Identity

A Qualitative Approach to the Intersection of Sexual, Ethnic, and Gender Identities

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This article reports on a qualitative strategy designed to study the intersection of sexual, ethnoracial, and gender identities, and how people who hold those identities interact with social contexts. Researchers often study identities as isolated constructs (e.g., "Latino," "gay") and by using separate measures to characterize each construct. This approach may be helpful depending on the questions asked, but it can also miss important elements of a self-system, such as those that stem from the intersection of identities or from people's interactions with social contexts. The strategy suggested in this article can help researchers overcome these limitations. It allows researchers to study how people craft their identities over time, through recurring and sometimes conflicted negotiations with institutional settings such as those of the church, family, and work.

Identity researchers have begun to describe the intersection of different social identities and the crosscutting of identities, statuses, and roles (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). This growing interest in intersectionality speaks of a need to overcome certain weaknesses and contro-

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versies in the literature. At stake are questions about the linkages of different identity domains, how the various aspects of the self interconnect, and how various identities become active or inactive as people locate themselves in various social contexts. Stewart and McDermott (2004) suggested three basic premises to help understand related questions about intersectionality: "(a) no social group is homogenous, (b) people must be located in terms of social structures that capture the power relations implied by those structures, and (c) there are unique, nonadditive effects of identifying with more than one social group" (p. 531).

The notion of intersectionality becomes especially important when studying the crossroads of racial/ethnic and sexual minority identities, and how these identities relate to the power relations implied by social contexts and structures. Here are important questions not only about the merging of identities, but also about the emergence of unique ways of experiencing self and other that can result from such intersections. Crenshaw (1996), for example, described a nonadditive model of identity. She noted that an African American lesbian identity is distinctively different from both African American and lesbian identities, and that the intersection creates a new construct that must be viewed as unique. Thus, African American lesbians face social and psychological concerns that are different from those faced both by heterosexual African American women and White lesbians and which can be captured only at the intersection of race and sexual identity.

Although researchers have recognized that identities related to race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality need to be considered in conjunction, they have seldom looked at the actual intersection of identities to elucidate distinct new categories. Rather, researchers have tended to add multiple identities. As Glenn (2000) noted in the case of gender, "if we begin with gender separated out, we have to 'add' race in order to account for the situation of women of color. This leads to an additive model in which women of color are described as suffering from 'double' jeopardy" (pp. 3–4). Crenshaw's (1996) theory suggests that accounting for nonadditive effects of intersected identities is important not only theoretically, but also because of the possible social and psychological conflicts that intersectionality can carry.

Consider, for example, an African American lesbian respondent quoted in Rust (2003): "When I came out, it was made clear to me that my being queer was in some sense a betrayal of my 'blackness.' … I spent a lot of years thinking that I could not be me and be 'really' black too" (p. 232). A Mexican American woman in the same study said: "[I] felt like … a traitor to my own race when I acknowledge my love of women. I have felt like I've bought into the white 'disease' of lesbianism" (p. 232). Similarly, Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, and Soto (2002) saw in gay Black men's identities a conflict between two cultural poles—racial and sexual—which have unique and sometimes stressful implications for the person and the group.

The interactions among various components of a person's identities are complex and difficult to schematize or isolate analytically. For example, for a man

who identifies as gay, Latino, and Colombian, any of these identities can become more or less significant, functional, or active depending on context, time, and institutional setting. A person who experiences intersectional minority identities may thus experience psychological and social demands that are unique to the specific constellation of such identities and related power structures. But, complex as they are, questions about intersectionality can throw a new light not only on sociopsychological theory, but also on important political issues. They help us better understand racism, sexism, and homophobia because a person who holds such intersectional identities is faced not with each of these "isms" in isolation, but with a fluid and contextual sexualization of race and a racialization of sexuality.

Hence, it is necessary to expand our theoretical understanding of the intersections of race/ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. However, because intersectionality is only an emerging conceptual framework, there are empirical limitations in the field and a dearth of adequate measurement instruments and empirical strategies.

Quantitative Approaches to the Measurement of Identity

Existing quantitative measures by and large focus on separate and single identity constructs rather than on their intersection. Exceptions include identity hierarchy measures that use cluster analysis to measure and quantify associations among various identities and roles. For example, we have previously reported on one such measure as it applies to lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations (Stirratt, Meyer, Ouellette, & Gara, 2008). However, for the most part, identity measures assess race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender as separate constructs; and racial/ethnic identities are often measured as relatively isolated from other identities. Instruments usually focus on strength of identity through ideological positions and feelings of affirmation and bonding to an individual's ethnic or racial groups (Ashmore et al., 2004; Contrada et al., 2001; Phinney, 1992; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Attitudes toward, and interactions with, other ethnic groups also are often measured. Phinney (1992), for instance, included in her Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure items such as "I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group" and "I enjoy being around people from ethnic groups other than my own" (pp. 172–173).

Measures of gay and lesbian identities often target certainty or uncertainty of self-identification as well as identity development via coming out stages (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) used semistructured interviews to assess gender-based differences in the sequencing of sexual identity milestones such as first same-sex attraction, first same-sex sexual activity, labeling of sexual identity, and first disclosure of nonheterosexual identity to another person. Whereas racial and sexual minority identity measurements frequently focus on strength of identity, gender models and

related quantitative assessments often focus on formation of gender roles, political identities (Gurin & Townsend, 1986), and related ideological positioning (Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Henley, Meng, O'Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998; Zucker, 2003). For example, Henderson-King and Stewart (1994) examined the relationship between group identity and feminist consciousness by asking women about their identification with group labels such as "women" and "feminist."

These examples show that quantitative measures usually position identities related to race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation as parallel rather than intersectional. These approaches may be helpful, depending on the questions that researchers ask; for example, they can usefully uncover an overall sense of belonging to one's ethnic or racial group. But, these approaches can also miss unique psychological and social elements that exist at the intersection of identities insofar as they do not allow respondents to reflect on the ways that such ethnic attachments interact with attachments related to gay or lesbian identities. These strategies may therefore limit our understanding of the complexity of identity and group attachment insofar as they obscure how respondents navigate multiple and sometimes conflicting collective identities. Indeed, these strategies may obscure central aspects of psychological cohesion and of individual-social integration among people who hold minority identities.

A Qualitative Assessment of Intersectionality

To addresses such limitations, we suggest a qualitative strategy for the study of the intersection of identities. We believe that open-ended approaches such as the one described below are useful in assessing identity processes, transactions between self and other, and temporality. They allow respondents to talk about idiosyncratic identity constellations, and can capture the intersection of identities and their relationship to social contexts (see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Our strategy was designed to capture key features of various qualitative approaches, such as personal narrative and life histories of classic or critical ethnography (e.g., Angrosino, 1992; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Wolf, 1992), while nonetheless providing relative economy of administration and analysis. In addition to providing data on the intersectionality of minority identities, our approach was also designed to help us assess the social dimensions of stress that are related to holding various and sometimes conflicting minority identities (e.g., gay and Latino). Though our focus was intersectionality, the approach presented in this article may be used to study an array of theoretical concerns regarding identity, such as role conflict, or the construction of minority identities through interactions between the individual and the institutional order.

METHODS

Our qualitative data on identity were collected as part of a larger longitudinal study on stress, identity, and health called Project Stride. The project was designed to study prejudice and discrimination as stressors related to sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and gender in order to assess their impact on mental health and to describe the role of identity in moderating the relationship of stress and mental illness (Meyer, 2003).

Sample

Project Stride included an overall sample of 524 respondents who came from wide-ranging sociogeographic areas in New York City: The respondents lived in 32 zip codes and were recruited from 274 venues as described below (Frost, Dietrich, Narváez, & Meyer, 2006). For this report, however, we focus on a subsample ($n = 41$) of participants who were asked to complete an open-ended interview in addition to the larger survey interview (demographics are described in Table 1).

All respondents were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) from venues such as coffeehouses, public parks, bars, bookstores, special events, social or interest groups, and community organizations. We targeted a range of venues to include varied cultural, political, ethnic, and sexual representation while also avoiding those with therapeutic functions (e.g., 12-step programs). Researchers implemented a strategy of ethnographic immersion, and 25 field-workers were trained to screen and recruit potential study participants from various functions in these venues (Frost et al., 2006). Eligibility crite-

TABLE 1
Description of Participants' Demographics

Variable	White (n = 15, 38%)		Black (n = 15, 38%)		Latino (n = 10, 25%)		Total (N = 40)	
(Continuous)	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*
Age	34.27	11.82	33.07	9.13	35.4	8.48	34.1	9.88
Income	40,894	28,679	28,755	23,850	29,749	20,287	33,556	25,054
(Categorical)	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Male	7	47	5	33	4	40	16	40
Female	8	53	10	67	6	60	24	60
Unemployed	1	7	6	40	1	10	8	20
≤ HS education	1	7	4	27	1	10	6	15

ria included: New York City residency for 2 years or more; age 18 to 59 years old; sufficient English language proficiency to engage in casual conversation; and self-identification along discrete categories of gender (male or female), sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other terms indicating same-sex orientation such as "queer"), and race/ethnicity (Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, White, or other terms referring to these categories). The four full-time interviewers (2 men, White and Hispanic, and two White women) were graduate students at Columbia University and were familiar with various LGB communities in New York City.

The qualitative interview reported in this article lasted 40 minutes on average and was conducted as the final component in a comprehensive face-to-face interview. The mean length of time to complete the full assessment battery was 3 hours and 49 minutes (SD = 1.0 hour).

Construction of the Qualitative Interview Guide

Our strategy aimed at eliciting self-referential narratives about identity, without confining the respondents to singular identities, so that respondents could describe how they perceived their identities within sociocultural contexts and over time. At the same time, we strove for precision in obtaining answers to specific research questions as well as efficiency in data analysis. We opted for semistructured interviews that aimed at: (a) eliciting personal definitions of identity and narratives about interrelations among identities, statuses, and roles; (b) providing narratives about the interaction between identity and institutional settings such as work, family, and community life; and (c) describing social stressors associated with these identities and institutions. This approach was piloted in two phases between June 3, 2003, and December 23, 2003. Each of these phases involved eight pilot participants and helped us test initial open-ended questions, probes, and visual cues that were modified and rendered more easily understandable.

Content and Administration

Following the pilot assessment, our final approach included four interviewing parts that were administered as described below. Because interviewing was not based on a questionnaire, but was instead a flexible medium to help respondents talk about their identities, interviewers were allowed to alter both the order of questions and their specific content depending on the flow of the interview. Interviewers probed narratives following standard guidelines to qualitative interviewing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), but we devised specific instructions and probes concerning possible biases on identity and social stress. For quality control, researchers randomly monitored taped interviews every month for the first 4 months to control for adherence to guidelines.
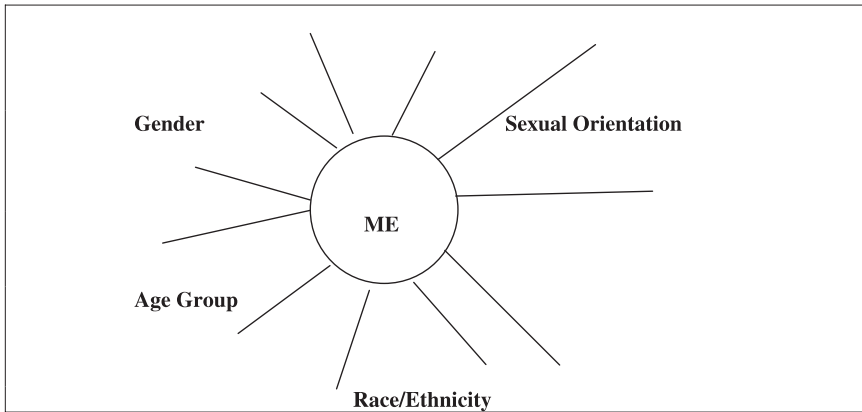
FIGURE 1   Identities and roles visual clue.

Part 1: Labeling of identities and roles.

At the beginning of the assessment, the respondent was presented with a visual cue (Figure 1) and asked to write any number of identity and role labels that he or she saw as self-descriptive. This visual cue shows 12 arms randomly protruding out of a circle where the word "ME" is inscribed. The cue includes four pretyped categories of interest to the overall project—gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and age. However, respondents were told that they were not required to enter any labels to describe these pretyped categories and that they could alter the preprinted labels or add other labels as they wished. The arms as well as any area on the page could be used to fill in any identity labels that the respondent associated with himself or herself (e.g., "lesbian," "Black"). The respondent was asked to enter as many identities as he or she wished, and to arrange them in any spatial design of his or her choice. To elicit an open-ended array of identity labels, respondents were asked to write down any identities and roles that "best describe who you are on this sheet of paper," to include identities or roles that they found challenging or problematic, and to "describe who you are in terms of roles and identities as best as you can."

Interviewers used probes to understand the respondent's engagement with identity constructs. They also encouraged respondents to think about their decisions on what to include in, and what to exclude from, the diagram. For example, if a respondent did not provide any label under the categories of sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, gender, and age group, the interviewer asked why such categories were not addressed. This was not done to force participants to nominate these identities, but to understand why such categories were left unstated. For example, a respon-

dent could thus explain why a category such as race/ethnicity was unimportant to him or her. The interviewer similarly probed identity labels that were not sufficiently elaborated by the respondent. For example, labels such as "gay," "lesbian," or "Latino" sometimes seemed to participants as being obvious and beyond the need for clarification. In such instances, an interviewer would ask, "If I were from another culture, how would you explain to me what you mean by Latino so that I understand what it means to you today?"

In general, interviewers attempted to follow and trace the respondent's own logic so that narratives conveyed how the respondent subjectively made sense of, and ascribed meanings and values to, his or her identities.

Part 2: Relationships among identities.

After identity labels were elicited, respondents were asked to talk about them. Respondents described how important these descriptors were and whether certain identities harmonized with others or not. For example, a respondent might discuss how his Latino identity related to his gay identity, and in which settings these identities might be in harmony or in conflict. Respondents were asked whether the identities entered "tie in with one another or not" and "In what ways do [these listed identifies] compete with one another or are in harmony?" After the diagram was filled in with identities and labels, the interviewers probed, "Is there anything on this sheet that does not capture how you think of yourself?" in order to segue into the narrative portion of the interview.

Part 3: Relationships between identities and social institutions.

After discussing their identities, respondents were asked to talk about stressors or strengths related to these identities. Such discussions focused on the respondent's daily life, on how he or she interacted with other people in various social settings, and on whether conflict or harmony arose from those interactions and, if so, to what degree. To help respondents think of social spaces where they might interact, a second visual cue showed labels of various "areas of life" scattered on a sheet of paper in no apparent order (Figure 2). These social spheres were identified during the pilot phase (neighborhood/community, intimate relationships/lovers, work/career, freedom of expression, family, personal safety, health, college, religious/spiritual life, early education, and politics). For example, some respondents discussed a gay identity with respect to work, a Black identity with respect to church, and so forth. Respondents, in short, were asked to describe how their identities "might have affected certain areas of your life, and about good and bad experiences related to these areas of life [Figure 2]." They discussed experiences related to any of the areas listed, introduced areas of life that were not listed, or both.

AREAS OF LIFE

    Neighborhood/Community

  Intimate Relationships/Lovers

   Work/Career Freedom of Expression

         Family
Personal Safety
        Health

 College

     Religious/Spiritual Life
Early Education
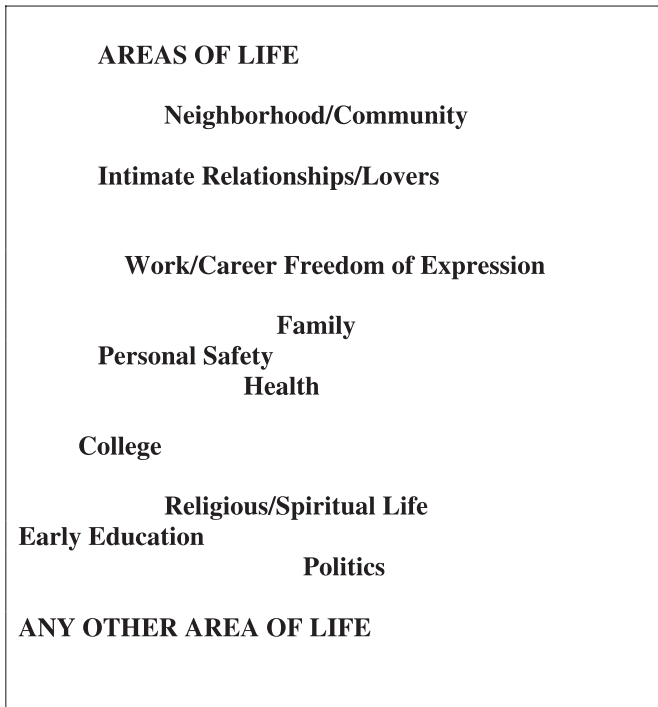   **Politics**

ANY OTHER AREA OF LIFE

FIGURE 2   Relationships between identities and institutions visual clue.

Interviewers watched for and discouraged narratives about social stressors that took an impersonal tone (e.g., generic political statements about gay oppression) if such responses subtracted elements of the respondent's personal story and were devoid of personal significance. Of course, some respondents experienced their identities politically. But, interviewers needed to probe these statements to understand how the respondents themselves experienced the world politically in their everyday life and through their particular senses of self. Hence, impersonal statements such as "in this society, people are homophobic" were rendered personal by probing for concrete anecdotes that depicted specific situations in specific settings (e.g., "Can you give me some examples of how this has affected your own life?").

Part 4: Narratives about "nonevents."

We defined "nonevents" as conditions that are stressful because of their absence, not their occurrence (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Such events relate to experiences and resources that were withheld from or not achieved by the

person (e.g., the denial of a state-recognized marriage to a gay person). Though such experiences were captured throughout the narrative, they also often eluded a participant's awareness. After experimenting with different ways of asking about nonevents in the pilot interviews, we added the following question, "How do you think your life would be like without homophobia, racism, and sexism?" Though this question seems vague, it successfully helped respondents to reflect on experiences and resources that were unavailable to them.

Analysis

Our initial reading of the interviews was guided by our need to assess how respondents understood their identities and senses of self, and how they related to various social milieus. More abstractly, we aimed to theoretically understand how individual identity systems were linked or not linked with social systems. Four general and a priori questions guided this initial reading:

1. How did respondents understand, organize, and script their self-descriptors (identities, statuses, and roles)?
2. What meanings were ascribed to descriptors related to sexuality, gender, and ethnicity?
3. How did they understand the interactions among self-descriptors and the interactions between self-descriptors and social contexts?
4. How did respondents, through these interactions, create norms and behaviors that allowed them to cope with, to adapt to, or to contest the scripts implied by mainstream social environments (such as work, family, and church)?

Narratives sometimes revolved around self-descriptors that were not associated with sexuality or ethnicity (e.g., "cyclist"), but this article focuses primarily on meanings related to sexuality and ethnicity.

Atlas.ti (Muhr, 2004) was used to organize the narrative material. The coding of narratives followed a paradigm suggested by grounded theory (Strauss, 1999); namely, a first impressionistic reading of the narratives, together with side annotations ("open coding"), progressively allowed us to disaggregate the bulk of data along specific narrative themes. We proceeded in our analysis, that is to say, from open coding to "axial" or thematic coding. The latter was progressively built as we aggregated recurring themes suggested by the former. This thematization of the data led us to write memoranda on what we came to perceive as the core themes that depicted the relationship between individual identities and social institutions. The theoretical schema that we present below is moored around such core themes.

"In vivo" and "sociological" codes were used. In vivo codes stemmed from the respondents' own words, and sociological codes stemmed from the researchers'

theoretically informed interpretation of the respondents' words. The first author led sociological coding, but coding schemata were reviewed by all researchers and decided on by consensus. Our sociological codes (and related memoranda) were often meant to address the theoretical foci of the overall project, and helped us understand whether or not these foci were empirically plausible: The overall project focused on the following themes: (a) *identity prominence:* how important an identity is in the person's overall identity hierarchy (e.g., some sexual identities listed by some respondents, such as "lesbian," were often invested with more personal significance than some racial identities such as "White"); (b) *identity valence:* whether identities are subjectively seen as positive, negative, or neutral; and (c) *stress and resilience:* the psychosocial burden that is related to minority status and identity, and the degree to which the minority person adapts to, copes with, or contests mainstream cultural and psychological demands.

RESULTS

Identity Prominence

Typically, self-descriptors provided by participants varied in prominence and respondents described some of their identities as very important while relegating others as secondary. For example, a 28-year-old White lesbian wrote "French" under race/ethnicity on the visual cue. During the narrative, she discussed this in comparison with a White identity: "I know that I am [White] … but it, because … I'm never reminded of it, I kind of forget that that's what I am. So I tend to forget to put it as a strong part of my identity." In contrast to this description of race/ethnicity as peripheral in terms of prominence, the same respondent described a prominent "butch lesbian" identity which, the narrative further suggests, has gained prominence in recent years as a result of interactions with the "butch-lesbian community":

> As a masculine woman, I was never made to feel attractive by people around me because it's not conventional, and rather than sort of flaunt it, you know, of course my reaction was to hide it, and to not know what to do with it. So to meet someone who says not only do I find you sexy but you belong to this community of people and they find you sexy too, and you know, you have this place … really made me capable of exploring that side of me.

A Black female respondent provided an example of racial and sexual identities that seemed equal in prominence:

> So, being Black, I always put that out there because … that's who I am, I'm a Black woman, first, but then, I can't separate being a Black woman and a gay woman,

there're still one and the same… . There's no separation between me being gay and being Black, and being a woman, all of this is the same, all of this is one thing. I'm identified as all, but I'm not just a Black woman, I'm not just a woman, I'm not just a gay woman.

A special strength of our interviewing strategy was showing that identity prominence can adapt to social contexts and change accordingly. One 34-year-old Latino gay man described his gay identity as prominent in the context of gay friends and intimate relationships, but he described the same identity as suppressed in the context of work and church. The change in prominence was so distinct that it was accompanied by changes in physical presentation:

I think in the public face I don't think I indicate that I am gay. And pretty much people will assume I am straight and I don't make any effort to correct that. And that's sort of how I want it … I act in a different sort of way with my friends than I would be with colleagues and coworkers or anyone outside my gay friends. So maybe the jokes that we would tell or the reference to a show or something that I did that would label me as gay. So yeah, I would act totally different. Oh yeah, church as well, the concept is that I am straight … when I talk on the phone with a church member my voice gets deeper and louder so there almost two personalities.

We were also able to detect shifts in prominence of identities that resulted from maturation: A 42-year-old White lesbian, for example, demonstrated that racial/ethnic identity became less prominent and a sexual identity became more prominent along with a shift from negative to positive sexual identity valence. In response to the visual cue that asks for identity labels, she composed a label that incorporates these historical shifts in her self-identity, describing herself as a "southerner, former Christian/Baptist, White, small town girl turned urbanite [in] exile." The narrative elaborating on this label showed that, during the respondent's childhood and adolescence, her identity revolved around a racial/ethnic identity ("White southerner"). But, her move to New York City, precipitated in part by her parents' discovery and termination of her relationship with her girlfriend, triggered large life changes, "All the main pillars of my identity, until I was twenty-one … sort of got just knocked out from under me, rapidly, kind of in an acute way, and I came here [to New York City] and had to put it all back together again." After 20 "traumatic" years of "exile" in New York City—where many changes in her self-perception and affiliation occurred—her identity came to be avowed mostly in terms of her sexual orientation ("lesbian"). "Trying to deal with coming out and all that … I feel like a lot of it [being a lesbian] really became much more prominent."

Prominent identities often seemed to provide existential axes of sorts, central support for the respondents' sense of self or sense of being. Often, respondents seemed to experience a hierarchically apportioned self, with some prominent iden-

tities holding sway over the person's existential moorings. The aforementioned narratives, for example, suggest that less prominent identities such as "White" cohered around prominent sexual identities such as "lesbian." They thus suggest that the intersectionality of identities is not always horizontal (or radial), but also vertical (or axial). As suggested by the previous examples, our approach also helped us see that such verticality of intersected identities can shift with time and social context. Participants also experienced two or more identities as equally prominent, for example, "Black" and "gay" in the foregoing example. (Indeed, as we will discuss below, when participants also experienced these horizontal identities as competing, their sense of self appeared strained, as if bereft of a clear existential horizon.)

Identity Valence

As we observed with prominence, the narratives also showed variations in valence (especially from negative to positive or to neutral) of sexual and ethnic identities and important contextual and temporal shifts in identity valence. For example, a 22-year-old Puerto Rican bisexual man described his recursive self-evaluation and his perceptions of social attitudes toward homosexuality as follows:

> When I was younger, I was always afraid, ashamed of being, you know, of being attracted to members of my sex… . And, you know, I was just very, I always felt wrong because that's what society instilled in me, you know, and my father, and all that stuff.

This shame pervaded "just everything, everybody, everything," and was "my deepest, darkest secret, my biggest shame." As with prominence, which showed variation over time and context, our strategy helped us note variations in valence. This respondent's sense of shame changed "dramatically" from the time of his adolescence: "[Now I] got no problems with anything…. My family, everybody, everything's cool [with my bisexuality]. And this is the way I am, and I like me, I accept me." Another participant suggested a rather neutral racial identity: "Well, I don't think I initially see myself as a Black man, I think it becomes conscious to me when I am put in a situation […] and *someone else* [italics added] is seeing me as a Black man."

The identities that participants portrayed as having high prominence and positive valence seemed to be a central feature of the respondents' identity performance and social presentation. These sorts of identities were typically deployed unambiguously regardless of institutional setting. A White female suggested, for example, "I meet you for thirty seconds and come out to you … like in the supermarket, I don't care." By contrast, identities with negative or neutral valences, even if privately prominent, tended to be downplayed or entirely suppressed in certain social settings, as though the self were predicated externally in these occasions, or

even colonized by institutional demands. A Latina respondent showed how she used to hide her lesbian identity:

> You don't want to hurt nobody by coming out with that, because everybody's against it, so now you go, okay, let me give the world, or let me give my family, what they want. Let me just sleep with a man. That way they won't have no funny feelings, if you're not with nobody for like ten years. If you stay single for ten years, no partners, they won't think something's wrong with you, or you're sick or something. But then you try to get involved with a man, you try to cover up what's really inside of you, and the funny thing about it is even your partner doesn't pick it up.

As with prominence, our strategy also helped us evaluate how identity valence related to the theme of intersectionality. Often, the constellation of different identities appeared as if held together by many (self-)judgments, and by emotional (not merely cognitive or ratiocinated) appraisals. The narratives suggested that an emotionally charged undercurrent of self-evaluation often sustained the many intersected identities and senses of the self, and that this also changed temporally and even contextually as the person moved away, for example, from such contexts as the church or the family.

Stress and Resilience

Narratives also helped us examine how identities interacted with different areas of life. Questions about areas of life helped respondents talk about social contexts that can place demands for adaptation or that can be more or less supportive of certain aspects of the self. The church, for instance, was often described as a source of stress related to LGB identities. A 34-year-old Puerto Rican gay man said: "[The church] is currently a huge stress right now because my church does not accept homosexuality." Several narratives described the church as a source of struggle because respondents' sexual identities were rejected by, and often hidden from, the church. Yet, the church was also a source of support. An African American man in his early twenties learned from his church that, "You'd go to hell if you are anything but straight. What am I doing that's so wrong? … Why is God not happy with this [homosexuality]?" Yet, he later moved to a more tolerant church, where "you can be who you are," so that this new church became the most important source of social support for him, even though the process overall was not easy:

> I started going to an openly gay church. Then I stopped going there because I felt guilty, then I started going to, like, this other one that I've been going to for a while now, and I'm starting slowly going back… . You can just come to church and know that you're going to be loved and respected and cared for and, you know, nobody's

going to think less of you or more of you just because, you know, you believe what you believe, or you live the life the way you do.

Others learned to accept their sexuality even within their religion and reframed their religiosity accordingly. A 50-year-old Puerto Rican lesbian explained, "Now when I pray, I don't say I'm sorry that I sinned because I slept with [Maria] again today. I say, 'Thank you for this day, and thank you for giving me [Maria].'"

Family was also important as a source of both stress and support. A 19-year-old gay man, who was a first-generation Hispanic immigrant to New York City, described the difficulties that family rejection posed:

Us Hispanic people, our family … if your family knows your sexual orientation in the Latino community, they're very … they can't accept that you're gay… . It's difficult to say that you are gay, to accept that, sometimes you think that you are bisexual, you think that you are doing wrong because that's a sin.

Similarly, a 45-year-old African American gay man from the South Bronx said:

I get more flack for being gay from my family and stuff than I do from friends… I mean, they [family members] call me names. My brother doesn't really like me being around his, well, my nephew, and everything… . Before I was OK, that I was babysitting, but once he found out I was gay, you can't babysit, and … if I take my other nephews out to the movies or something, I can't take them to the movies unless I got somebody else, another adult with me and stuff.

But, families, notably, also changed and became supportive as a 34-year-old Puerto Rican gay man described:

When I first came out it was a big problem [for my family] but over the years things have improved. Every once in a while you hit a bump in the road where something might come up, where someone in the family might say something that might hurt. But then my defense mechanism is "They are still adjusting to this" something that I have lived with my whole life—they have only had a few years to adjust.

The 22-year-old Puerto Rican bisexual respondent who described shame that pervaded "just everything, everybody, everything" explained that his family became a major source of support after he overcame the initial fear of disappointing them because of his bisexuality:

Matter of fact, my mother's got a gay friend that lives down the hall. He's got a crush on me for a while. My mother's always trying to get me, hook me up with this guy… . She was always telling me, you know, why don't you? He's a nice guy, you should try, you know, get together with him.

Social contexts thus shifted. And, these shifts were often prodded by the respondents themselves. By coming out and by asserting their identities, they managed to change certain social dynamics and at least their outward valuations (e.g., family, work). As social contexts shifted so did their demands for adaptation and related stressors. Hence, these identities were not typically "constructed" by the demands of the social order and participants, instead, actively constructed and reconstructed certain features of their social milieus. More often, however, respondents managed their need for adaptation and their capacity for contestation in various ways. The 34-year-old Puerto Rican gay man quoted above explained how he economized on the need for adaptation depending on context:

> When I refer to "public," it's any environment where people don't know who I am or don't know me very well, and where, I guess, I am sort of being evaluated in some sense, and where that evaluation might have an influence on my life. Because, if I go to the store or pharmacy to buy something and I do something where I am flagged as gay or whatever, I could really care less, and that's sort of in the public. But in church or at work, where people don't know me very well, and their evaluation or opinion of me may somehow affect my working relationship with them, then I need to have certain safeguards.

Narratives also described resilient adaptation to broader contexts such as immigration to a new city. The 34-year-old Puerto Rican gay man discussed above said:

> I came to this country at the age of six. I didn't speak English at all… . And so there was a lot of insecurities that developed as a child due to that… . And that has, for instance, caused me at some point in my life turn my back on my heritage. And then later on in life realizing that my ethnicity is who I am, and had to sort of reinvent myself … and retract all those things that I've tried to change in myself.

We were also able to study how identities evoke internalized stressors, which were described in narratives as negative self-regard or anger. An example of internal turmoil over sexuality was described above by the respondent who called his attraction to other men as "my biggest, darkest secret, my biggest shame." But, stress was directed outward too. A 59-year-old respondent described herself as a "Black aggressive gay woman angry at times" and a "disillusioned gay woman," where anger and disillusionment were inherent in the self-label and immanent to the notion of self.

Interactions Among Identities and Between Identities and Social Contexts

One of the main reasons for designing this interviewing protocol was to capture different ways in which identities interact with one another and with social con-

texts. We describe these relationships as "conjunct" versus "disjunct." With the no-tion of conjunct identities we mean to further develop an idea suggested in the fore-going discussion of prominence and valence: meaning that identities can coalesce around a main identity axis that is usually reflected in a prominent (and typically positive) self-descriptor (e.g., "lesbian"). By contrast, with the notion of disjunct identities, we want to develop a contrasting idea: meaning that identities involve a self-system in conflict, a conflict typically between two centrally prominent iden-tity axes (e.g., "lesbian" and "Black," as we will now discuss). Thus, "conjunct" and "disjunct" are not attributes of the self—they are only shorthand descriptors of concordances and tensions in the self-system. Also, "conjunct" and "disjunct" are not two poles for a theory of identity. Rather, they are coding schemata that helped us outline how the respondents described the interactions among their various senses of self. Below we present more extended descriptions of two respondents to illustrate this idea.

Conjunct identities.

The first example is a White lesbian in her thirties who lived with her African American girlfriend in a middle/working class neighborhood. This case illustrates a self-system that revolves around a main identity axis, the respondent's sexual-po-litical identity as a "lesbian," a prominent identity that has a positive valence. The visual cue elicited the vernacular "lesbian" and "dyke" as identities, and probes elicited a narrative where sexual identity was prominent: "Yeah, I'm very out [as a lesbian]. I'm out to people on the streets." Though "lesbian" "may not be an exact identifier" (the respondent had had previous relationships with men), she used this identity as "a political move." She noted that, although her sexual preference fell "somewhere in between the straight–lesbian scale," her sexual identity ("lesbian": at once sexual and political) was prominent in that it implied, for instance, an "infi-nite opposition" against the majority establishment. Therefore, her identity presen-tation never varied depending on context: "I meet you for thirty seconds and I am out to you … in the supermarket…. I don't care." Because she felt "like an ambas-sador to my people," she felt "acutely" aware of her actions, behavior, and speech "everywhere I go." (Only in one place did she prefer not to be outspoken about her lesbian identity: "In most of my neighborhood [my girlfriend and I] we'd hold hands and be affectionate with each other, but we'll drop hands when passing by [a straight, male-oriented bar where groups of men hang out outside]." This is not ego-dystonic behavior, but a self-protective attitude, the result of knowing that a passerby was shot with a pistol by a man coming out from this bar. This was not, that is to say, a true reflection of her sense of self.)

Other identities seemed to coalesce around her sexual identity. For example, on the race/ethnicity identity space of the visual, she entered the vernaculars "White girl" and "White bitch." "That has been a big part of my identity and the one that strikes me as the most obvious," in part because the respondent lived in an ethnic/

racial minority community where being White was highlighted. The respondent thus felt "very conscious of [being White]. Not that it is a bad thing, but I'm aware of it." She reported a White identity as neutral or negative in valence. For example, the respondent noted that she had been made highly "conscious of the privilege, White privilege." Also, to be in "infinite opposition" against the mainstream seemed to imply a negative appraisal of Whiteness because Whiteness was part of the respondent's understanding of the mainstream. The other self-descriptors provided in the visual cue ("progressive," "feminist," "rock-stable," "writer," etc.) were also "very fitting" and positive, and are thus coalesced around the predominant sexual-political axis.

In sum, the notion that the respondent's self-system overall implied a conjunct identity revolving around a main identity axis was further suggested by the following response to the nonevents query:

> I completely identify with the angst of rebelling against the norm and … wanting things to be different, and I spend a lot of my energy, my time, my conversations, the music that I listen to, the movies I go to, the kind of parties that I go to, the kind of friends that I have, the kind of stuff I like to do is all connected somehow to the isms [homophobia, racism, and sexism]. [Otherwise] I can't imagine what would be important to me. I don't know *what* [respondent's verbal emphasis] would be important to me.

As suggested by the respondent who described his sexual identity as "my deepest, darkest secret, my biggest shame," narratives also showed, though seldom, that a conjunct self-system could revolve around a prominent, yet negative, identity. Naturally, this intensely and prominently negative sense of self would result in much anxiety and distress.

Disjunct identities.

Our approach also helped us assess tensions in the respondents' senses of self that arose from competing identities. The second example is an African American lesbian in her late fifties with a history of incarceration and heroin use. Because both the respondent's racial and sexual identities were described as prominent and positive, these two identities seemed to be in constant competition. This contrasts with the previous example, where racial and ethnic identities had different values, and as such they were devoid of competitive conflict.

The respondent answered the question of whether the self-descriptors she had entered on the visual cue "fit or don't fit together":

> Okay, say like [race/ethnicity], there's no balance in that particular category, because, being a Black, and being a Black aggressive female … because there's so much homophobia in my culture … so there's no balance with being a Black and gay, and just

being Black. It's like total [pause, raising voice for emphasis] *two separate entities*! Like, Black [pause] even in my culture there's a lot of things that I don't like, as far as [being] a Black woman … even as a heterosexual Black woman, there's too many responsibilities [respondent's verbal emphasis].

The respondent suggested that, "in my culture," there is a divide between what is expected from men and women; and that this is exacerbated from the point of view of gay women:

Is just not enough of this compatibility between the sexes. So as a Black gay female is even less: more isolation, more disillusion about how we [both genders] are supposed to come together… . So there's no balance as far as race [and sexual orientation]..

In the previous example, the White lesbian respondent suggested that her lesbian identity implied meanings, values, and behaviors that were central to her sense of self and self-worth. Because her lesbian identity was most positive and prominent, it was also dominant over her White identity. Hence, this identity provided a main existential axis or domain that was devoid of conflict between both identities. By contrast, in the present example, both the racial/ethnic ("Black") and the sexual ("gay") identities were prominent and positive. Neither one was secondary. Additionally, the respondent thought that the institutional context ("the ideology of my culture") was in conflict with one of her identities, "gay woman"—an identity that, given its importance, the respondent could not disown or render secondary. Here, the perceived external conflict between "gay community" and "Black community" was experienced as an internal conflict where being a "gay woman" clashed with being a "Black woman."

On one hand, the respondent reported a positive identity as a "strong Black woman" which, according to the narrative, was inherited from her culture and her mother ("a strong protective Black woman"). On the other hand, the respondent reported having "always" been "against [her] culture" because her culture was in conflict with her sexual identity. Her immediate culture, she explained, taught her to be "secretive about your personal business" and therefore placed obstacles against having an open gay identity. As a result, the respondent reported feeling neither strongly connected to the gay community nor to the "Black community." She had always been "playing against the whole world… . Never knew how to plug in … always been on the outside." (However, the respondent referred to a past sense of connection with the Black community, when she could be "very proud" of her culture's "vision" and "[civil rights] politics," to which she felt indebted.)

Despite the respondent's overall sense of disjunction between sexual orientation and race/ethnicity, there were some specific areas of identity conjunction. First, in at least one area, her "spiritual life," the respondent was able to find harmony between her race/ethnic and sexual orientation identities. After much

searching, she found an African American church that taught her to be "peaceful and happy with yourself wherever you are at," including her sexual identity. Second, there was conjunction around other self-descriptors that connected with either the Black or gay identities or both. These identities included, as entered on the visual cue: "Educator," "mediator," "organizer," and "caretaker." All those "go together" and were "connected" to her "Black" identity. The respondent felt that, as a Black woman of her generation, she had to learn to be a caretaker from a very early age. "Black women," she explained, have a strong culture as care givers—a culture that, in her case, ebbed into her identity as "Educator," "mediator," and "organizer." These secondary, positive, and conjunct identities were also tangentially related to her identity as a gay woman. Being an "organizer" implied at the same time an avowal of her cultural roots and a contestation against the "ideology of my race" in that, as a "strong, aggressive Black gay woman" and an "Educator" and "organizer," she had been active against what she perceived as unfair heterosexist demands from institutional life. The "biggest part of me is being a Black, gay, aggressive woman," where "aggressive" meant always facing adversity and having to make choices "as well as being disillusioned. Those are the things that I repeat here."

Notably, some African American LGB respondents seemed to strive for identity integration. Some of them learned to manage conflicting identities and developed strategies for adaptation, negotiation, and contestation vis-à-vis such institutions as those of the church. (Meyer and Ouellette, in press, provided an extensive discussion of identity conflict and integration among African American LGB respondents in our sample.)

DISCUSSION

We described a qualitative strategy to study identity and social and psychological stressors associated with the intersectionality of sexual and ethnic minority identities. This strategy yielded helpful information describing minority identities and interactions of these and other identities, roles, and social contexts. Researchers who want to assess multiple components of identity often resort to using separate measures for each; for example, a measure for race/ethnicity, one for sexual orientation, and yet other measures for other identities and roles. But, the addition of multiple assessments can miss elements of a self-system that stem from the intersection of identities, interactions between identities and social contexts, and related shifts in identity over time. We have outlined an approach that can help overcome problems related to studying minority identities as decontextualized, parallel, additive constructs.

Stewart and McDermott (2004) suggested that researchers have to locate people contextually, "in terms of social structures that capture the power relations implied

by those structures" (p. 532). With this sample of LGB respondents, we have endeavored to demonstrate an approach to help researchers better understand how people who hold multiple minority identities interact with social structures related to institutions such those of the family, church, and work. First, we showed how identities can become stamped by power relations implied by these institutions; for example, the respondents who, to varying degrees, deactivated their gay identities in contexts such as church or work. Second, we showed how people recapture power relations endorsed by the same structures; for example, the respondent who in the past prayed for forgiveness for her lesbianism and now thanked God for it. Third, we showed how people move away from social structures, detach themselves from their symbolic demands, and actively participate in alternative settings, thereby recapturing alternative allocations of social or cultural capital; for example, the respondent who in the past tended to hide her "masculine woman" presentation and now, after "discovering" the "butch community," discovered additionally a new social and sexual self-worth. Further, we also suggested that people who hold minority identities can in fact change features of the symbolic order in a given milieu; for example, by coming out to their families.

Narratives also helped us to assess prominence and valence of minority identities and show how these dimensions vary temporally, contextually, and developmentally, as exemplified by the respondents who came to terms with identities after years of self-rejection or the respondents whose identities shifted along with their actions and reactions related to social environments. Our approach also helped us to understand the intersection of identities along a continuum of conjunction or disjunction in the person's sense of self, and assess how the various identity shifts are often experienced by sexual/racial minorities related to stress and resilience.

In summary, our approach helped us to study certain processes through which the identities of individuals are linked to collective identities, and how these linkages change with time and social context.

By allowing respondents to describe the intersection of identities in an open-ended and semistructured setting, researchers can find patterns that cannot be revealed using traditional quantitative methods that assess each identity independently and outside social contexts. Respondents such as the Black woman with strong positive Black and gay identities might look differently on measures that assess race/ethnicity and sexual orientation independently. We were able to examine the intersection of and compatibility between these identities. The positive and strong character of each identity appeared different when reflected through other identities (Deaux & Perkins, 2001). Also, unlike measures that provide snapshots of identity, devoid of context and temporality, a semistructured and open-ended setting allowed us to examine the identity's contextual and temporal dimensions; for example, how identities developed over time. But, unlike other qualitative approaches such as life histories, which require lengthy interviewing and analysis,

our strategy provides relative economy in administration and analysis. We found it feasible to use this approach as the qualitative component of a larger survey research study.

This strategy has limitations. Nonverbal elements of self-systems fall outside the narratives. An example of such nonverbal elements are those captured by the notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), which refers to prereflective dispositions in the person. These are naturalized dispositions that stem not only from mental schemata, but from the intersection of mental *and* bodily *and* social schemata. Also, this approach does not work with all respondents. It calls for a minimum of affective and cognitive investment in the task. The respondent is asked to establish a distance from his or her own self, to disclose subjective notions that portray his or her sense of self, and to reflect on the relevance and relative weight of different identities. The respondent is also asked to search for identity labels and relatively quickly identify their relevance to the self-system. Some command of language is necessary to produce figures of speech (synecdoche, metaphor, simile) and the ability to use the visual cue to produce an illustrative narrative. The respondent and, with him or her, the interviewer thus construct identities that are subjective, metaphorical, and reflexive. The quality of data is dependent on the respondent's and the interviewer's ability to engage in the task. We found that approximately one of eight participants was unable to fully engage in the task, although in part this could be due to the lengthy survey interview that preceded the qualitative component of the study. This approach was not tested among persons whose identities more closely reflect certain parameters of cultural majorities (e.g., White heterosexuals). And, it is unlikely that it would work well in such settings because it was designed to capture tensions between dissenting aspects of the self in conflict with mainstream cultural requisites.

Measures that conceptualize identities in isolation from one another and from social context are not amenable to studying intersectionality, processes, and context. Here, we presented a strategy that helps assess multiple intersectional identities in context and over time. It can also throw light on how social institutions—through impingements, tensions, constraints, and/or support—can be a means through which individual and collective identities are activated, performed, and lived. This approach can be tested in different settings and with different questions in mind. Future studies can apply the strategy suggested in this article to examine how minority individuals and groups—by adopting, negotiating, and creating identities—thus craft their experience within larger cultural contexts and over time.

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