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Unity and Purpose at the Intersections of Racial/Ethnic and Sexual Identities

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Something in Oz and me was amiss
But I tried not to notice
I was intent on the search for my reflection, love, affirmation in eyes of blue gray green.
Searching, I discovered something I didn't expect.
Something decades of determined assimilation cannot blind me to.
In this great gay Mecca I was an invisible man.
I had no shadow, no substance, no place, no history, no reflection.
I was an alien unseen and seen unwanted.... I was a nigger. Still.

I am angry because of the treatment I am afforded as a Black man.
That fiery anger is stoked additionally with the views of contempt and despisal shown me by my community because I am gay.
I cannot go home as who I am.
When I speak of home I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire black community: the black press, the black church, black academicians, the black literati, and the black left.
Where is *my* reflection?
I am most often rendered invisible,

Perceived as a threat to the family,
Or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous.
I cannot go home as who I am,
And that hurts me deeply.

—Riggs (1989)

Writers have described Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) as having conflicted and fractured identities. Black LGBs are said to experience their sexual identities as competing with their racial/ethnic identities, to suffer from a double burden (or "double jeopardy") of stressors related to their race/ethnicity and sexual orientation identities, and to have looser connections with the gay community than White LGBs. This view of Black gay identity is supported by identity theories that describe the postmodern self as a "protean self," which, rather than striving for coherence, thrives on dissonance (Gergen, 1991; Lifton, 1993). Our observations among a group of Black LGBs in New York City and our reading of more recent literature lead us to conclude otherwise. Where others have seen identity conflict and a double burden, we see a search for unity and purpose at the intersection of racial/ethnic and sexual identities. We hear in Black LGBs a recognition of the constraints of social forces but also a struggle—both internal and external—for coherence.

The theoretical question underpinning this chapter is: How do Black LGB individuals, who inhabit two socially significant identities, experience these identities? We address two dominant perspectives in identity theory. One perspective views multiple salient identities as competing; the other perspective argues that multiple identities coexist to form a coherent self. We supplement these perspectives with two notions: (1) that individuals recognize the social origin of constraints placed on their identities and (2) that identity is a dialectical process that occurs in distinctive interpersonal, sociocultural, and historical contexts. This conceptual framework enables us to appreciate how unity can exist alongside multiplicity and personal agency alongside social determination in Black LGB identities.

LGB and Racial/Ethnic Identities in Conflict

The view that identities are in conflict has been prominent in literature describing the lives of LGB individuals who are also members of racial/ethnic minority groups, especially the experiences of African Americans. Collins (2005) sees the source of this conflict in an affinity between racist and heterosexist ideology. Racist ideology views Blacks as primitive and as having abundant sexuality that is more connected to nature. Because homosexuality is seen as unnatural, it is seen as not inherently African. Following this reasoning, LGB Blacks are seen as less authentically Black.

We believe that the historical context of identity politics in the United States, where racial/ethnic and sexual identities have been foci of civil rights struggles, may help explain this casting of LGB and racial/ethnic identities as inevitably conflicted. During the civil rights struggles, it seems, identity conflict was experienced as a conflict in political allegiances. Acquiring two politically salient identities was not simply a personal matter; American politics required that only one identity be important: the one that guided one's political action and allegiance.

The depth of this conflict perspective is echoed in the identity labels used by some authors. *Black gay* and *gay Black* refer to the seemingly necessary primacy of one or the other identity among Black LGBs (Wilson & Miller, 2002). In an article titled "Are You Black First or Are You Queer?," Conerly (2001) suggests not only a conflict but a competition between identities. He and others (Johnson, 1982) show that "black-identified gays" were equated with loyalty to Black culture and causes, whereas "gay-identified blacks" were associated with assimilation, abandonment, and, one gets the sense, *betrayal*, of Black roots.

In an examination of Black anthologies published primarily from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Conerly (2001) finds that authors tended to employ the "black nationalist 'blacker-than-thou' rhetoric to discredit gay-identified black men" (p. 18). In the early anthologies of lesbian Black writers, gay-identified Blacks, or *interracialists*, were viewed as self-hating and their "blackness and their commitment to black politics" were questioned (p. 13). Conerly sees the source of identity conflict in the social circumstances of Black LGBs and the double oppression they experience in mainstream Black and gay communities. Black LGBs, he writes, "perceive racism among white lesbigays and heterosexism among straight blacks" (p. 11). Underlying this experience is not solely lack of acceptance and prejudice, but a complete lack of cultural relevance: a *"rift between two cultures"* (p. 12, italics added).

This perspective of identity conflict also underlies our understanding of stress and coping among Black LGBs. Authors have suggested that Black LGBs suffer from prejudice because of their race/ethnicity in their interactions in mostly White LGB communities and homophobia in their racial/ethnic communities (Loiacano, 1989). Writers have suggested that Black LGBs cope with the stressors suffered in each community by choosing to affiliate with one or the other. Battle and Crum (2007) explain:

> Black LGBs...often feel the pressure to "choose" between what are perceived as conflicting identities: their "Black self" or their "LGB self." Experiencing gay/lesbian culture as White and hegemonic, ethnic minority gay men and lesbians feel a strong need for continued ties to their cultural communities.... They cannot "afford" the

> rejection of the homophobic [Black] heterosexual world... because
> the [mostly white] "homosexual world" does not deliver the same
> social and psychological benefits for them as it does to the White gay
> and lesbian community. (pp. 337–338)

Audre Lorde (1984) describes the influence of conflict on the self: because of homophobia and racism, she says, Black lesbians are "constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of self and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying other parts of self" (cited in Loiacano, 1989, p. 21).

Identity Theory: Conflict versus Unity

The typical understanding of gay Black identities as torn and conflicted also has roots in identity theory and identity development models that researchers have used to understand gay and (separately) Black identities (Cass, 1984; Cross, 1995; Phinney, 1996; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997; Troiden, 1989). Interestingly, although there has been little, if any, exchange among writers discussing gay and Black identity development, both areas suffer from a view of identity as singular and insular. In both areas, writers describe identity development as a series of struggles to resolve identity crises leading to a solid identity. In this view, there is competition between Black and gay identities, which are seen as conflicting components in search of a resolution toward a unitary but singular identity. Such models have been criticized as not fitting a multiplicity model of identity where several identities coexist (Eliason & Schope, 2007).

Currently, most identity theorists recognize that individuals hold multiple identities, but these theorists do not agree about how these identities coexist. The main theories highlight conflict versus unity. The conflict perspective describes identity as comprising components that are at war with one another: "...The life story is really more like a *conversation of narrators*, or perhaps a *war of historians* in your head" (Raggatt, 2006, p. 16, italics in the source). Such authors critique the notion that identity synthesis is required for healthy development. Instead, "the dialogical self" (Hermans, 2001), "the mutable self" (Côté, 1996), and "the protean self" (Lifton, 1993) are presented as "models [that] share the insight that the self need not be viewed as abhorring dissonance, requiring consistency and coherence as prerequisites for survival or even psychic health" (Hartman Halbertal & Koren, 2006, p. 40).

Raggatt (2006) demonstrates the dialogical self using the case study of Charles, a gay White man. Raggatt notes that Charles' narrative demonstrates

conflicts resulting from his social positioning between gay and straight—initially Charles tries to become heterosexual but then accepts a gay identity and becomes a gay rights activist. In Charles as an activist, Raggatt concedes, "we can see some evidence for integration, but this dynamic of change over the life course can also be interpreted dialogically. The voice of the activist is a dialogical response to the socially produced positioning of self as 'humiliated homosexual'" (p. 31). Thus, Raggatt's interpretation of Charles' life course retains the two conflicting parts (the prior heterosexual and the ultimate resolved gay activist).

Similarly, Hartman Halbertal and Koren (2006) take the conflict perspective in their analysis of the narratives of 18 Orthodox Jewish gay men and lesbians. These authors see in the life stories of their respondents so much identity dualism and conflict that, they say, "the very notion of identity synthesis [and] its usefulness as a model to account for [these respondents'] experience must be called into question" (p. 37). The life stories of the Orthodox Jewish lesbian and gay respondents represent, according to the authors, two identities that cannot be reconciled, each—religion and sexual orientation—seen as essential and even "divinely bestowed" (p. 37). Unlike other elements of identity, which could be incorporated into or unified with one's sexual identity, "religion represents a far more encompassing web of beliefs, values, ritual practices, and social and familial connections that cannot easily be uncoupled from the individuals' deepest sense of being" (p. 38).

The respondents in Hartman Halbertal and Koren's (2006) study all achieved acceptance of their sexual identities—they identify as both lesbian or gay and Orthodox Jews—but "nonetheless continue to experience these identities in stridently dualistic terms" (p. 39). The authors found in the life stories no concept of a singular self through which conflicting claims on their identities are mediated and processed, much less synthesized: "the notion of identity synthesis is far more than merely nonresonant: It is an oxymoron" (p. 57).

In contrast to this view, according to the unity perspective, the self strives for coherence by incorporating complex identities into an integrated and meaningful unity. Summarizing the unity perspective, Singer (2004) notes that an individual's life story provides "causal, temporal, and thematic coherence to an overall sense of identity" (p. 442). This coherence reflects progress through the "work of building a narrative identity" (p. 445)—work that progresses across the individual's life span. Referring to their data from a study of the life course of academics, McAdams and Logan (2006) find: "In neither case does the story suggest a simple unity and coherence in life. At the same time, neither story devolves into randomness and the kind of shifting, patternless mélange that postmodern theorists such as Gergen (1991) repeatedly invoke" (pp. 100–101).

Identity as a Dialectic of Persons in Context

The unity view of identity often found in narrative studies embeds identity processes and content in historical, social, and cultural, as well as personal, contexts. For Cohler and Hammack (2006), it is the interaction of the person and his or her sociohistorical context that determines identity constructions. When viewed this way, identity emerges as a result of individuals' active confrontation with several external forces. Applying the unity view, in a closer look at the narratives examined by Hartman Halbertal and Koren (2006), we disagree, in part, with the authors' interpretation of identity conflict: We see their respondents striving for and achieving consolidation of religious and sexual identities. For example, Amiram, one of the respondents in the study, talked about being "torn from the inside," but he clearly identified the *external* source of his seeming conflict when he said: "It hurts, it just hurts. I am not angry at God, I am angrier at society" (p. 54). A lesbian (Shlomit) reported that she stopped discussing her sexuality with rabbis, declaring, "I have studied [religious law] and I can explicitly say that I can be a religious person and I can be a lesbian and be *whole with it*" (p. 56, italics added). Such resolutions of identity conflict among religious LGBs, by reinterpretation of religious teachings, have also been described among Christian and Muslim LGBs (Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Sociocultural Context

In terms of the broader sociocultural context of Black LGB lives, we recognize that the American cultural context has been changing significantly over the past 40 years. The context of Black LGBs described above, in which identity was described as conflicted and identity choice indicated loyalty, has changed to an extent. On the one hand, attitudes about gay men and lesbians have become more accepting. On the other, the urgent need of the Black civil rights movement for strict identity allegiance has subsided. In general, identity discourse has loosened, allowing more fluid identity constructions (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Eliason & Schope, 2007; Glenn, 1999).

Perhaps reflecting these changes, in addition to the conflict view of Black LGB identities that we described above, a unity perspective has also emerged. For example, hooks (2001) maintains that homophobia and racism still characterize the experience of Black LGBs but rejects the notion that the lives of Black LGBs are lives of conflict and contradiction. hooks takes issue with the notion that Black communities are more homophobic than White communities. Rather than emphasizing competition between gay and Black identities, hooks highlights the synthesis of the struggles for Black civil rights and gay

rights. She describes the experience of Black lesbians and gay men who have lived integrated lives in Black communities but warns that their stories are often missing from the public record. She notes (2001):

> This is a research project that must be carried out if we are to fully understand the experience of being Black and gay in this white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society.... We [hear] hardly anything from black gay people who live contentedly in black communities. (pp. 68–69)

In this chapter, we directly aim to describe these voices.

Voices of Black LGBs

In this chapter we examine how Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who are embedded in Black communities in New York City narrate their identities. In our view, the person, his or her contexts, and the transactions between person and context need to be seriously addressed when we consider identity conflict and unity among Black LGBs. In this chapter we consider the person's awareness of, feelings about, and movement toward action in response to the social and other external constraints upon his or her identities. We examine identity in multiple areas of participants' lives, particularly in the context of prejudice and discrimination—stressors related to both race/ethnicity and sexual orientation (Meyer, 2003). We include what is close at hand for identity construction in the form of close relationships and work commitments and less proximal connections such as those with religious institutions. We employ existential notions like Sartre's (1956) *look* and Greene's (1988) *situated freedom* in our interpretation of identity narratives.

To employ a multidimensional analytic approach, we rely on a dialectical view of identity processes. Borrowing from theorists like Ricoeur (1965), we seek to avoid simple dichotomies and recognize that identities at the intersections of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation are continuously being crafted in particular times and places in creative ways, with the potential for the production of radically new forms of personal and social identity.

Method

Sampling

This report relates to a small subsample of participants in a large epidemiological study. (Detailed information about the study's sampling and other

methodological issues is available online at http://www.columbia.edu/~im15/.)
We used a venue-based sampling method, with venues selected to ensure a
wide diversity of cultural, political, ethnic, and sexual representation within
the demographics of interest. Venues included business establishments (e.g.,
bookstores and cafes), social groups, outdoor areas (e.g., parks), and snowball
referrals (upon completing an interview, respondents were asked to nominate
up to four potential participants). Between February 2004 and January 2005,
25 outreach workers visited a total of 274 venues in 32 different New York City
zip codes.

In each venue, outreach workers approached potential study participants,
invited them to participate in the study, and completed a brief eligibility
screening form for each volunteer. Respondents were eligible if they were 18 to
59 years old, had resided in New York City for two years or more and self-
identified as (1) heterosexual or lesbian, gay, or bisexual; (2) male or female
(and their identity matched sex at birth); and (3) White, Black, or Latino; but
they could have used other labels referring to these identities. Eligible respon-
dents were contacted by trained research interviewers and invited to partici-
pate in the study. Interviews lasting on average 3.8 hours were conducted in
English, in person, at the research office.

Of 524 respondents, 131 were Black LGBs. As Figure 4-1 reveals, most Black
participants resided in New York City neighborhoods that are predominantly
Black. This chapter reports on 22 Black respondents (11 men and 11 women)
who were selected at random from among the Black study participants to par-
ticipate in a semistructured qualitative component of the study (see Table 4-1).
This portion of the interview lasted on average for 40 minutes.

Interview

We aimed to elicit brief self-referential narratives about identity but also
to improve quantitative gay and Black identity measures, which confine
respondents to singular identities. At the same time, we strove for precision
in obtaining answers to the research questions and efficiency in the data
analysis. We therefore opted for semistructured interviews so that respon-
dents could describe their identities within sociocultural contexts and over
time, but also so that they were allowed complete freedom in choosing how
to relay these narratives. The interview aimed to (1) elicit descriptions of
and narratives about interrelations among identities, statuses, and roles;
(2) provide narratives about the enactment of identities and interactions
with institutional settings such as work, family, and community life; and
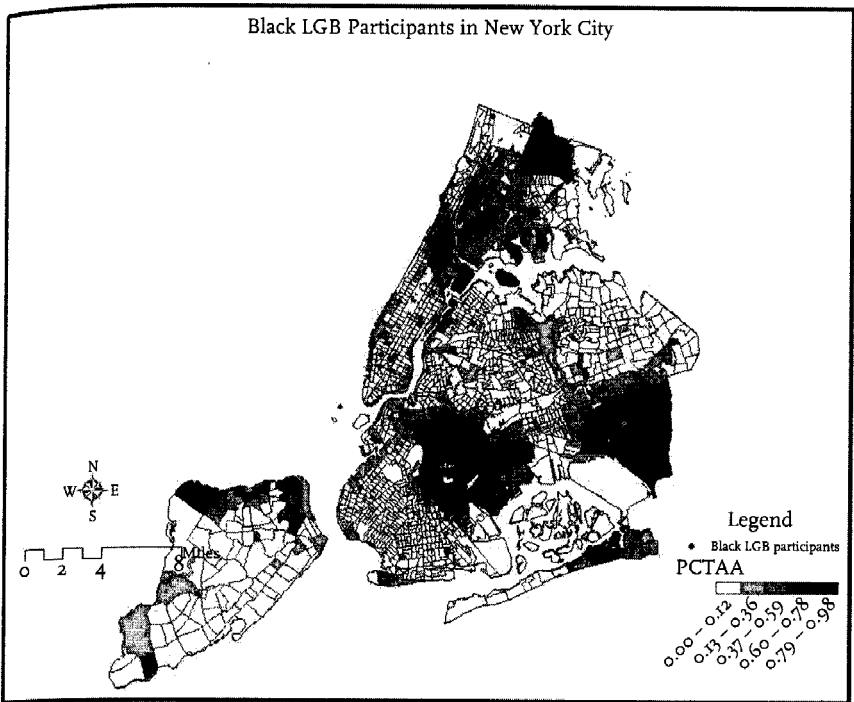(3) describe social stressors associated with these identities and institutions.

Black LGB Participants in New York City

FIGURE 4-1 Participants' georgraphic residence. (Note: Black participants' $(N = 131)$ residential location is indicated by a dot that is superimposed on New York City's neighborhoods grouped by proportion of Black residents. Darker areas indicate a greater concentration of Black residents.)

We used as a probe a sheet of paper with a drawing of a large circle with lines protruding from it. Four of the lines had preprinted labels for race/ethnicity, gender, age group, and sexual orientation, the focus of our investigation. Respondents were asked to list identities, statuses, and roles that described who they were near these labels and near the other blank lines. They were told that they could write as many or as few identities as they wished and that they did not have to fill in the prelabeled spaces if they did not wish to do so.

With this list at hand, the interview began by asking the respondent to describe what she or he had listed. 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 for qualitative interviewing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). We devised specific instructions and probes to induce responses of interest to the main questions of the study and reduce possible biases related to social desirability.

TABLE 4-1 Select Sample Characteristics ($N = 22$)

Name*	Age	Education	Sexual Orientation Identity Label	Sexual Orientation Identity†	Race/Ethnic Identity Label‡
Women					
Monette	38	High school	Lesbian	Gay/love women	None listed
Corine	23	Some grad school	Bisexual	Bisexual	Mixed
Aretha	36	Some college	Lesbian	Lesbian	Black
Llysha	28	Some college	Lesbian	Futch (female butch)	Native American, Jamaican, Honduran
Belle	50	B.A. degree	Gay	Gay woman/ Black, aggressive gay woman	Black/Black aggressive gay woman only at times
Lela	37	Some college	Bisexual	Het/bi	None listed
Les	23	Some college	Gay	None listed	None listed
Tameca	23	B.A. degree	Lesbian	Queer/gay/ lesbian	Black
Candice	27	B.A. degree	Gay	None listed	None listed
Tiffany	32	High school	Bisexual	None listed	Black
Binta	27	Some college	Lesbian	None listed	None listed
Paulina	42	Some college	Lesbian	Lesbian	None listed
Men					
Aaron	28	High school	Bisexual	Bisexual	Black (African American)
John	34	High school	Homosexual	Gay	African American
Kahlil	45	High school	Gay	Gay/just being me	Black
Clifford	40	B.A. degree	Gay	Gay	Black
Perry	30	B.A. degree	Gay	None listed	None listed
William	41	High school	Gay	Ver.top	Black
Tyrone	23	Some college	Gay	Gay	Black
Adrian	46	B.A. degree	Gay	Homosexual	Black
Elijah	18	B.A. degree	Gay	Gay	Black
Duane	29	B.A. degree	Gay	Gay	None listed

* No real names are used to protect respondents' identity.

† Label was chosen by the respondent from multiple-choice categories given in the quantitative section of the interview.

‡ These labels were given by respondents in the qualitative section. We used as a probe a white 9×11 inch page with a preprinted illustration of a large circle centered in the upper half of the page with lines positioned around the perimeter protruding out of the circle. On four of the lines around the circle were written the words *sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age group,* and *gender* as areas of identities and roles. At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked to write any number of identities, statuses, roles, or other descriptors as they chose on this sheet. They were told that they could choose to write something under the prelabeled categories or not.

For example, if a respondent chose not to describe an identity related to his or her race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, he or she was asked to explain this choice (e.g., "I see that you did not write anything describing your race/ethnicity, I wonder why?"). If a respondent did not report identity conflict, he or she was asked about it; when a respondent reported general ideas or truisms, he or she was challenged to provide detailed and concrete examples. By probing, interviewers sought to elicit an honest discussion, not to influence the interviewee's response. To do so, they tried to put the respondent at ease, making it clear that all answers were acceptable, explaining that the researchers were interested in the respondent's own point of view, and expressing genuine interest in and curiosity about the respondent's identity narrative.

Data Analysis

Complete transcriptions of the interviews that included participants' and interviewers' words along with notation of pauses, overlapping speech, expressions of emotion, and unintelligible speech represented our data sources. Both authors conducted multiple readings of the transcripts alone and together, with conversations between readings.

We began our analysis with some ideas about relationships between the concepts that were based in several prior conceptualizations of identity as well as minority stress theory. This conceptual familiarity supported an initial coding analysis in which we looked for the appearance of concepts and themes. We then proceeded to a more intensive look at portions of identity narratives in light of the full narratives, that is, in light of the complete material on individual cases. In this thematic analysis, we relied on comparative examination across cases. We turned insights gained from single cases into questions that we posed to and across other individual cases. We moved between deductive and inductive forms of analysis. Although we approached the material with clear questions and prior conceptualizations, we allowed the interview material to confirm or disconfirm our preconceptions and to introduce new ideas. Guided by a specific research question, we present as results the themes that support an understanding of how it is that Black gay men and lesbian women of a variety of ages are able to maintain prominent and positive gay identities alongside equally prominent and positive Black identities. As our analysis evolved, we found ourselves relying more and more on existential and hermeneutical theories for interpretation. The conceptual formulation of identity at the end of our work is fuller and more complex than the one with which we began.

Results

ELIJAH (18-YEAR-OLD GAY MAN):   Well, it seems, well, all my identities
seem to work together, no, nothing seem to conflict really, because most
of my identities have to do with me expressing myself, so, you know, it's
all like intertwined.

BELLE (50-YEAR-OLD GAY WOMAN):   I can't separate being a Black
woman and a gay woman, there're still one and the same. So, a Black
woman who's not afraid to go out there and meet challenges or face
adversity, no matter what, because just being Black is gonna be an adver-
sity. Being gay is gonna be adversity, but [I am] the type a person that
I can face all'a that, you know what I mean? No matter what. I'm never
gonna not be able to do it. I think that's why we treat that so much as
important that is known, that this is the biggest part of me.

WILLIAM (41-YEAR-OLD GAY MAN):   ...A big dream, or not a dream,
but a, I always think, if I go to my parents' church, and the preacher, you
know we go as a family or whatever, and the preacher is saying antigay
things from the pulpit, I would get up and leave. That would be my biggest
moment, my biggest protest moment, in front of my parents, and in front of
people that they know.

Each of these quotations represents one of the three key themes we identi-
fied in the interview data. The three themes interact with and complement one
another. Instead of hearing conflict and competition, we were overwhelmed
by voices that describe unity and coherence. We title this theme *unity and
coherence*. But it is not an untroubled unity. We discuss a complex picture in
which identity conflict is also present, yet acted upon in respondents' search
for integration.

Our second theme, *struggle with social constraints*, helps to explain how
this unity is achieved. Individuals engage in a long and ongoing process in
which the self confronts and seeks to transcend limitations to coherence. As
respondents contend with gay and Black identities, they are acutely aware of
the external structures and processes that seek to limit their identity pursuits.
In this theme, the narratives of respondents revealed the view that something
is wrong with what *society* assumes about their identities—with what other
people think about them and how they act toward them. Through their con-
templation of social constraints (especially related to religion and family of
origin), and by identifying these external forces as sources of struggle rather

than internal doubt, our respondents built a foundation for a coherent view of themselves.

The third theme, *identity as a dialectical process*, is related to the first and second themes in that it helps to explain the process through which potentially conflicted identities become unified. With this theme, we describe the crafting of identities as a dialectical process that happens in context and over time. People contend with earlier undesired ways of being, seek resolution of these in the present, and project this work into the future when resolution can be imagined. Through their view of what might be, they choose life projects and commitments to new ways of expressing self in the future. Thereby, they experience an even more fundamental source of unity across identities and time.

Unity and Coherence

Our interviewers were trained to let participants frame identity issues as they subjectively experienced them. Given the interview guidelines and the tools used in the interview, however, there was plenty of opportunity for respondents to focus on identities in isolation and in conflict with each other. Nonetheless, respondents did not choose to cast their identities in these terms, struggling instead to present a unified self. Interviewers' efforts to encourage participants to talk about conflict were often and insistently redirected:

INTERVIEWER JT: I guess what we'd just like to know is, do you think that these different parts of yourself, how do you think that they fit together, or they don't fit together, are there ways that you see them similarly or different, or just, overall, like, how do you think that they fit together, or don't fit together?

CLIFFORD (40-YEAR-OLD GAY MAN):   I really don't see h-, what's the separation? I don't understand the separation. You, you're either, you're male or female, I', I'm male, I'm gay, I'm Black, I'm forty. It just,

INTERVIEWER JT: Okay, just so tell me what you mean by that in terms of the separation.

CLIFFORD: I don't see a separation at all.... Yes, that's who I am. I, I wake up every morning, I'm a Black, gay, male that's forty years old.... That's that.

INTERVIEWER ARG: In what ways do [your racial and sexual identities] compete with one another or are in harmony?

JOHN: Well, they don't compete against one another, for me. But, I guess it's society who looks at'em.

Participants consistently refuted the notion of significant conflict between their racial/ethnic and sexual identities. Instead, participants' identity narratives were sites of construction for a coherent self. Elijah, an 18-year-old gay male poet, needs to inhabit all of his identities in order to be who he is: "... No, nothing seem to conflict really, because most of my identities have to do with me expressing myself, so, you know, it's all like intertwined."

A unified identity is what respondents find when they look in the mirror. For Perry, a 30-year-old gay man, being gay, a man, and a person of color are "inextricably bound.... They all come together." He and others talk about their necessarily multifaceted ways of being. Respondents were acutely aware that they have views about who they are and how they see themselves, and their self-reflections may produce images at odds with (and more positive than) images others would impose on them. Addressing the notion that you cannot be gay and Black, Duane, a 29-year-old man, says, mockingly: "Hello! [laugh] I'm here!"

In making this strong claim for unity narratives, we are not suggesting that participants never talk about conflict or the experience of clashes between identities, living more than one life, or having separate lives. For example, the majority of respondents talk about the relevance of religion and spirituality in their lives, and five of them explicitly depict conflict between being gay or lesbian and being a believer and member of a church or mosque. Most often, however, this experience does not represent as much an internal conflict as a conflict with clearly defined *external* oppressive forces.

Monette, a 38-year-old lesbian, describes the relationship between external oppression and the notion of clashing identities:

> Well, my spiritual and my gay. That, sometimes clashes, I mean, because I was brought up in church.... Sometimes it does cause a problem with my spiritual life because some of the spiritual people, they don't understand it, if you tell them, so now you got to live sort of like a double life, meaning that you don't want to tell too many people that are who go to the church, because they're going to judge you for who you are, so now you keep that on the back burner, keep that separate from your spiritual life, and sometimes it actually clashes because you never know when you're out in the streets and you're with your partner, or whatever, and you happen to see one of the church members, sometimes you find yourself, you say, "Oh this is just my friend," and you don't mean to be that way, but you see the spiritual, you see it clashing.

In this excerpt from Monette's narrative, she shifts from talking about the church to "church members." Her narrative echoes those of other respondents

who describe this conflict not as abstract or distal, not only about ideology or institutions. Rather, it is a very *social* conflict in which respondents report feeling distance from and disagreement with important family members and friends who uphold the religious ideas and teachings that stigmatize gay identity.

Some respondents describe conflict as involving a split between gay identities and their membership in the Black community. But that experience is also not an internal conflict: Being gay or lesbian conflicts with expectations some perceive within the Black community about sexuality and gender. John, a 34-year-old man who identified as a "homosexual," perceives community norms as dictating that he cannot be both a "real man" and gay in the African American community. This perception questions his masculinity and prevents others from recognizing the paternal role he has assumed for his nephew. Aretha, a 36-year-old lesbian, reports that she has been ostracized by both men and women in the Black community because they perceive her as having too "aggressive" a look for a woman. Duane, a 29-year-old gay man, echoes other narratives in his articulation that the source of the conflict is not internal but in the community's attitudes. At the same time, he speaks of his rejection of these attitudes:

> In the Black community they see, and it's, you know, a crazy part,
> they see as being gay as sort of a White European thing for some
> reason. You know, "Black people are not gay," you know, we don't talk
> about those things.

The respondents acknowledge the negative consequences of such community attitudes for their lives. Along with the negative personal emotional responses captured by the terms *frustration* and *guilt*, respondents describe the negative effects this conflict has had on their relationships. Corine, a 23-year-old Catholic bisexual woman, misses being able to go to church with her parents the way her siblings do: "It's just confusing, it's frustrating, so it's just like a big thing." And Monette, sadly, says about her mother: "I love her to death, I love her, but I don't think she would ever be able to accept my lifestyle."

In essentially all of their expressions, respondents clearly present conflict as having to do with the role of social and cultural forces—forces that they typically dissociate from their internal voice. They typically depict conflict as outside the self, attributable to mistaken views held by others—specific others or society in general. Duane, a 29-year-old gay man, provides a typical instance of this attribution as he corrects the interviewer's perception of conflict:

> INTERVIEWER JXT: Um, tell me a little bit of where you feel like the
> conflict comes from. I mean, it sounds like there's a conflict somewhat
> between that, so if you could just say a little about...

DUANE: Um, conflict, I think it's a lot on society's views and how they
view people, you know.

Struggle with Social Constraints

When asked to talk about their identities in various spheres of life, many
respondents chose to talk about "freedom of expression" as a way of narrat-
ing their experience of what is limited in their lives. A theme common across
several identity narratives is the threat posed by others' "looks"—typically
encountered on the street, sometimes accompanied by threat—that strive to
negate their identity. Often such threats lead to an assertion of one's self. When
Duane is asked what impact such encounters had on him, he responds:

Duane:...It keeps me going stronger...how am I gonna say this,
if I...listen to what everyone else said, I'd be a crazy person
[laughs]...so I try to do, you know, what I need to do for myself, um,
to make myself a better person.

Duane does not only externalize the source of identity conflict but uses his
awareness of it as the impetus for coherent identity development.

Similarly, for Perry, the 30-year-old gay man who described his identities
as "inexorably bound," the struggles of being gay as a young person in his Black
community enabled him to escape negative influences in his environment,
provided him with pathways to better places like college, and enabled him to
set goals and to be courageous. Tameca, a 23-year-old lesbian of Caribbean her-
itage, appreciates the growth such struggles afforded her. She recounted how
she has become more politically and personally confident over time, noting:

Tameca:...Maybe in opposition with those things [racism, homopho-
bia, and sexism]...maybe that's a strange thing to say. But I think
to a certain extent even the things that have been awful...but at the
same time...you can also develop, personally.

Participants' stories about socially induced stress related to racism or
homophobia turn into discourses about the identity-unifying benefits of
being able to see oneself as someone who can rise to the challenge of stress.
Participants like Belle, whose narrative introduced the Results section, explic-
itly make a connection between facing multiple adversities and identity inte-
gration. Belle sees sexual orientation as a personal choice against homophobia
and racism, while she sees each of these forms of discrimination as a "societal
choice." She is resigned to the notion that these negative forces within soci-
ety will always be there and contends with it through a view of herself as one

who will always respond to social pressures aggressively. Alongside her view of society as essentially stressful and debilitating is her view of herself as the person who is always there to step in when there is a problem.

Other respondents also often take an active role to counter social stressors, even in the most difficult area of religion. They take the position that church members, the church, and even God are wrong in their rejection of gay people. In this realization is also the promise (or hope) of self-assertion in front of God and people, a self-assertion that comes out of a struggle that has an almost rebellious connotation.

> MONETTE: Yeah, and I think I keep [my gay and religious identities] separate because in one sense, I know the Bible says it's not right [to be gay], and then in one sense, I'm saying, "Well God, I can't help who I fall in love, I can't help what I feel," it's like a clashing, and the bad thing about our society is that it doesn't understand....

> And it shouldn't clash, but, I think as you learn yourself and know who you are, eventually that won't clash, you'll just be free to say, well, "This is my girlfriend," whether the person, whether they judge or not, that takes a lot of experience and you've got to deal with your inner self with that....

John, a 34-year-old gay man, also describes a process that involves determination, choice, and action:

> Being that from such a young age, at 5 years old up until I was 29, I was part of a religious organization, that had a very big impact in shaping and molding me into the person I am today. So if I do have one thing that's fighting, it's the fact that being gay does not agree with what I was taught as such a young child. So that's a constant conflict that I have going on even though I would like to have them resolve each other. I've gotten better with it, but it's still a sore spot, it's a very sentimental point for me cuz, if I could be openly gay in that organization, I would still be with it, but I had to, one of them had to be given up. And the one I gave up was the one that I had a, I had the ability to choose if I wanted to be in it or not. I didn't, I didn't choose to be gay, that's how it was.

Identity as a Dialectical Process

In the narratives we witness an identity dialogue, but it is not in Raggatt's (2006) sense of the warring internal voices or selves. Rather, the dialogue is

between the self and what are perceived to be external forces seeking to limit the self. Duane nicely demonstrates the difference. He replaces Raggatt's metaphor of war with metaphors of fashion and dance. His identity, he says, is made up of many hats he carries with him in a "big suitcase." He presents himself as having become quite adept at knowing when and how to switch hats. He thus contends with the taboos surrounding race and gender in the Black and White communities. But, he says, he has to remain vigilant: remaining aware of context and staying "on my toes."

This dialectic goes on within intrapersonal, interpersonal, and larger social and cultural contexts. These contexts reveal something of the mechanisms and processes through which ongoing identity work happens. With regard to the intrapersonal, our participants' responses have taught us that although our focus is on racial/ethnic and gay identities, we need to broaden our view to include participants' many other identities and to understand the relationships among them. For example, for two artists within the group, the identity as an artist becomes a vehicle through which to experience a way of integrating Black and gay identities.

> ELIJAH: One of my identities is a [sic] artist. And the kind of way it fits together is because my poetry and also my song is based upon my, multi identities, like, you know, me being gay, I write a lot of poetry based on, you know, gay lives and the trouble that we go through. Also, also, I'm, I teach a lot of people about, information about, like Black culture, and one of the other things I write poetry about. So I kind of like intertwine my multi identities through my, my poetry or myself.

Binta, a 27-year-old lesbian poet, expresses similar identity possibilities in her art:

> BINTA: ...Do they work together? Yes, because without me being a poet, I couldn't be a friend, I couldn't be a counselor, I couldn't be a daughter, a good daughter at that. And, then I wouldn't be so much of a dreamer. I don't know.
>
> INTERVIEWER (YXN):   Can you tell me more specifically how they connect? Give me some examples of the way that you see yourself being a poet and a lesbian and these connecting for you.
>
> BINTA: Um. Oh, wow [laughs]. Because my views as a lesbian, what I can't do, such as getting married, it shows in my poetry.

With regard to interpersonal context, the narratives reveal that participants do not work on their identities in isolation. Identities happen *with* significant others. Clifford, the 40-year-old gay man who has had to live his gay

life as separate from his life with his family, describes changes in his identity as critically connected with what his brother and other family members think and do regarding his sexuality. He reports that their attitudes have changed "drastically" over the past 10 years. His younger brother, with whom he typically only talks about sports, "just came out of the blue and said, 'I can deal with a gay man long as he doesn't wear a dress.'" Clifford's response to his brother was a simple "Okay," but he shares more with the interviewer. He sees his brother's statement as a sign that, despite their strong Baptist-based belief that homosexuality is wrong, he may at some point be able to share his sexual identity with his siblings.

Similarly, Duane's identity is interwoven with people in his life. For example, his attempts to help his White gay partner resolve identity issues are connected to his own identity reconciliations. An aunt is a kind of identity go-between—her conversations with a sister smooth the way for a resolution of the impasse he and his mother had reached concerning his sexual identity. He has always understood his mother as the source of his positive outlook on life, and casting her in that role has never sat well with her rejection of his homosexuality. But they are now beginning to talk about sexuality.

With regard to sociocultural context, religion is a prominent institution. But, interestingly, this context is not something to which people passively respond. Most participants who retain a connection with religion and spirituality can see the flaws, hypocrisy, and prejudices of those who see themselves out as representing the will of God. Monette, who worries that she will meet church members while walking down the street with her girlfriend, tells us that identity clashes stem from church members who do not understand what it means to be gay. The sources of the clashes our respondents experience are family members, neighbors, and society at large. Aretha, who has been rejected by members of her Black community, says that she is a "universal person" without conflict within herself; it is others who have a problem with the way she presents herself, and she does not want to internalize their problems.

Often, the respondents interact with religion and bring about changes in the context as they search for a more supportive environment. Most respondents who, like John, were troubled by their church's rejection, searched for and were able to find a new, more accepting church. Aaron, a 28-year-old bisexual man, describes how he moved from a conservative Pentecostal church to an openly gay church and now to a more inclusive—but not gay-identified—interdenominational fellowship. Others reject institutionalized religion altogether, keeping their spirituality separate from the church. Kahlil, a 45-year-old gay man for whom the mosque was once very important, now finds that he can no longer go to the formal institution because of its rejection of gay people and

its hypocrisy (because he knew one or two other mosque members to be gay but closeted). "I don't have to go to a church or to a mosque to find God," he says. "So, I'm at peace with myself." Lela, a 37-year-old bisexual woman, also describes her journey from being born a Baptist to conversion to Islam and membership in a mosque to a more personal form of Islam:

> Oh, I was born um Baptist, um I converted to Islam in 1998 which
> I'm still Muslim and was practicing Muslim up until about a year
> ago, I'm still Muslim but I don't go to the mosque, I don't really
> practice, it's because now I have a different awareness of religion and
> I think that as long as I have a relationship with God personally, I
> don't need to be so disciplined and strict about, "oh I need to go to
> the church, oh I need to do this, oh I need to that, oh I'll be damned
> if I don't," and I really don't believe that anymore.

Tyrone, a 23-year-old gay man who had been raised in Islam, had felt very attracted to many aspects of the religion but found it too rigid, especially its ideas about sexual orientation. He is now considering Buddhism, where he is hoping to experience what he found positive about Islam while being free of its negative constraints. William expresses a commitment to a different way of being in a church. And Monette looks forward to a time when she can say to church members on the street: "This is my girlfriend."

For yet other respondents, college provided an important sociocultural context. Tameca tells us: "For me when I went away to college, that was a big shift for me, in terms of feeling like I can grow." It was in college that she came to see that the church and some of her other communities were homophobic. For Duane, an academic article he read in college provided the insight to contend with and resolve struggles over his multiple identities by arriving at a coherent, integrated gay and Black identity.

> ...And I'll never forget there was actually an article I read in college
> [laugh] by Peggy McKlintock or McKlintish, and I can't remember
> her last name, but it was on that same issue. It was identifying as a
> gay Black um, individual, or as a Black gay individual.

Work is another relevant identity context. When asked if there are specific circumstances in which identities are in harmony or in competition, Duane describes his current human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention work as enabling him to express his multiple identities simultaneously and the New York City Gay Men's Chorus as a setting where he proudly sings as both a gay and a Black man. For Paulina, a 42-year-old lesbian, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) youth group she runs is a safe place for her own identity

work. Finally, 18-year-old Elijah, our youngest participant, sees new possibilities for a coherent gay and Black identity in the current historical sociocultural context.

> Well, you know, nowadays, like today, presently, it seems like people are more open-minded, so, but maybe like three four years ago, it was a little awkward. You know, people would look at, you know, have that look of disgust, you know, so, but now, you know, I see a gradual change in the whole, you know, way people perceive, you know, homosexuals, so.

Discussion

Although we approached the material with clear questions and prior conceptualizations, we allowed the interview material to inform us and were open to confirm or disconfirm our preconceptions. As we began to read through the interview materials, we were struck by the clarity of voice about two topics. First, while we expected, based on our reading of the literature, to find conflict between gay and Black identities, we found clear and consistent evidence for coherence and unity. Second, religion emerged quite clearly as a core locus of conflict and deliberation. Our analysis supports Hartman Halbertal and Koren's (2006) claim that religion represents a unique element of identity among religious LGB individuals because it creates challenges for unity and coherence. These authors noted that, among Orthodox Jewish lesbians and gay men, religious identity comprises a set of core values and beliefs that directly compete with LGB identity and are not malleable. However, unlike these authors, we found that our respondents—of Christian and Muslim denominations—actively engaged with religious identities, striving for identity unity and often finding ways to integrate religious and gay identities.

As we began to analyze respondents' identity stories, and as we discussed these in view of various contemporary readings on identity, we became dissatisfied with a simple dichotomy of identity integration versus identity conflict. Although concepts relevant to each pole of the binary were useful in our characterization of some of our respondents' stances concerning self, we found ourselves in need of a conceptual framework that allowed us to talk not about the "either-or," but about the movement between and beyond the two. The writings of hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1996) provide a more effective way of describing and understanding the narratives of our respondents.

Although identities are often discussed in the literature in static ways, we see in our respondents' stories identities on the move, with evidence of people

working on identities to reshape them. Especially relevant are the observations of participants' reclaiming of religion and spirituality as aspects of their identity. Several of our respondents described how important religion had been to them in the past but also how damaging it had been to their developing gay identities, leading them to leave their church or mosque. Later, however, they found new ways to interpret religious teachings and be religious or spiritual. They reclaimed a religious identity and redefined it in ways that now are compatible with an LGB identity while engaging in an ongoing search regarding spirituality.

From Ricoeur's (1996) perspective, all of our narratives about self and identity reveal an attempt to maintain a sense of sameness while simultaneously facing the unknown and the incompleteness of the self. Ricoeur sees this process as a part of the human condition: We are constantly creating who we are. Ricoeur would have us recognize, in the interpretation of an identity narrative, the importance of what has happened in the person's past, but also how the person is contending with those influences and even healing their effects in the present. In addition, Ricoeur asks us to examine how a person's view of the future influences how he or she experiences the present. The person's movement toward both the past and the future provides some sense of unity—a different kind of unity than is present in much of the current psychological literature on identity, but a unity nonetheless. When they talk about their identities, respondents convey the "warmth and intimacy" that William James and later scholars of the self associate with the experience of the sameness of self (Barresi, 2002).

With the addition of participants' emphasis upon stress and struggle related to homophobia and racism, we can expand this interpretation. Participants bring to powerful life Jean-Paul Sartre's (1956) notion of the others' gaze as that through which the person comes to experience limitations on his or her own freedom and with which the person must come to terms if his or her exercise of freedom is to be authentic. In other words, from the existential perspective, freedom is freedom only if it is exercised in the midst of the limitations imposed by others, place, and time. Contemporary existential philosophers Charles Taylor and Maxine Greene call authentic freedom a *situated freedom*—that is, a freedom that must be exercised within the constraints that are inevitably part of lives lived with others (Greene, 1988).

Stress—external sources of demand and challenge in forms such as stigma, prejudice, and discrimination—forms the background against which participants construct, maintain, and change their identities (Meyer, 2003). Social stress represents the limitations and causes of suffering that Ricoeur

(1965) found essential to include as he wrote about men's and women's exercise of will and freedom through language and narrative. In their stories about social stress, respondents help us understand what they need to contend with as they seek to build any kind of identity. Further, it is through their awareness and recognition of these stressors that respondents move away from a debilitating sense of identity conflict toward identity coherence.

In these stressful challenges, respondents described identity as enacted on people—whether it be church members, family members, or members of the Black and gay communities in general. This finding is consistent with McAdams' (1997) "identity as a life story" approach, where, as Singer (2004) describes it,

> [The self] coheres around a narrative structure, which casts the individual as a protagonist in a lifelong journey, marked by the mutual challenges of intimacy and autonomy, and expressed through archetypical characters, turning points, and various outcomes of redemption or contamination. (p. 445)

There are many limitations to our study. First, we do not write here about everything that might be said about participants' identity narratives. We searched for answers to the specific questions we initially posed about the integration of Black and gay identities. Second, our respondents are a select group of Black LGB individuals, identified to a lesser or greater extent with both their gay and Black identities. We did not attempt here to discuss other forms of identification (or lack of identification) with same-sex behavior, such as men who have sex with men (MSM) and women who have sex with women (WSW) (Young & Meyer, 2005) or the much-discussed "down low" (Boykin, 2005). That being said, to the extent that we can talk about any representation from a small, mostly qualitative, study, it is important to note that our sample was not drawn from a traditional (White) gay community. As is demonstrated by the geographic residence of our participants, they are Black LGBs deeply embedded in New York City's Black communities.

We started this chapter with reference to the many writers who noted the difficulty that dual identities cause Black LGBs. But there have been other voices that are consistent with what we found from our respondents' identity narratives. For example, Hawkeswood (1996) documents the lives of gay men who reside in Harlem—a Black community in New York City—and are socially integrated into its community. He notes the rich history of Black men in Harlem who define themselves as Black and gay, the social networks available to them within the community, and the indigenous Black gay culture and society. Among the men he interviewed, he does not describe the kind of conflict and torn identities described by the writers we quote in the introduction

to this chapter. Similarly, Wilson and Miller (2002) did not find evidence that Black gay and bisexual men experience a conflict among identities. Even though they confirm that some men experience the gay community as racist and the Black community as homophobic, this finding does not seem to lead to choosing an affiliation with one community against the other community. The authors discovered that some men changed their behavior, depending on the context, but they still sensed that they belonged to both communities. These men did not view their racial/ethnic and sexual identities as separate and certainly did not view one as subordinate to the other.

More recently, authors have taken biculturalism as a model for understanding the integration of racial/ethnic and sexual identities (e.g., LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Such authors explain that the challenges of Black LGBs are similar to the challenges of acculturation and underscore the possibility of engaging effectively in two cultures simultaneously. Indeed, Parks, Hughes, and Matthews (2004) note, "What is or has been a source of oppression may become a source of strength" (p. 251), so that experiences of racism may help Black LGBs cope with experiences of homophobia. Another study of Black gay and bisexual men suggests that a more cohesive identity is most psychologically beneficial. Crawford and colleagues found that men who had a positive identification as both African American and gay had higher levels of self esteem, better social support, more life satisfaction, better HIV-related coping strategies, and less distress than men who did not have a positive identification with both identities (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002).

Changes in the situation of Black LGBs are presented in Marlon Riggs's film *Tongues Untied*. The quotation that opens this chapter illustrates Riggs's experience of identity conflict. By the end of the film, Riggs and his friends march for gay rights as an African American contingent and illustrate the unity of identities and, indeed, of political agendas. Unlike the attempts of Black heterosexuals to silence the sexual orientation of Bayard Rustin for the perceived benefit of the struggles for Black civil rights (D'Emilio, 2003), more recent discourse has explicitly allowed for the synthesis of the two identities. Hutchinson (2000), who describes himself as a heterosexual Black man, acknowledges that there is much homophobia among heterosexual Blacks and calls on Black leaders to confront it and see that "they should be the last ones in America to jettison other Blacks who may be in a position to make valuable contributions to the struggle for political and economic empowerment" (p. 6).

Similarly, hooks claims that there is no inherent conflict between Black and gay identities. Although hooks (2001) does not believe that homophobia and racism should be discussed as synonymous—she sees skin color as a stronger social indicator and a greater cause of harm to Black people than the more

concealable sexual orientation—she believes that there is a "union between black liberation struggle and gay liberation struggle" (p. 73). Collins (2005) goes further. She sees an intersection between race and sexual identities and therefore a common political struggle: "Developing a progressive Black sexual politics requires examining how racism and heterosexism mutually construct one another" (p. 89). This work has been adopted by many current Black leaders, including such prominent figures as Coretta Scott King, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Rev. Al Sharpton, indicating and leading to further significant changes in the Black community (Banerjee, 2006; "Tutu stops short of backing gay marriage," 2004).

Influenced by what we have read in the literature, we approached this research with the hypothesis that Black LGBs would experience great struggles in managing their sexual and racial/ethnic identities. We expected that these struggles would leave Black LGBs conflicted and fragmented. We thought that some would resolve this conflict by moving more toward the White LGB community, making their sexual identities primary, and others would resolve the conflict by making their racial identities primary. We consulted identity theorists and found Raggatt's (2006) and other postmodern theorists' description of the protean self (Lifton, 1993) to be a good theoretical orientation for our study. But the picture that emerged as we heard the voices of our respondents was quite different: We found a struggle, for sure, but a struggle that helps unite rather than separate identities, a struggle that, for most respondents, seems to have led to a unified sense of self, appreciation of their various identities, and a clear sense of the stressful impact of oppression. In understanding what we heard, we relied on Cohler and Hammack (2006) and Cohler (2007) to explain the social context of our respondents' identity stories and to recognize that the shifting social context over the past few decades has helped Black LGBs to construct a coherent identity. We also relied on McAdams (1997) and other identity theorists who describe not a warring self, but the strive for unity and purpose in identity construction.

Acknowledgment

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