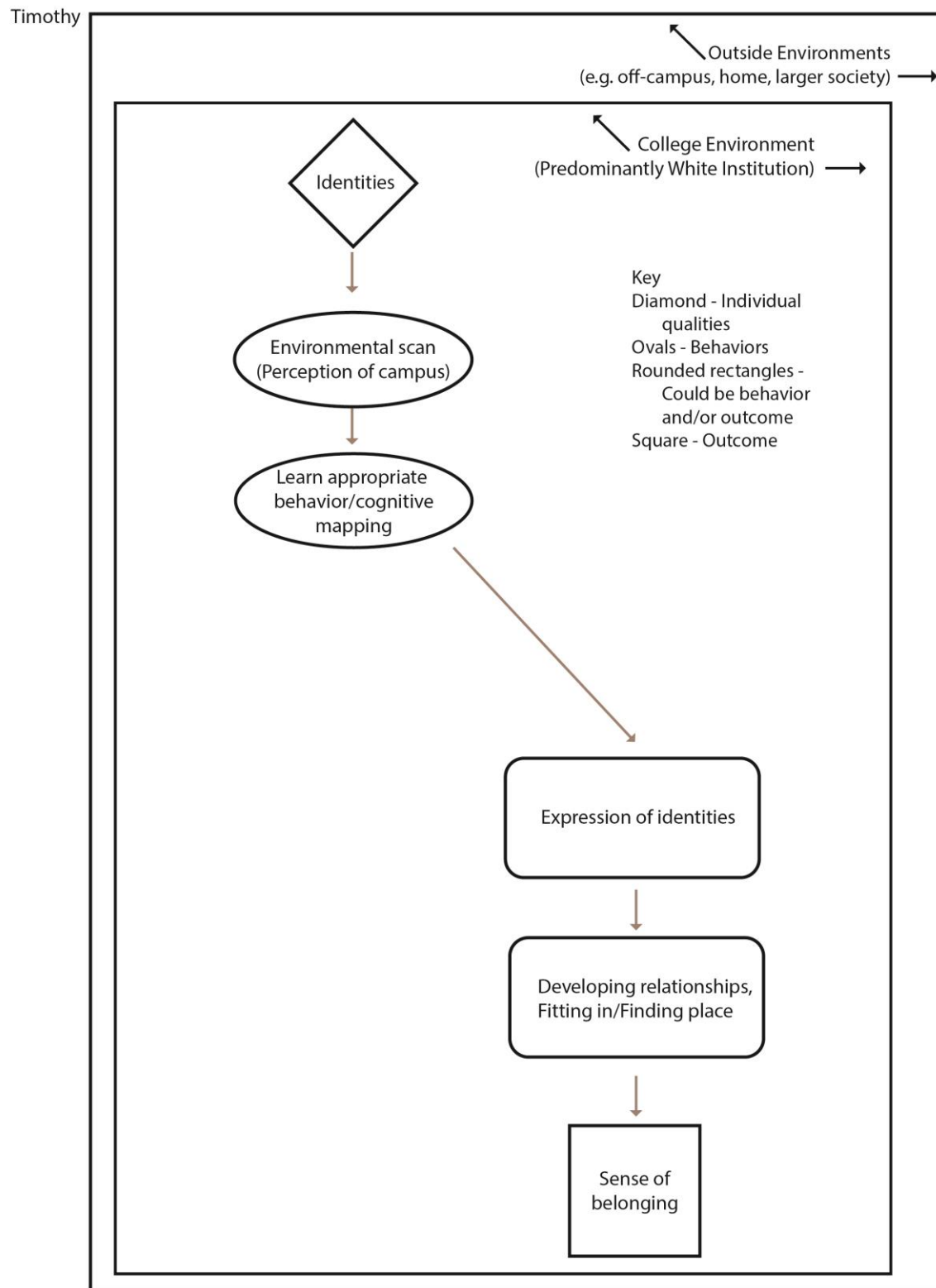


Figure 6.1. Timothy's path through the Sense of Belonging Model

Greg's Sense of Belonging Path

Greg was a 19-year-old finishing his second year at SPSU, majoring in public relations and ethnic studies. Greg had a full scholarship from SPSU as a part of SPLI and was also a McNair Scholar³. He identified as a Black gay man with a middle class background. Greg's path through the sense of belonging model is illustrated in Figure 6.2 (page 171).

Environmental Scan

Greg thought that the campus climate for minoritized students could certainly have been better at SPSU. Greg noted that the SPSU climate had improved over the prior year in terms of the acceptance of minoritized students. He acknowledged that there was still a long way to go in terms of improvement on the SPSU campus, but that the overall climate in relation to race, sexual orientation, and gender had gotten better. He said that he felt like SPSU worked hard to recruit diverse students and put some effort into creating a positive campus climate but that they did not necessarily work hard enough to create a positive environment for diverse students once they got to campus.

Greg gave several examples of microaggressions he experienced on campus. One example was the way the leadership of SPSU perceived students of color in terms of their academic achievement. He said that if students of color, particularly Black students, had a 3.0 GPA they were celebrated, while White students would need to earn at least a 3.5 GPA to earn

³ The McNair Scholars program is a TRIO program for first-generation students with high financial need or underrepresented students who show high academic promise that is “designed to prepare undergraduate students for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities” (McNair Scholars Program, 2016, ¶1).

the same praise. As Greg talked about how he perceived the university in terms of climate, he said:

Um, I think there's effort. I think the university tries um, which is good. But um, I think, I don't think they always carry out or like follow through. So...or, I guess what I should say is that like sometimes like the university isn't always the most congruent. Like we say we value diversity, but then some of the, like some of the university's actions may not like be the most congruent. So this is a good example. Um, I think the university thinks like that diversity means like having a lot of different people, like in rep-, representation at the university, but, so like I think in terms of like recruiting multicultural students or creating diverse students, they think they do a good job of bringing like them here, but I think they should focus on putting more effort on like, you know, actually the students, the environment, fostering an environment, a better environment for when those students get here. I think they just bri-, 'cause you can't, I know I, well I personally don't feel like you can just bring all these different people together and then not teach them how to live together. I just think like there's a lack of understanding, that the university could do a better job of helping create...So I think there's effort, but just, better follow-through.

Greg added that he did not think that the problems on campus related to race, sexual orientation, or gender were a result of people being malicious. He thought the things that happened were out of ignorance or a lack of understanding and that SPSU should have played a larger role in helping students understand each other and getting along. Greg used his role on the executive board of SPSU's Black Student Union (BSU) to help address some of the ignorance that he saw on campus. He and his peers in BSU tried to help inform the campus about Black culture and Blackness in an effort to help create a safe space for open dialogue and for people (non-Blacks) to be able to ask questions.

One concrete example of how he worked in his role within BSU to address ignorance was when Greg worked with his peers to host a meeting titled, "Is the Black Student Union Racist?" This meeting was intended to be a place for people of all races to ask questions so that BSU could articulate why the organization existed and that they hoped to have non-Black students attend their meetings. Greg said that there were not a lot of White students present at the event

but that he was still seeing positive changes on campus and that he felt comfortable at SPSU. He said, “I do feel comfortable. And even in the times where I don’t feel comfortable, I don’t feel like it’s because someone hates me. I feel like it’s because someone doesn’t understand me. And I think...that’s important to understand.” For Greg it was important to distinguish the difference between acts of intentional discrimination and ignorance or a lack of understanding. Greg was better able to handle the times when he felt uncomfortable on campus when he understood that the person(s) causing his discomfort did not understand that what they had said or done was problematic as opposed to knowing that someone was saying or doing something because they were racist or homophobic.

Greg said that he sometimes felt uncomfortable because he perceived others (Whites) on campus to be uncomfortable because of his race. This feeling of his Blackness making others uncomfortable was very new to Greg because he attended a predominantly Black high school in an urban environment. He said that being Black was the identity most at the forefront while he was at SPSU because it was what made him visibly different, but that because there was no “gay look,” people did not necessarily know he was gay. He said he was able to “maneuver” some spaces on campus without people knowing he was gay or having it come up in conversation. Greg did note that he thought he was having a better experience at SPSU because of SPLI, an institute that he applied to as part of his admission to SPSU, which included four full years of tuition for participants. As a member of SPLI he had access to resources that others did not. Greg speculated that the average student, especially the average minoritized student, might perceive the campus differently because they did not have access to the resources he did on campus. Greg’s understanding of SPSU’s climate and the resources he had access to because of his involvement in SPLI served as buffers when he faced microaggressions or less friendly

environments on campus. As Greg gained an understanding of the campus climate at SPSU, especially that others were sometimes uncomfortable because of his Blackness and because he learned before college that some might not like him because of his identities, he went on to learn what he perceived to be appropriate behavior.

Learning Appropriate Behavior

While Greg did not indicate that he had received any messages about how he should behave, he noted that he felt uncomfortable in spaces where there was no one else who shared any identities with him. He said that he tried to keep to himself in those spaces or to avoid them altogether. When Greg was not able to avoid those spaces, he did whatever he needed to do quickly so that he could leave the space. Greg said that he sometimes had classes where no one else shared any of his identities. He indicated that those were the spaces at SPSU where he was least likely to be himself. I asked Greg how he handled classroom situations where no one shared any of his identities and he said:

I mean if it's a class then I'm just gonna stay to myself and take notes or like do my assignment until I can leave the class. Or usually I just tune out. I just check out, really, which is not the best, but (laugh), yeah.

Because Greg thought that his Blackness made others uncomfortable, he perceived that appropriate behavior for him, in terms of minimizing his discomfort and the discomfort of others, was to minimize himself. For him, this meant keeping to himself and getting out of spaces quickly when he thought his presence might be making others uncomfortable. Greg said that as he got into his major classes in ethnic studies, his classes were more diverse, and as a result, he did not necessarily have to act in a specific way. Because Greg perceived his race to make others uncomfortable and because he felt uncomfortable when no one in a space shared any of his identities, he often tried to minimize his identity(s) and was conscious of where and when he

openly expressed his identities; however, Greg did find some places where he felt like his race was accepted. When he felt like his race was accepted in a space, he felt safe expressing and talking about his Black identity.

Expression of Identities

Greg said that he expressed his identities through his involvement with student organizations and other activities with people who identified the same way(s) that he did. When I asked Greg how important it was for him to be able to bring all of his identities together he said:

Ex-, extremely, extremely important. I know why, I just, it's just figuring out a way to articulate that. ...This is making me think about like intersectionality...I guess I think it's important 'cause I have to understand like...which parts of my identity will...will work well together and which, which parts of my identity won't work well together and that, in turn, like affects my acceptance or belonging into like a different, like space or setting.

While Greg knew that the expression of his identities was important to him, he was also aware that his identities affected one another and that he was not necessarily able to bring all of his identities into every setting. In other words, Greg was aware that he could not always express himself intersectionally because of what others thought about his identity(s), or at least what he perceived others to think about his identity(s).

Even though Greg felt like it was “extremely important” to express his identities in an intersectional way, he knew that he was not able to do so because some of his identities did not “work well together” in certain settings. For example, Greg made the decision to only talk about his sexuality when he was asked about it, specifically in BSU. Greg said:

I'm comfortable enough to share with those who inquire, but um...if you don't inquire then I'm, I just don't, like bring it up. Only because I feel like um, I don't know. I feel like I'm bringing like an unnecessary attention to myself kind of because I don't-, like straight people don't have to you know, come out or anything like-, so I just, if you, if you ask I will tell you, but um, other than that, no.

Greg felt that because he was on the executive board of the organization he had to “cater to” all of the members of the organization, which, for him, meant being mindful not to create any tension. He thought that talking about his sexuality openly within BSU might create tension or discomfort for some members, and, therefore, he made the decision to not bring up his sexuality even though he was aware that his sexuality was often a topic of discussion among his peers in BSU when he was not around. Greg seemed to feel like people were less likely to have a problem with his sexuality if he did not talk about it, and, therefore, he kept that piece of his identity out of conversations with his peers unless he was directly asked about it. Greg’s assumption that others might not accept his sexuality is consistent with minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995), as is the fact that he often tried cover or minimize his sexuality.

Greg said that in high school he was only out to his closest friends and that he realized that he was spending a lot of energy hiding his sexuality. While he still chose to only tell people about his sexuality when they asked, he said he had a “healthy amount of not caring” what others thought about him in relation to his sexuality. He said that it took “too much energy” to worry about what his peers thought about his sexuality. Greg said that the easiest place for him to express all of his identities simultaneously and where he felt most accepted was in queer people of color (QPOC) spaces; however, he did not have that type of space at SPSU and had only been in such a space once before when he attended MBLGTACC, the Midwest Bisexual, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Ally College Conference. He said that he knew there were other Black gay men at SPSU, but very few openly talked about being a Black gay man and that the men were not social with each other.

While Greg was a theater student (his major prior to switching to public relations and ethnic studies), he said that he code switched a lot because people stereotyped him because he

was Black, because of the music he liked to listen to, the way he talked, and where he was from.

He said:

But it was just really, it was really overwhelming. I felt drained all the time. I felt...I felt like I had to code switch, um, and I feel like the code switching made me like feel really like, I don't know. I feel like it took a toll on me because I feel like I kinda like...I, I guess by code switching like I, I don't think it's being fake, but it's like I wasn't being myself and, and those were the people I was around a lot.

Greg recognized the toll that code switching was taking on him, which was one of the main factors in his decision to change his major. He said he got tired of having to explain or correct the incorrect assumptions that people had about him based on their preconceived ideas of what a Black person who came from a large, primarily Black city should be like. As Greg spent more time at SPSU, he learned appropriate behavior around his race and sexuality based on what he thought other people expected of him and made decisions about where and when he would express his identities. He said that he had to take time to figure out which identities could go together in which spaces in order to feel like he belonged. In other words, Greg was cognizant that there were environments where some of his identities were more acceptable than other identities, and therefore, he chose to cover or code switch some of his identities in some settings. Similar to the experiences of other participants, Greg went on to develop important relationships with friends, faculty, and staff where he could be himself, which aided him in being successful, feeling a sense of belonging, and persisting at SPSU.

Developing Relationships and Fitting In/Finding Place

Greg was one participant for whom developing relationships was essential to his decision to stay at his institution. He talked about a period of time where he was frustrated with many of his peers and friends at SPSU because he felt like they did not value their participation in student organizations in the same way he did. He said:

I just feel like people were very apathetic um, I felt like people-, I don't know...I just realized how many people... like how many [student] leaders on campus were not doing things because they were passionate about them, but were doing them as like resume fillers. I don't know...it was just frustrating I guess because I felt like I was, I felt like I was passionate about...something and, well I guess what I'm trying to say, I was frustrated because someone didn't respect and take something as seriously, didn't take something as seriously as I did I guess.

Greg's perspective changed when he talked to his best friends from high school who were all at different colleges or universities and experiencing similar attitudes and behaviors with their peers. He said that he realized that going to a different school would not solve the problem that he was having and that:

the grass is not greener on the other side. I guess as like corny as it sounds, like I was gonna try to make, I was gonna try to water the grass here and make it greener and make the most of my experience here.

Talking to his friends from home about his frustrations was a turning point for Greg. He developed closer relationships with people other than those in SPLI after he decided to make the most out of his experience at SPSU. When I asked who his supports were and who he could talk to, Greg said that he had close friends in SPLI and BSU, faculty members, his advisor, and the Black gay faculty member he had made sure to develop a relationship with. Greg noted that he had to create these relationships himself, which seemed to stress the point that he knew he had to be very intentional about his efforts to "water the grass" and "make it greener" at SPSU. Because of the positive relationships Greg had with several faculty members, his experience with SPLI and BSU, and his close friend groups, Greg developed a sense of belonging at SPSU.

Sense of Belonging

Greg noted that he had a lot of close friends at SPSU in addition to his four friends from high school that he kept in close contact with. He also found a place for himself in SPSU's BSU, within the LGBTQ+ community, and with his cohort in SPLI. Greg also identified Black spaces

(places where Black individuals gathered) to be places he fit. These spaces were essential in his ability to feel a sense of belonging at SPSU. While he still wished he was able to identify a QPOC space on campus, he felt like he had developed strong relationships and found places where he felt like he fit. Greg was very conscious that his identities affected where he was accepted and fit in and said that his sense of belonging was affected by his identities in specific spaces. However, the relationships Greg developed with peers and faculty and his ability to identify spaces on campus where he felt like he could be himself led him to feel a sense of belonging at SPSU, despite his awareness that he was not necessarily accepted or completely welcome within all spaces. I illustrate JJ's path through the sense of belonging model next.

Greg

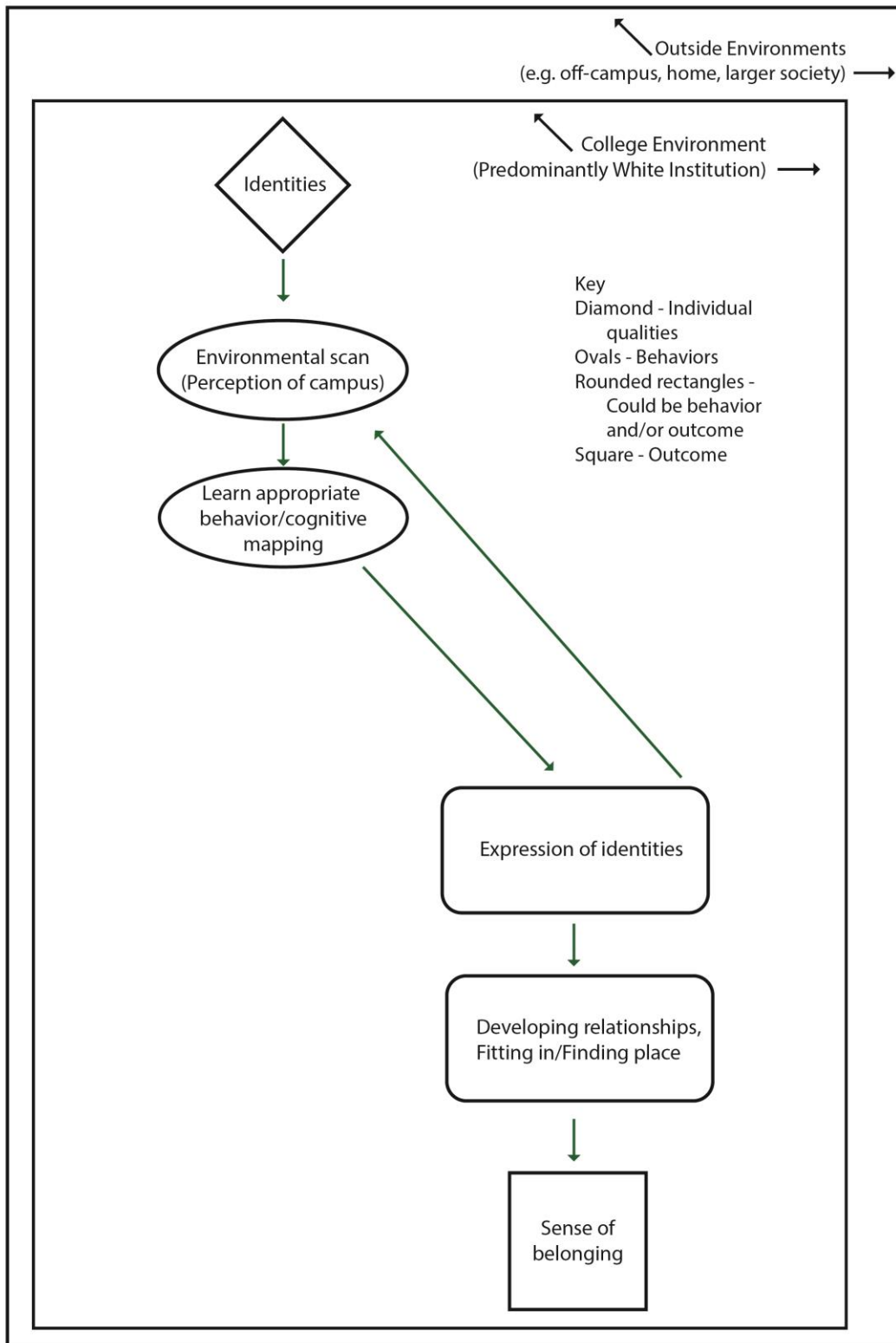


Figure 6.2. Greg's path through the Sense of Belonging Model

JJ's Sense of Belonging Path

JJ, a 21-year-old fourth year student who identified as religious, Black, and gay, had felt a sense of belonging at GSU but was questioning it at the time of our interviews. JJ's sense of belonging path is depicted in Figure 6.3 (page 179). JJ had just returned from the Navy Reserves a few months before I interviewed him. He was having trouble reintegrating into GSU. He had decided to change his major from marketing and advertising to engineering because he was assigned to learn and do engineering work in the Navy. He made the decision to change majors even though doing so added two to three years to the length of time he would need to be in school to earn his degree. JJ realized during his time in the Navy that engineering was work that he was passionate about and that he was more interested in the work he was doing in the Navy than work he had done at any other point in his life. First, I discuss JJ's progression through the sense of belonging model prior to his departure for boot camp and then address how JJ's sense of belonging changed after boot camp.

Environmental Scan

JJ said he liked to sit back and analyze his environment until he felt comfortable. He said that he liked the size of GSU's campus, which he considered to be small. JJ was shy when he first arrived at GSU, attended academic orientation, and moved into the residence halls as a first year student. He said that in his residence hall:

people's doors are open but I didn't know like, you can, just walk in a room and say "hi!" If I would have known that, stuff probably would have went a little easier. But, I didn't and I just...I didn't really speak unless spoken to.

JJ did eventually open up and become less reserved, but it took him time to understand what the environment was like in his residence hall. He said that in time, once he began to understand the cultural norms of his hall, he would just walk into people's rooms and hang out. JJ ended up

developing friendships with people on his floor that lasted throughout his time at GSU. As a result of his experience in the residence halls, JJ learned that GSU was an open environment where people were very friendly and welcoming.

In time, JJ felt comfortable and accepted on campus, which had a “family feeling.” As he spent time on campus, he got the sense the campus climate was one where people tended not to care about things like race and sexuality, which he perceived to mean that people did not have any issues with him being Black or gay. JJ said that his first roommate sometimes said “the N word,” but that it did not bother him because his roommate apologized whenever he said it and because, “Black people say it.” He also heard about racist incidents happening off campus at the bars, but he said he had only heard of those things happening when people were drunk. To JJ, hearing about racist incidents happening off campus when people were drunk was somehow not as bad as if it had happened on campus when people were sober. Because JJ felt accepted on campus and perceived the overall environment as being a place where people were friendly and accepting, JJ moved directly from environmental scan to expression of identities at GSU.

Expression of Identities

JJ was working towards expressing all of his identities and not covering or code switching. He said that it was very important for him to be himself and express all of his identities with his close friends. He said:

so like, when it, you know, comes to being myself I don't have a problem with that, you know. I don't feel like, I feel like people who get to know you, they're not gonna know you if you're not yourself, you know, if you're trying to be what the world wants you to be...it doesn't make any sense.

JJ had only recently started to come out to people in his life, and he felt like that process was going well for him. While he wanted to be completely out, he expressed some fear. He said:

I'm not, you know, scared of anyone really knowing. It's just, I think I'm more so scared of, I guess, losing the people, you know? The people close to me, you know. Cause I don't know how everyone's gonna react to it...but like, at some point...I have to be 100% you know...100% willing for everyone to know, you know?

JJ felt confident in the progress that he had made in starting to tell people that he was gay, but he felt like he wanted to get to the point where he could share his whole self all the time, including his sexuality, with the people around him. It was important to JJ that he be able to bring his identities together because he felt like "that's how people like you," but the fear of losing people who did not accept his sexuality was very real for him. His fear was mostly relevant with his family because they are extremely religious. JJ did not seem to be concerned with how people on campus might perceive either his race or his sexuality.

JJ said he felt like he could express himself on campus and that he was able to do whatever he wanted to do at GSU. He said he never felt like he was limited because of his identities. His response was similar to Jordan's feelings about being accepted as stated in Chapter Five, because he felt like he was able to interact with whomever he wanted to or get involved in whatever he wanted, whether he chose to or not, and that no one would reject him because of his identities. In fact, JJ got involved in his building's hall council, student government, German Club, and American Sign Language Club. He said that he did not feel like race-related groups were for him because he perceived them to be "cliquey." Also, he had initially wanted to join a Black Greek letter organization, but that when he looked into the organizations he felt like he was competing for friends.

When I asked JJ if he ever prioritized or minimized any of his identities, he specifically mentioned he was not yet out to his best friend, and as a result, he was code switching when he was with his friend, a male, who was not a student at GSU. He said that he would talk about "manly things" with his friend and not talk about finding men attractive or his relations with

men. JJ planned on coming out to his best friend in the near future because he had recently learned that his best friend already knew he was gay and because he wanted to be honest with his friend. While JJ was not out to everyone at GSU, he did not have any concerns about what people might think of him being gay at his institution.

Similar to other participants discussed in Chapter Five, JJ felt like he did not want to live up to negative stereotypes of Black men. JJ said, “I’m not your typical, you know, Black guy.” By that, JJ meant that he was not like the stereotypes of Black men that participants like Raheem and Tyrell had described; he was not “loud, ghetto, or in jail.” JJ also said that he did not like it when other Black men “lived up to stereotypes.” He said that when he saw a Black person living up to negative stereotypes he would say:

“why are you being ignorant right now?” Like, “why are you doing this right now? It’s ignorant.” And you know they give you a look like...“you’re no better.” What the hell? Like, I’m not, but I know how to condone [sic] myself you know?

JJ felt like there was a certain way he should act in all settings, and he did everything he could not to live up to negative stereotypes about Black people because he wanted to “give [his] race a good name.” JJ received these messages about Black people long before he attended GSU and he took these messages with him into his experiences in college. Because JJ perceived GSU to be a welcoming space where people were not concerned with things like race and sexuality, JJ made the decision to express his identities, especially his sexuality, and he moved on to developing relationships and finding places where he felt like he fit in at GSU.

Developing Relationships and Fitting In/Finding Place

Since JJ felt like he could express his identities on campus and was working on feeling comfortable with being open about his sexuality, he developed relationships on campus and identified places where he felt like he had a place and fit in, including several student

organizations that he joined. JJ continued to develop relationships with people on campus and coworkers at his off-campus workplace, many of whom were also students at GSU. JJ said he and his friends started partying so much during his first semester that his grades suffered. He said that he had “slipped,” and he had to work hard to bring his grades up. JJ’s grade point average was a 3.1 at the time he was interviewed. While developing relationships was positive for JJ feeling like he had found a place at GSU, it did have a negative outcome in that his grades suffered temporarily, and he had to learn to balance spending time with friends and doing well in his courses.

JJ loved his workplace and worked a lot of hours. He talked about frequently working a “double,” (typically a 12 hour shift) then going back and doing another double the following day. JJ said he worked 20 to 30 hours per week. He also enjoyed partying with his friends and had learned to balance all of his commitments. JJ also said that he had developed important relationships with his advisor and some of the professors at GSU, which made him feel like he fit in within his classes. JJ’s experiences with friends and faculty are consistent with the experiences of other participants as discussed in Chapter Four. Because he had developed important relationships and identified places where he felt like he fit and had a place, including student organizations, JJ felt like he belonged at GSU.

Sense of Belonging and Returning to Environmental Scan and Perception of Campus

Prior to leaving for boot camp, JJ said he had a strong sense of belonging at GSU. He loved his classes and had developed relationships with peers and faculty. His close friend group was a strong support for him and he loved going to work, hanging out with his coworkers, and going out to party. Since returning from boot camp, JJ said that he no longer had any desire to go out and party, he did not like working where he used to work because his coworkers had become

“cliquey,” and that he did not know if GSU was where he wanted to be anymore. JJ said that he had developed a sense of belonging in the Navy and was feeling conflicted about being back at GSU. JJ said:

I just I don't want to work here. I don't want to live in [city where GSU is located]. I don't want to be here. I've been trying to get like active duty orders to just be gone, you know, like on a ship out in the fleet and everything, but I have to wait and I'm just like, “oh what the hell?” So I'm making the best of it right now.

When I interviewed JJ he had just enrolled in summer classes, was going to try to reestablish his connection with GSU as an institution, and wanted to focus on his coursework. He acknowledged that things had gotten better since he first returned, but he was also considering transferring to one of two institutions within his state, one of which had a better engineering program and the other was close to his home and would allow him to save money. The sense of belonging he developed while he was at Navy Reserves boot camp changed JJ's priorities and, as a result, made him question his belonging at GSU.

When JJ was in training with the Navy Reserves and was given work as an engineer, he completely changed his focus and what he wanted to do with his life. He talked about studying like he had never studied and being motivated in ways he never had been before, both because he was passionate about the material he was learning but also because the Navy was very strict. While JJ knew he wanted to earn a degree in engineering, he also felt like he did not want to deal with being at GSU any more, including hanging out with his friends there, partying, and living in the city where GSU is located. JJ was conflicted about completing his degree, serving in active duty in the Navy Reserves, and being at GSU.

After coming back from the Navy, JJ felt like he wanted to be in a community where people were on the same path as he was, meaning that they had the same goals that he had, of being successful and wanting to do “something big.” He felt like he experienced a shift while he

was away and had the drive to do something big, while his friends at GSU had stayed the same. JJ's path through the sense of belonging model is unique because he is the only person who left his institution for something not academically related (other participants had taken classes at other institutions, studied abroad, or had a semester-long internship away from campus) and because leaving for six months caused him to feel differently about both his institution and his place within the institution.

JJ

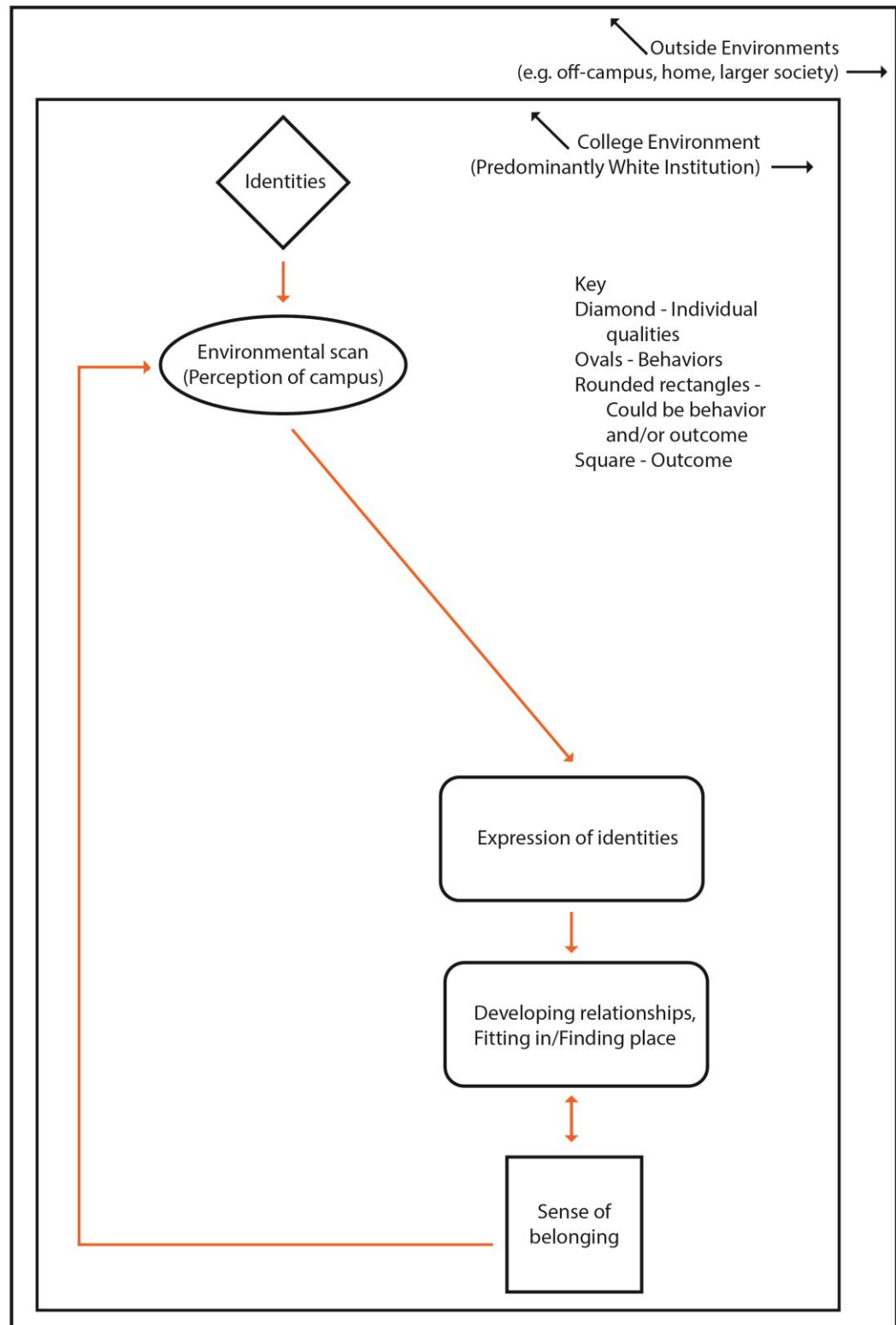


Figure 6.3. JJ's path in the Sense of Belonging Model

This chapter illustrated the ways that JJ, Timothy, and Greg progressed through the sense of belonging model. Each one of these participants had experiences that were unique to them and affected their path to feeling a sense of belonging at their institution. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the implications of this study for practice, theory, and research in higher education.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this final chapter I first give a brief overview of the findings that emerged from this study of the sense of belonging of 16 Black gay men attending PWIs. Next, I discuss the findings discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six in relation to existing scholarly work. Finally, I put forth implications of this study for practice, theory, and research in higher education. I address the findings and implications in relation to the research questions that guided this study as well as other interesting findings that emerged.

Study Overview

In this study I explored the sense of belonging of Black gay men at three PWIs. I completed two semi-structured interviews each with 16 self-identified Black gay men. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. Do Black gay men feel a sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions?
2. If Black gay men do feel a sense of belonging, what processes contribute to sense of belonging?

This study, in which all 16 participants felt a sense of belonging, led to the development of a sense of belonging model for Black gay men that identifies the factors that lead to sense of belonging. I used social constructivism, anti-deficit, and intersectional research paradigms in designing, interpreting, and analyzing this study. As I discuss later in this chapter, this sense of belonging model may also be applicable to other groups of minoritized individuals in higher education. This study adds to the larger body of scholarly work about sense of belonging in higher education, specifically the sense of belonging of Black gay men, which has been previously examined by others (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013a). Specifically, this study identifies additional factors that contribute to student sense of belonging

and the process that Black gay men go through to feel a sense of belonging. Understanding the process that leads to sense of belonging can lead to improved practices within institutions of higher education, evolving use of theory, and new areas of research. Existing literature regarding the experiences of Black men, gay men, Black gay men, and sense of belonging shaped the semi-structured interview protocol used for this study.

Summary and Discussion of Major Findings

In answer to research question one, the 16 Black gay men in this study all felt a sense of belonging at some point during their experience at their institution. Though participants experienced incidents of what I interpreted to be homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, and racism, they all saw their campus climates as mostly positive places where all people were welcome. It is highly likely that participants experienced these forms of oppression prior to attending their institution, and as a result, were not surprised to experience them within their institutional setting. Many of the topics described in Chapter Two, including the nature of PWIs, factors discussed in Hurtado and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging model, and experiences of discrimination and microaggressions resulting from homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and/or Black masculinity, were relevant to the experiences of participants. Additionally, the themes identified in Chapter Four were central in participants progressing through the model. Having positive experiences in student workplaces, with faculty members, in university programs, with friend groups, and in student organizations often led participants to gain new understandings about their environment and identifying safe people and spaces allowed participants to feel a sense of belonging. I now briefly discuss the parts of the sense of belonging model that I developed from this study in relation to existing literature, which directly answers research question two, regarding the processes which contributed to sense of belonging.

Environment, Identities, and Cognitive Mapping/Perception of Campus Climate

Because environment, identities, and cognitive mapping/perception of campus climate are directly related in the context of this study and existing literature, I address them together in this portion of the summary of findings and discussion. Similar to two of Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly's (2013b) participants who "recognized how social identities and social locations influenced the development of their self-concept" (p. 103), participants in this study considered their multiple minoritized identities in relation to their cognitive maps of campus and perceptions of campus climate. As a result, I argue that campus environments are directly related to student identities and cognitive mapping/perception of campus climate.

Participants made sense of the campus climate of their institutions, PWIs, in order to understand how their identities fit, or did not fit, in specific spaces on their campuses. Scholars have addressed institutions of higher education as "chilly" for both LGBTQ+ and Black students (e.g., Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Rankin, et al., 2010). Participants were able to make sense of campus and gain an understanding of campus climate by understanding the areas of campus that were most important to them (Attinasi, 1989; Tinto, 1993). Though several participants thought about leaving their institution, none of them attributed thinking about leaving to the campus climate at their institution. For example, Raheem had felt a sense of belonging at GSU and said that he felt like he wanted to do bigger things than his peers; however, he did not articulate wanting to leave because GSU was racist or homophobic.

Learning Appropriate Behavior

As a result of performing cognitive mapping, gaining an understanding of their campus climates some participants learned what they perceived to be appropriate behavior. This part of the model is consistent with existing literature cited in Chapter Two in that participants acted out

their identities in ways they perceived to be appropriate based on their environment. Because the Black gay men in this study were often tokenized or expected to behave in ways their peers thought were consistent with their stereotypes regarding Black men, participants were often very mindful of their behavior. Participants also felt like they were expected to act in specific ways in regard to their sexuality, especially around Black straight men. The phenomenon of Black masculinity is discussed widely in existing literature.

Very few participants who talked about covering or code switching around their sexuality talked about having experienced homophobic discrimination on campus; however, participants gave descriptions of negative messages they received about being gay or not acting in a masculine way dating back to before they were in high school from both peers and family members, and in society. It may be the case that these participants assumed that their university setting would be an environment where people had negative feelings about non-heterosexual persons, as is consistent with minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995), and likely affected the way they progressed through the sense of belonging model. Additionally, messages about what it means to be Black that participants heard prior to attending their institution were sometimes reinforced when participants had negative experiences in their classrooms because of their Black identity and/or their interests that were related to their identity(s). Because of messages that participants received before attending their institution and sometimes while they were at their institution, they learned what behavior was expected of them in which setting and expressed their identities accordingly.

Expression of Identities

Participants showed agency in their decisions to express their identities. Based on their settings, participants made very conscious decisions about which identities they would express at

what times and in which environments (e.g., Stewart, 2015 and Tillman-Kelly, 2015). In this section, the concepts of intersectionality, passing, covering, and code switching are also relevant and are discussed. When participants perceived or assumed racism, sexism, homophobia, or heterosexism in their environments, they were more likely to minimize their minoritized identity(s) that they thought might be an issue, which is consistent with the findings of other scholars.

Intersectionality. The majority of participants in this study did not express their identities intersectionally. Most participants covered or code switched in different settings based on their perception or assumptions about their environment. Intersectionality argues that one's identities and oppressions can only be experienced together, not separately (e.g., Crenshaw, 2001); however, participants consistently minimized or omitted specific identities, most commonly their sexuality, in order to try to avoid active oppression. Minority stress theory argues that minoritized persons may hide or minimize their identities not only because they have had negative experiences, but also because they expect to be stigmatized by dominant society because of their identity(s) (e.g., Meyer, 1995). Additionally, Black men receive messages about what it means to be a Black man and often feel the need to adhere to rigid expectations of masculinity. As a result of fear and of not wanting to act in ways that others perceive to be not masculine, Black gay men may cover or code switch their identities, which has negative consequences for their overall wellbeing, as discussed in Chapter Two. In other words, participants may not have had negative experiences based on their identity(s) at their institution, but because they received negative messages about their identity(s) in dominant society and from others in their lives before they got to their institution, they may have assumed that people would have negative feelings about their identity(s) at their university. When participants had negative

experiences as a result of their identity(s), they were also more likely to cover and code switch their identities and not express themselves intersectionally. In some settings, participants felt like their identities were not relevant, like when Corey said that if he made a mistake in the lab where he worked it was not because of his Black or gay identities, rather it was because he made a mistake as a chemistry student working in a lab. However, the majority of participants did not experience their identities intersectionally because they made decisions about covering or code switching their minoritized identity(s) because they feared rejection.

Covering and code switching. Many participants were able to recall times where they intentionally covered or code switched their identities, which are defined in Chapter Two. Covering and code switching were most relevant for participants in relation to their sexuality, though some participants talked about code switching in relation to their race. People cover or code switch in an effort to downplay their minoritized identity(s) to reduce tension and draw attention away from that identity(s) (see Chapter Two for relevant literature).

Result of covering and code switching. While using fluidity in navigating environments to survive and maintain relationships was certainly a factor for participants in this study (e.g., Jones, et al., 2012), participants also talked about the fact that survival and maintaining relationships often meant covering or code switching. While participants in Stewart's (2015) study did not seem to have any negative outcomes as a result of their decisions to perform their identities, code switching came at a cost for some participants in this study. While participants used agency in their decision to cover or code switch, they often struggled with their decisions about expressing and not expressing their identities and what it meant to be authentic in any given setting. For those who chose to cover or code switch, they sometimes expressed feelings of guilt, discomfort, cowardice, being less of a man, or putting on a show. This was a source of

stress and constant negotiation for some participants, which is consistent with minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995). Regardless of whether participants covered or code switched, expression of identities was an important part of the sense of belonging model and affected how participants went about developing relationships and finding fit/place and whom they tried to develop relationships with.

Developing Relationships and Finding Fit/Place

Participants developed important relationships with students, faculty, and staff at their institution and identified places where they felt like they fit. Participants found fit and place in a variety of places including student organizations, friend groups, workplaces, and institutions as a whole in ways that were consistent with existing scholarship. The ways in which participants developed relationships with individuals on campus was also consistent with existing literature; however, the literature related to factors that affected sense of belonging did not talk about developing relationships with staff members in the way that it was salient for participants in this study.

Sense of Belonging

Participants in this study consistently described sense of belonging in ways that were consistent with existing literature. Participants were very much aware of their feelings of social support, connection, being valued, and important to others on campus and their sense of belonging went far beyond simply participating in social and academic aspects of their campuses. Though not all factors in Hurtado and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging model were relevant in this study, and there were additional factors that were important to sense of belonging for participants in this study not identified by Hurtado and Carter, participants consistently

described a sense of belonging in a variety of settings on campus and within their institutions in ways that were consistent with existing literature.

It was interesting that participants clearly articulated incidents of racism, homophobia, heterosexism, and sexism in their environments and still felt a sense of belonging, both within specific groups on campus, but also within their institutions as a whole. It was also clear that participants did not have to feel a sense of belonging in every space on campus in order to feel a sense of belonging in specific spaces or at their institution as a whole. Participants learned how to navigate spaces that they perceived as not safe for them, whether it was by avoiding the spaces, covering, code switching, learning appropriate behavior, or just dealing with the space for as short an amount of time as possible. This phenomenon is similar to the findings of other scholars (e.g., Means & Jaeger, 2013; Patton, 2011; Samura, 2016; Stewart, 2015). Covering and code switching clearly played a role in how the Black gay men in this study interacted with spaces and individuals, which enabled their sense of belonging. As noted, while some scholars cite student agency in how students engage in environments based on their identities (e.g., Patton, 2011; Stewart, 2015; Tillman-Kelly, 2015) and note fluidity of authenticity in different settings (Jones, et al., 2012), which participants in this study clearly enacted, previous work has not discussed negative outcomes students experienced based on covering or code switching. Though the other scholars noted previously did not find negative outcomes their participants experienced, these negative outcomes are consistent with minority stress theory (e.g., Meyer, 1995).

Samura (2016) claimed that for Asian American participants in her qualitative study (interview and photo journal), sense of belonging “was not a state of being to attain; rather, it was a *process* that involved remaking themselves, repositioning themselves, or remaking space

to increase belonging” (p. 140, emphasis in original). Participants in her study said that in some moments they felt they belonged, while in others they did not. She claimed:

Campus spaces can embody contradictions. In one moment, a student can experience and even use a picture to portray a particular campus space as comfortable. However, at a different time of the day or even if different people pass through or occupy that same space, the meaning of space, and subsequently, the meaning that the student intended to communicate through the image, can be completely different (p. 139).

In other words, sense of belonging was not a fixed state that participants reached and stayed at, rather it was a culmination of making changes to themselves, the spaces they were in, and the ways in which they fit within those spaces as a result of their racial identities (Samura, 2016).

Samura (2016) identified three strategies that participants used when they felt a low sense of belonging. These strategies were: remaking themselves, repositioning themselves, and remaking space. These processes are all similar to the steps in the sense of belonging model created in this study, specifically learning appropriate behavior, expression of identities (and covering and code switching), and developing relationships and finding fit/place. For example, Asian American participants in Samura’s (2016) study repositioned themselves to avoid academic stereotypes of Asian Americans as model minorities by choosing majors that were not tied to stereotypes (e.g., doctors and lawyers), while participants in this study often tried to distance themselves from stereotypes about Black persons being underprepared for college by proving people wrong about their academic abilities or by silencing themselves in classrooms in order to not appear underprepared. Similar to participants in this study, when Samura’s (2016) participants “did not feel like they belonged socially at West University, they sought out places and people with whom they thought they could better fit” (p. 145). A final example from Samura’s (2016) study is one that mirrors finding fit/place in this study. Samura (2016) claimed “participants indicated that they belonged socially, but not because they were integrated into the

dominant culture, although that may be the case for some students, but because they found and created their own social spaces based on their shared ethnic or racial identification” (p. 147).

Some Black gay men in this study found and created their own social spaces based on their social identities, but in some cases, still had to cover or code switch based on their race or sexuality.

Samura’s (2016) study identified a parallel phenomenon to one that I identified in this study, that is, that participants identified negative experiences and feeling a sense of belonging, but were not able to be their full selves in order to feel belonging. While some participants in this study clearly articulated their choice to cover or code switch and how that affected them, Samura (2016) did not explore the effects on her participants beyond participants feeling a sense of belonging. Some participants in this study clearly made sense of their covering and code switching in order to feel a sense of belonging, however others did not articulate that they knew their sense of belonging was a result of covering and code switching. What is clear and confirmed by Samura’s (2016) study is that for some participants in this study, covering and code switching identities was a clear factor in their ability to feel a sense of belonging. I discuss the implications for research based on these findings below. Given the findings of this study, in which all 16 Black gay men felt a sense of belonging at their institution, I move on to discuss the implications for practice, theory, and research in higher education.

Implications for Research, Theory, and Practice

The findings of this study indicate that student identities, environmental scans and perception of campus, learning appropriate behavior and cognitive mapping, expression of identities, developing relationships, and fitting in/finding place are all key factors in participants feeling a sense of belonging at their institution. Additionally, the themes identified in Chapter

Four were central to students feeling a sense of belonging and several of the themes often served as factors that helped participants move from one step of the model to the next. These findings, the components of the sense of belonging model I created, have relevance for practice, theory, and research in higher education. I elaborate on each of these areas within this section.

Implications for Practice

The sense of belonging model has several implications for practice, which I discuss here. Our society is polarized and the political climate is one in which minoritized lives are sometimes devalued by citizens, politicians, and presidential candidates. There have been increases in anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and many other forms of oppression. In the recent months and years, the United States has seen Black men and women killed by police at alarming rates and a mass murder at Pulse, an LGBTQ+ nightclub in Orlando, Florida. It is the job of institutions of higher education to not only provide an education to its students, but also to create citizens who have open minds and critically consider multiple viewpoints. Additionally, institutions of higher education must provide safe spaces for minoritized students who are watching discriminatory events take place both within and outside of their institutions. An anti-deficit framework insists that it is not the fault of minoritized students that they sometimes have negative experiences within institutions of higher education and that the onus must be put back on colleges and universities to support minoritized students and create campuses where they are safe and welcomed as full community members, rather than blaming students for their challenges. It is not the fault of the minoritized students who struggle in higher education that they may be having trouble at an institution that, as discussed in Chapter Two, was created for White privileged people. The implications discussed here are not necessarily groundbreaking. What is most important is that colleges and universities commit to

making their institutions safe spaces for all of their students by both communicating and enacting consistent messages and values of acceptance, inclusion, and equity. There are implications for institutions as a whole that campus leadership should take into consideration. Additionally, I identify implications for practice specifically related to student work environments, faculty and staff, and student organizations.

Institutions. There are several implications for institutions that arise from the findings of this study on the sense of belonging of Black gay men. First, university programs that engage minoritized students can play a large role in the factors that lead to sense of belonging. Second, institutions must focus on not only recruiting diverse students but also on creating positive campus climates that are conducive to facilitating the safety and sense of belonging of minoritized students. Third, institutions must have a sense of their overall campus climate for minoritized students in order to identify places where resources should be allocated to improve campus climate. Finally, institutions should encourage various units across the university to collaborate in order facilitate greater understanding of the issues minoritized students face and to address the intersectional needs of students.

University programs. The sense of belonging model suggests that university programs can play a role in factors that contribute to sense of belonging. Seven students in this study identified specific university programs that helped them to better understand campus climate, learn appropriate behavior, develop relationships, and find places where they felt like they fit. Greg and Vaughn indicated that the Shady Pine Leadership Institute played a central role in their ability to understand the campus climate at SPSU. They also said SPLI was a place where they developed relationships and felt like they fit. Raheem and Timothy both said that GSU's special leadership based orientation program, which took place during the week prior to new student

orientation, was central to their initial experiences and getting a feel for campus climate. Timothy talked about his experience in GSU's multicultural scholarship program as a place where he was able to scan his environment, get a sense of the campus climate, develop relationships, and find a place where he felt like he fit. These programs are also a site where members of the institution can demonstrate their commitment to making their campuses welcoming spaces for all students by using inclusive language and acknowledging that everyone must be dedicated to continuing to learn and evolve in their understandings of the lives of minoritized students and their efforts to make campuses safe places for everyone to learn. These programs also serve as opportunities for new students to experience social justice programming and activities where they learn about privilege, bias, equity, and inclusion.

There are many examples of other large-scale campus programs that are designed to help improve campus climates for students and send clear messages about the values of the institution. For example, Syracuse University has an initiative called No Place for Hate. The program is sponsored by the Office of Residence Life and serves to communicate an expectation of community behavior and values (Syracuse University, n.d.b). The institution also has an initiative called Stop Bias, which helps to educate students about what bias is and how to report it. Their website states:

As an institution of higher education, Syracuse University fosters learning and growth. It seeks to provide all students with a safe and secure learning environment that is free of crime and/or policy violations motivated by discrimination, sexual and bias-related harassment, and other violations of rights. (Syracuse University, n.d.a)

While programs like these are not enough on their own, when university personnel support these initiatives and are clear about the expectations of the university community, students not only understand how they are expected to behave, but also and what the values of the institution are.

While these large campus programming initiatives fall under the responsibility of specific campus units, they are all programs that are central to the university. One could also argue that student organizations, residence hall communities, and academic instruction are university programs as well. Campus leaders must understand that these university functions, some of which fall under what might be considered academic areas and others under student affairs areas, all played central roles in the participants in this study feeling a sense of belonging. It is essential that resources continue to be allotted for these university programs, and, given their centrality for the experiences of Black gay men in this study, these programs should be assessed to learn if there are ways that these programs can provide additional support for students in their processes of understanding campus climate, learning appropriate behavior, developing relationships, and finding places where they feel like they fit. Campus leaders should also explore the implementation of social justice trainings. One example of such a program is LeaderShape, a weeklong leadership development program that emphasizes the role that privilege plays in society (LeaderShape, 2015). Additional resources should be allotted as necessary to improve upon and expand these programs to contribute to sense of belonging for not only Black gay men but also other minoritized students.

Institutional leadership must put forward as much, if not more, effort toward creating positive campus climates as they do recruiting diverse students because negative campus climate is associated with things such as negative health outcomes for minoritized students, a lack of sense of belonging, and, potentially, attrition (e.g., Harper & Quaye, 2015; Meyer, 1995; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Many participants in this study experienced heterosexism, homophobia, and racism in a variety of settings at GSU, MCSU, and SPSU. Participants themselves called for institutions to create more positive campus climates for minoritized

students. For example, Justin said that all faculty should have to go through training to create inclusive classrooms as a result of hearing multiple professors use heterosexist examples in class. Greg talked about how he felt like SPSU needed to make sure that institutions did not forget about minoritized students once they had been recruited and were in attendance at the institution.

While this study used an anti-deficit approach to understand the experiences of Black gay men and often focused on positive student experiences, there were many examples of heterosexism, homophobia, and racism experienced by participants that should not be ignored. There are myriad ways that institutions can work on creating positive campus climates that range from small-scale initiatives to campus-wide initiatives, and while no single program or initiative can singlehandedly fix or improve campus climates, each initiative institutions implement can serve as a part of an ongoing process to create positive institutional change. These initiatives also send clear messages to all students that the institution is an inclusive space that values and respects all of its community members. Because the sense of belonging model created in this study indicates that campus climate, specifically the presence of racism, homophobia, and heterosexism, is a central factor in students feeling a sense of belonging, administrators must work towards creating safer and more inclusive campus climates.

Finally, campuses must regularly conduct campus climate assessments to better understand what minoritized persons at their institution are experiencing and how they perceive their institution's campus climate. The sense of belonging model indicates that student perceptions of campus climate are important in students feeling a sense of belonging and affect the ways that students learn appropriate behavior, express their identities, and develop relationships and find place/fit. Efforts towards creating positive campus climates are essential to the experiences and sense of belonging of Black gay men, minoritized persons, and majoritized

persons within university communities. It is important to assess the perceptions of campus climate of students, faculty, and staff because climate is both experienced and perpetuated by entire university communities. Without having an understanding of current issues and experiences of minoritized persons, institutional leaders will not know where to allocate resources, what campus services and programs are playing central roles in the experiences of university community members, and which areas are most in need of improvement to improve the safety, sense of belonging, and likely, the persistence of students. Organizational change takes time, and as a result, efforts for improving campus climate must be consistent both in terms of expressed and enacted values and behaviors.

Student workplaces. Many participants claimed that their workplaces were sites where they developed relationships and felt like they found a place where they fit in, both central factors in the sense of belonging model. Participants identifying workplaces as positive environments is consistent with existing literature which claims workplaces are important climates for students with minoritized sexualities where they can receive positive and inclusive or negative and exclusionary messages from their coworkers, clients, and environment (Vaccaro, et al., 2015). Participants' coworkers, including faculty, staff, and student peers, were the largest factors in participants feeling like they fit in their workplace. Of the 11 students who cited their workplaces as places where they developed relationships and felt like they found a place where they fit in, nine of these participants held on-campus jobs, meaning that off-campus workplaces can also affect student sense of belonging, particularly when many of the relationships students develop at work are with other students from their institution. As discussed in Chapter Five, though participants got the message that they should not be out at work and therefore did not talk about their sexuality because they did not think it was appropriate, the message did not seem to

affect the positive effects of developing relationships and finding a fit in the workplace.

Participants cited coworkers, particularly staff members in the university setting, as important players in their college experiences whom they could count on for support and guidance.

Participants were overwhelmingly pleased, and sometimes surprised, by the support they received from staff and university departments.

In order to help create safe workspaces for students, colleges and universities should have training for employees that focus on issues of diversity and working with people with marginalized identities. Employees should know that students have received the message that they should not be out and that students are sometimes intentionally holding back their sexuality, and that this behavior may have negative implications for students. It is possible that Black gay men may also be code switching around their racial identity because they do not want to fulfill negative stereotypes about Black people. Also, it would likely be helpful for both faculty and staff to know that students value their relationships with them and that their interactions with students play a central role in the experiences of students and ultimately contribute to student sense of belonging so that there might be more intentionality in their interactions with students. It should be noted that when participants gave examples of faculty and staff who played an important role for them at their institution, participants gave examples of these individuals showing that they cared. It was not necessary for faculty and staff to do anything extraordinary, rather, they showed participants that they cared about them and their success by offering help, mentorship, and support during challenging times.

For students like Jieron who live off campus, having a workplace that is supportive likely plays a larger role in how students perceive their campus climate, and the role of developing relationships with coworkers is even more important than it is for students who live on campus.

The presence of safe work places that are supportive of students can serve as a buffer for marginalized student populations against negative messages they receive in other areas of their lives, specifically other areas on campus and within the city where their university is located. Ultimately, workplaces that are safe for students, where they develop relationships with faculty and staff and feel like they find a place and fit in, can be large factors in students feeling a sense of belonging at their institution, as indicated in the sense of belonging model created in this study.

Faculty. The sense of belonging model clearly identifies four ways that faculty can help facilitate student sense of belonging in that classrooms are places where students get a sense for campus climate, learn appropriate behavior, make decisions about the expression of their identities, and develop relationships and find fit/place. Faculty played a large role in participants feeling a sense of belonging. Despite the fact that some participants had negative experiences with some faculty members, positive experiences with faculty members outweighed negative experiences, both in terms of the number of positive experiences and the outcome of experiences. Generally, students felt positively about the faculty at MCSU, GSU, and SPSU.

It is crucial that faculty understand the ability they have to affect not only student learning but also the ways students interact with each other and the ways students feel about their institution. Though negative interactions between peers sometimes happened when faculty were not present, faculty have the ability to create safe spaces in their classrooms for all students, including students who have minoritized identities. Faculty should receive training on creating safe spaces for minoritized students in their classrooms. One place this could easily occur is during orientation for new faculty. This type of training could also be offered by persons from faculty development offices, LGBTQ+ student services, or cultural centers. This training should

include not only an understanding that faculty relationships with students can be central to students feeling a sense of belonging, but also how the use of language in the classroom can affect the ways students relate to material being taught in the classroom. Faculty should be provided with some inclusive examples that they could use in classes so that students might relate to their examples and feel included. When faculty use inclusive language and examples in their class, they also send clear messages about expectations of accepting and inclusive classroom spaces.

Another strategy that could be used in order to encourage faculty to create inclusive classrooms and develop positive relationships with students would be institutional incentives. Institutions could provide small research grants for faculty who commit to ongoing professional development in relation to creating inclusive classrooms for all students. Also, institutions should provide incentives to faculty in the form of rewards for inclusive classrooms in the reappointment, tenure, and promotion process. Several institutions have recently included issues of diversity and inclusion in their evaluation policy for faculty members. For example, Pomona College added new language to its assessment for teaching activities. Faculty members are now expected to be competent in “fostering an inclusive classroom where all students are encouraged to participate in discussions, studios, rehearsals, performances, activities and other course exercises” (Jashchik, 2016, p. 1). Pomona clarifies that faculty should specifically address these efforts in their tenure portfolio and can address efforts like specific classroom practices intentionally used to create diverse participation, creating greater understanding of different backgrounds, and using learning materials created by minoritized persons (Jashchick, 2016). Pomona College follows other institutions like Virginia Tech in implementing tenure policies that consider faculty’s efforts to create more inclusive classrooms (Jashchik, 2016). Assessments

of teaching could also include formal measures related to faculty practices in creating safe spaces for students in classrooms and serving as mentors for students.

Student organizations. Student organizations were another central place for students to cognitively map their campuses and get a sense of the campus climate, develop relationships, and find places where they felt like they fit. Some students joined student organizations related to their major, organizations related to their identity(s), and organizations related to their interests. Overall, 14 participants cited student organizations as places where they developed relationships with their peers. Of those 14 participants, six joined social fraternities. Four participants developed strong relationships with their brothers and felt like they found a place where they fit.

Identity-based student organizations were sometimes places where students simultaneously felt like they completely fit and did not fit. None of the institutions in this study had QPOC student organizations, and participants who joined identity-based groups joined either the LGBTQ+ student organization or a race-based organization (either NAACP or BSU). Jo'El and Greg both claimed that their sexuality was at least somewhat of an issue within their race-based organization and, as a result, learned that talking about their sexuality was likely not appropriate. Greg did not talk about his sexuality within SPSU's BSU because he did not talk about his sexuality unless specifically asked about it and because he did not want his sexuality to be a distraction for the organization. Even though he did not talk about his sexuality in BSU, Greg was passionate about the work the organization was doing, and he felt like it was a positive factor in his overall identity development and sense of belonging.

Student organizations based on student interests that are not identity-based are equally as important in terms of the role they play for students. Students with minoritized identities bring their identities with them wherever they go; however, student groups can serve as one more place

on campus where they must perform an environmental scan, learn appropriate behavior, and make decisions about which identities they are going to express and which ones they are not. It is important that minoritized students are able to engage in student organizations related to their academic major or their interests without fearing that their identities will negatively affect their experience within the organization, and potentially their perception of campus climate.

Participants in this study had mostly positive experiences in student organizations that were not related to their identities; however, negative experiences like Raheem and Timothy had within their fraternities could happen in any student organization. The thematic analysis conducted and sense of belonging model developed from this study identified student organizations as important sites that played a role in the sense of belonging of participants. It is essential that organizations are inclusive so that students can develop relationships and identify places where they feel like they fit.

Because several participants in this study indicated that they felt least likely to express all of their identities in Black student organizations, special attention should be paid to educating both advisors and student leaders in these organizations about the experiences of members with multiple minoritized identities. Additionally, since many participants indicated that they felt uncomfortable around Black men who acted in stereotypically masculine ways, the topic of Black masculinities should be explored and discussed within student organizations in an effort to understand that there are many ways to express masculinity that vary from stereotypical Black masculinity. This conversation could be facilitated by faculty or staff members who are familiar with the concept of Black masculinity and able to engage students in a dialogue about multiple ways for Black men to express their masculinity. Black gay men may feel more able to express their sexuality in these organizations if they feel like their sexuality and expression of

masculinity are accepted within the organization, which may affect their sense of belonging. Because some Black gay men in this study did not always feel like they belonged in spaces where they were not able to express their sexuality and had to conform to rigid expectations of masculinity, spaces that are not inclusive in this way may not be places where Black gay men feel comfortable and may negatively affect the factors in the sense of belonging model.

Collaboration across units. Participants sometimes talked about making the decision to cover or code switch their identity(s) without giving an example of something that happened at their institution that would lead them to believe their identity(s) would not be accepted. In other words, they sometimes made assumptions that the space they were in was not accepting without knowing anything about the space. While this is consistent with minority stress theory, research has shown that this has negative effects on minoritized persons (e.g., Meyer, 1995). Institutions of higher education should work to create more equitable environments where students know they are safe, or at least confident about what spaces are safe for them in order to minimize the effects of minority stress theory. Additionally, by improving campus climates, it becomes more likely that entire campuses can be safe spaces for students, rather than specific spaces, at specific times, with only specific people.

One way to make institutions safer spaces for minoritized students is to encourage collaboration across various units, both academic and student affairs, in order to both make institutions more equitable in practice, but also to communicate and show students that there are safe spaces where they do not have to hide or minimize their identity(s). In the instances of MCSU, GSU, and SPSU, units could develop collaborations in order to put on programming and initiatives for students with multiple minoritized identities. For example, LGBTQ+ resource centers and cultural centers could create ongoing program for QPOC. These units could also

work with academic units in order to build collaborations with units that have both similar and differing areas of study. Academic programs in LGBTQ+ and African American studies could collaborate, not only with each other in order to create classroom environments that are not racist or homophobic, but also with student affairs units in order to provide educational initiatives on campus and to be vocal about their acceptance of students with multiple minoritized identities. Also, programming and trainings for student groups, faculty, and staff could be created in order to help create more inclusive spaces for minoritized students, especially students with multiple minoritized identities.

Finally, while it is important the university leadership, faculty, and staff acknowledge and provide support to minoritized students when tragic events happen off campus, the support that minoritized students receive cannot only be reactionary. As discussed, students are likely to, at least initially, assume that their campus environment will mimic the environments that they have been in before. In other words, minoritized students will likely assume that there are spaces that are not safe for them and that many individuals will hold negative feelings about their identity(s). If institutions want to create safe spaces for students, they must not only provide support when major events occur, but consistently across time so that university personnel are not only claiming that institutions are safe spaces, but working towards creating and showing students that their institution is a safe space. It is imperative that institutions create more than mission statements and anti-discrimination statements, but that the values they espouse are actualized.

Implications for Theory

This study points towards several implications for theory, specifically, the use of intersectionality and anti-deficit research. I used intersectionality as a theoretical framework for this study; however, as I conducted interviews and performed initial coding of interviews it

became clear that most participants did not express their identities in intersectional ways. As indicated in Chapter Four, existing literature (i.e., Bowleg, 2013) argues that individuals cannot separate their multiple identities and while participants carried all of their identities into each situation and environment with them and *experienced* their identities intersectionally, they rarely *expressed* their identities intersectionally. Participants in this study were intentional in the ways they expressed their identities and held back identities based on their environment. Covering and code switching identities surely affected participant experiences; however, it was clear that, at least from participants' perspectives, the fact that they minimized or hid identities had a positive effect on their ability to feel a sense of belonging at their institution. It is essential that researchers who utilize intersectionality are mindful of all of the multiple environments within which participants exist. In the case of this study, participants were attending a university, but they also brought many messages with them from settings outside of the university including messages from family members, high schools, friends, and messages from larger society. Also, additional work should be done that uses both intersectional and minority stress theory to further explore how these frameworks can best be used together to understand the experiences of persons with multiple minoritized identities.

This study also suggests anti-deficit research is a powerful tool for understanding the factors that lead to sense of belonging and student persistence. In utilizing anti-deficit research practices in framing both the interview protocol and in interpreting findings in this study, I was able to identify and explore the positive experiences and factors that participants identified that led to them feeling a sense of belonging. While understanding overall campus climate is essential in the work of higher education, it is also important to consider more than the microaggressions and discrimination that students face in order to understand the positive factors on campus that

affect student experiences. The Black gay men in this study certainly illuminated heterosexist, homophobic, and racist experiences, and it is important to know that campuses are not always welcoming spaces for minoritized students; however, by focusing on positive factors participants identified and positive behaviors they exhibited, such as the ability to cognitively map their campuses and develop relationships on campus, I was able to understand that Black gay men are able to feel a sense of belonging at PWIs and develop a model that illustrates the process these men go through. Focusing on the positive qualities and experiences of students and not “what is wrong with them” or “what they are missing” leads to the ability to identify what it is about students that enables, enhances, or increases their likelihood of success and persistence.

Implications for Research

There are a number implications for research that stem from this study, I discuss four here. First, a comparable study should be conducted at HBCUs. Second, the sense of belonging model developed in this study should be used in research about the sense of belonging of other minoritized groups. The third implication for research relates to studying Black masculinities. Finally, future research should explore the relationship between sense of belonging and persistence.

Studying the sense of belonging of Black gay men at HBCUs. As research indicates, Black men graduate at lower rates than any other student group in higher education (e.g., Harper, 2012). Because the racial makeup of HBCUs is strikingly different from that of PWIs, it is likely that Black gay men face both similar and different factors that affect their sense of belonging. Patton (2011) studied the experiences of identity disclosure of Black gay and bisexual men at HBCUs, however, her study only identified some of the factors related to sense of belonging illustrated in this study. Researching the sense of belonging of Black gay men at HBCUs would

allow researchers to learn more about the experiences of minoritized Black men in another institutional setting and could help improve practices for institutions of higher education that could lead to higher persistence and graduation rates for Black men. I sought out Black gay men at PWIs in order to understand the experiences of these men within this specific environment. Intersectionality indicates that the environment in which one exists plays a large role in their overall experience. Researchers should explore if Black gay men attending HBCUs have similar experiences to those in this study and if the sense of belonging model is applicable within the environment of HBCUs.

Applying sense of belonging model to students with other minoritized identities. It is possible, maybe even probable, that the sense of belonging model is relevant for students with minoritized identities different from or in addition to Black and gay. Many minoritized students experience forms of discrimination and their identities are a large factor in how they navigate their campuses (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Because participant identities were the starting point in the sense of belonging model, future research should consider how different minoritized identities affect the process by which students feel a sense of belonging within their institutions.

Black masculinities. Additional research should also explore the concept of Black masculinities. I use the word masculinities here to assert that there are multiple ways to express and perform masculinity. As discussed in Chapter Two, the BGMUs in Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly's (2013b) study consistently hid their sexuality and tried to make up for it by engaging in activities that allowed them to be perceived as more masculine. This behavior may affect the sense of belonging of Black gay men and should be explored further.

As described in Chapter Two and within the findings of this study, the concept of Black masculinity holds Black men to explicit and narrow expectations of masculinity. Most

participants in this study were very aware of their behavior, specifically in relation to their gender performance, when they were around others, especially Black straight men. In Chapter Six I illustrated the ways that Kris changed his behavior in order to show respect towards his Black straight male friends. Future work should further explore types of Black masculinity expressed by students within higher education, the outcomes of those who do not adhere to rigid constructs of Black masculinity, and how those outcomes relate to sense of belonging. Extending from Black masculinity, research should further explore the experiences of Black gay men as they relate to the idea that acting in a masculine way is a way of showing respect to others, specifically Black straight men. Many participants talked about being conscious of their behavior and expression of their gay identity as to not make other (presumed straight) people uncomfortable.

Sense of belonging and persistence. Future research should further explore what about sense of belonging has a positive effect on persistence. In other words, why does sense of belonging have a positive effect on persistence when students are faced with negative experiences and environments within their institutions? In this study I explored the process of how Black gay men feel a sense of belonging. Participants described various experiences within their environments and perceptions of their campus climates that made them feel uncomfortable. The question then is, despite discrimination and microaggressions, does sense of belonging lead to persistence? Do minoritized students arrive at their institutions expecting to experience discrimination and microaggressions? Does sense of belonging serve as a buffer against the negative effects of discrimination on campuses? If sense of belonging does lead to persistence, how does it do so? While some scholars have recently identified factors that positively relate to sense of belonging for Black men, including student use of support services on campus and

students who felt confident about their transition to their institution (Strayhorn, et al., 2015; Wood & Harris III, 2015), it may be that the process and factors that lead to a sense of belonging as identified in the sense of belonging model in this study and the factors related to sense of belonging illustrated in Chapters Four and Five serve as buffers for students against negative experiences and environments so that the negative incidents experienced do not inhibit student sense of belonging.

Future research should further explore sense of belonging for minoritized students. It may be the case that, as Samura (2016) indicated, sense of belonging is a continuous process rather than a status students achieve and then keep. Two participants in this study, JJ and Raheem, went back to earlier steps in the sense of belong model and it seems likely that individuals could go back to other steps and resume their path towards feeling a sense of belonging. Samura's (2016) study suggests that it is theoretically possible that students may reengage in earlier behaviors in the model in an effort to feel a sense of belonging. Though participants in this study (JJ and Raheem) specifically went back to environmental scan and as a result, the model only contains an arrow to reflect their experiences, adding additional arrows in the model (from sense of belonging to learning appropriate behavior/cognitive mapping, expression of identities, and developing relationships and fitting in/finding place) could depict developing a sense of belonging as an iterative process.

Code switching was part of the process of feeling a sense of belonging for some participants in this study. Some who code switched did not seem to make sense of their decision to code switch while others clearly articulated when and why they made the decisions they did in regard to expressing their identities. In exploring this model further, future research should consider whether making sense of covering and code switching might be part of the model. Is it

necessarily the case that students understand that they are changing their behavior or expression of their identity(s) in order to feel a sense of belonging and is it actually necessary that they understand this behavior? If making sense of the process of covering and code switching has an effect on sense of belonging, there may be additional implications for practice and research in relation to helping students make sense of their expression of identities.

Because several Black gay men in this study engaged in covering or code switching at least one identity in order to feel a sense of belonging, future research should consider whether, in some cases, minoritized persons must sacrifice authenticity in order to feel a sense of belonging. While Stewart (2015) indicated that all of the participants in zir's study were still authentic when they code switched or performed their identities and Jones and colleagues (2012) discussed the concept of authenticity being fluid, it may not be the case that all minoritized persons are able to be authentic in utilizing such strategies to feel a sense of belonging. Finally, based on the findings of this study and the ways in which some participants expressed negative feelings about their decision to code switch, it seems possible that covering or code switching identities could prohibit or outweigh the benefits of sense of belonging. In other words, is it possible that acting in ways that are not authentic and hiding identity(s) might negatively affect a student's well being and ultimately, sense of belonging? Minority stress theory argues that when individuals are vigilant about their interactions with others because they are afraid of discrimination or violence, they may experience negative outcomes (e.g., Meyer, 1995). While sense of belonging is shown to have positive outcomes for students in higher education, there are still many questions that remain in relation to how sense of belonging happens and factors related to sense of belonging, how students with multiple minoritized identities feel a sense of

belonging, and if the process one goes through to feel a sense of belonging is positive for all college students.

Conclusion

In this study I set out to learn if Black gay men feel a sense of belonging at PWIs and the process Black gay men go through to feel a sense of belonging at PWIs. I found that all 16 Black gay men in this study did feel a sense of belonging and created a model to illustrate the process participants went through in order to feel a sense of belonging. Based on my findings, it is clear that Black gay men can feel a sense of belonging despite having negative experiences at their institutions. The sense of belonging model created from this study indicates that performing cognitive mapping and gaining an understanding of campus climate, learning appropriate behavior, expressing identities, developing relationships, and finding fit/place lead to sense of belonging for Black gay men.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Final Interview Protocol

- Tell me a bit about yourself?
 - Can you tell me a little bit about your family?
 - What was high school like for you?
 - What was your coming out experience like (pre and during college)?
- Tell me about your overall experience at your current school?
 - Tell me about your comfort level on campus?
 - Tell me about a time when you felt accepted on your campus?
 - What are the ways you feel like your institution is a good fit for you? What are the ways you don't feel like you fit?
 - Tell me about a time you felt like you belonged at your institution? How about a time when you felt like you didn't belong?
- I'd like to learn about your transition to your school.
 - What was orientation like?
 - What was it like when you met your roommate? People in your residence hall? First day of classes?
 - How about your first few weeks?
 - Can you tell me about your first year of school?
 - Can you tell me about the resources you've found on campus that have been helpful to you? Are there things you haven't found that you think would be helpful for you?
- Everyone holds multiple identities. Some examples of identities people talk about are sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, religion, first generation college student, and so on. You see people on campus from all over Michigan, the US, and the world to express themselves in different ways and try on different identities in college.
 - What aspects of your identity feel important to you?
 - How do you express or show these identities?
 - How important is it to you to bring your multiple identities together in one time and place?
- How do you know when you belong in a community?
 - Do you feel like you belong here at your institution? What makes you feel that way?
 - Can you tell me about a time where you knew you belonged to a group (i.e., student group, group of friends, academic major)?
 - Has there ever been a time when you felt like you didn't belong somewhere on campus? Can you tell me what happened?
- I'd like to learn about your academic experiences on campus. How do you feel as a student at your school?

- Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you were academically prepared for college? What a time when you didn't feel prepared?
 - How have your classroom experiences been with faculty? With peers?
 - What is your academic performance like? GPA? How do you feel about that?
 - Can you tell me about interactions you have with faculty outside the classroom?
 - Do you talk about your course material outside of classes? Can you tell me about this? Where? With who?
 - How did you decide your major? Do you like your major?
 - How much time would you say you spend on coursework outside of class?
- I'd like to learn about your social experiences on campus. How do you feel about the social environment?
 - Can you tell me about groups that you are involved with on campus? Are you involved in any groups related to your sexual orientation and/or race? What made you decide to become involved with these groups? What does your involvement look like? Member, occasional visitor, executive board?
 - Who do you hang out with in terms of your friends? Close friends? Acquaintances?
 - Who would you consider to be your peer group?
- Can you tell me about your living experiences during college?
 - Where have you lived?
 - What were these living environments like for you?
- What has dating been like for you in college?
- How do you perceive your campus in terms of what it's like for diverse students?
- Can you tell me about a time you experienced discrimination on campus? What do you believe was the reason for this discrimination? How did you handle it?
- What factors influence your experience on campus most?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you were able to safely and comfortably express your identities? What about a time when you couldn't? Which identities?
 - Overall, do you feel like you can be yourself on campus?
- I've heard people say that they sometimes feel like they have to prioritize different parts of themselves at different times. Have you ever felt like you had to choose between or prioritize any of the parts of your identity (ex. Black, gay, man, class, etc.)? Why or why not?
- Can you tell me about any communities outside of campus (family, church, work, friends, etc.) that you are involved with? Do you have a job on or off campus? How do you manage your money?

- Have you ever thought about leaving this institution? Why? When you thought about leaving, what kept you here?
- What is it like to be a Black gay man on your campus?

Appendix B
Participant Questionnaire

Pseudonym/Name you'd like to be identified as: _____

How old are you?: _____

How many years have you been at this school: _____

Did you transfer here from somewhere else? If yes, where? _____

What is your major? _____

What is your GPA? _____

Are you eligible to receive Pell Grants through financial aid? _____

What was your high school GPA? _____

Where are you from originally? _____

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Research Study Title: Black Gay Men and Sense of Belonging at Predominantly White
Institutions of Higher Education: An Intersectional Approach

This is a consent form for a research project that will examine the experiences of Black gay men who are attending classes at colleges or universities. If you choose to participate, we will conduct two (2) face-to-face interview with open-ended questions that will take approximately one (1) hour to one hour and a half (1.5) each to complete. The interviews will take place in a “safe place” agreed upon by both the subject and the researcher, where your privacy will be respected. At the end of your second interview you will be given a \$25 gift certificate for your participation.

The researchers will audio record responses without any identifiers linked to a subject’s real identity; we will however assign a “pseudonym” or a “false” identifier to link your responses until we can transcribe the tapes. Your personal identity will be kept confidential. The results of the survey may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

Your participation will contribute to our knowledge of how gay Black men who are college students, understand and experience their identity and their college campus. Claire Gonyo is the study coordinator for this research project and is working under the supervision of Dr. Kristen Renn.

You must be at least 18 years of age or older to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to answer all of the questions that the researcher asks, or you may skip any that you find too uncomfortable without losing benefits. You may withdraw at any time from this research project. Your responses or decision whether or not to participate in this study will have no penalty of any kind and will not have any effect on your status as a student. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Claire Gonyo at gonyocla@msu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Kristen Renn, Associate Professor in Educational Administration, 426 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, by phone: (517)-355-6617, or email: renn@msu.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, you would like to obtain more information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University Human Research Protection Programs at (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, or email: irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 202 Olds Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing MI 48824.

By engaging in the face-to-face interview you voluntarily agree to be in this research project. If you would like a copy of this consent form, one will be provided. Thank you for your participation!

Appendix D
Email Solicitation

Are you a Black gay man?
Are you an undergraduate student in a college or university?
Would you like to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card?

Would you be interested in being a part of a confidential research study on the experiences Black gay cisgender men at predominantly White colleges and universities? My name is Claire Gonyo. I am a doctoral student at Michigan State University in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education program. I am looking for participants who self-identify as Black gay men who are attending a college or university to interview for my dissertation. Participants do NOT have to be out to be a part of this study (you can be out, not out, or anywhere in between). This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Michigan State University (approval: # i044148).

Your participation would include two interviews that would take about 45 minutes to an hour and a half of your time (each). For your time you will be compensated with a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you can stop participating in the study at any time. Every effort will be made to keep your identity **confidential**. Please contact Claire Gonyo (gonyocla@msu.edu), doctoral student, if you are interested in participating or would like more information.

Thank you,

Claire Gonyo
Study Coordinator
Doctoral Candidate, Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University

CONFIDENTIAL STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GAY MEN

- Are you a **Black gay cisgender man** attending a college or university?
- Are you an **undergraduate** student?
- Participate in two interviews (45-90 minutes each) and receive a **\$25 Amazon gift card** for your time.
- You **do not have to be out** to be a part of this study. (You can be out, not out, or anywhere in between.)

Please contact Claire Gonyo (PhD student in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, Michigan State) at **gonyocla@msu.edu** for more information.

This study has been approved by the Michigan State Institutional Review Board (approval i044148)

Figure 8.1. Solicitation Flyer

Appendix F
Quarter Sheet Solicitation



Figure 8.2. Quarter Sheet Solicitation

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