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"We'd Be Free": Narratives of Life Without Homophobia, Racism, or Sexism

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Abstract Stigma and social inequality deprive disadvantaged social groups of a sense of social well-being. Stress researchers have focused on prejudice-related events and conditions but have not described more intangible stressors experienced by sexual minorities. We use narrative methods to examine how sexual minorities experience stigma and social inequality as we focus on the more intangible stressors that are both pervasive and difficult to measure.

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Three themes emerged in the narratives of our ethnically diverse sample of 57 adult sexual minority women and men: (a) stigma deprived them of access to critical possibilities and opportunities; (b) stigma deprives them of safety and acceptance; and (c) despite this, the experience of stigma is also related to the adoption of a positive and collective orientation towards their stigmatized identities. Recognizing these stressors and related resilience can direct policy makers toward interventions that go even beyond eliminating prejudice by including goals to strengthen minority communities.

Introduction

Minority stress theory suggests that sexual minorities (lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals [LGB]), like members of other disadvantaged groups, experience excess stress due to their social position. This stress is chronic because it is tied to enduring social structures; it causes disorders, including mental disorders; and, therefore, it plays a key role in creating and exacerbating observed health disparities between heterosexuals and sexual minorities in the United States (Meyer 2003). The concept of minority stress originated, in part, from social and psychological theories about the importance of understanding the person in the context of his or her social environment (Durkheim 1951; Merton 1968) and from stress theories that described how a noxious social environment can be harmful to one's health (Pearlin et al. 1999; Dohrenwend 1998). Lazarus and

Folkman (1984) described a perceived ill fit or "mismatch" (p. 234) between the individual and his or her experience of society as the crux of all social stress. Similarly, Selye (1982) identified a sense of harmony with one's environment as the basis of healthy living. As others have argued, when an individual is a member of a stigmatized minority group, the disharmony between her or him and the hegemonic culture in which she or he lives can be oppressive and the consequent stress significant (Allison et al. 1998; Clark et al. 1999). Deprivation of a foundational sense of harmony between the person and the social environment is, thus, at the core of minority stress.

Minority stress research—and stress research generally—has focused on concrete, clearly defined stressors. Most notably, minority stress research has described major (and traumatic) life events, such as violence, job loss, and the death of a loved one; more minor, but impactful, stressful events (sometimes referred to as *everyday discrimination*) such as being treated unfairly; and chronic strains, such as being unemployed and caring for a loved one who is ill (Meyer et al. 2008; Wheaton et al. 1999).

Minority stress literature has also addressed the impact of stigma and the many subtle ways that it affects individuals' lives. For example, researchers have studied expectations of stigma as a stressor, whereby the person's anticipation of being stigmatized leads to a variety of negative outcomes. Among the many manifestations of expectations of stigma are *stereotype threat*, which leads to poor performance in academic and social situations (Steele 1997); cognitive burdens related to preoccupation, suspicion, and increased vigilance in an attempt to ward off the effect of stigmatization (Pachankis 2007); and various behavioral manifestations, such as avoidance and isolation (Pachankis 2007), and rejection sensitivity (Pachankis et al. 2008).

This research has described the social environment of LGB people and its impact on mental health, addressing specific processes that can be objectively defined as well as those that depend on internalized expectations. However, minority stress research has not been as informative about the more diffuse, and intangible stressors to which stigmatized minorities are exposed—the stress that comes from the lack of harmony to which Selye (1982) referred. The paucity of research that describes these more symbolic stressors in turn inhibits the development of effective measures and studies. Without sufficient study, researchers are limited in understanding these subtle processes and, therefore, cannot recommend public policy approaches to ameliorate the effects of such stressors.

Among the less studied minority stressors are minor, or everyday events and circumstances and even *nonevents*. Minor stressors—like being overlooked, denied services, and treated with disrespect—are reminders that the person's social identity is stigmatized and rejected by society. The symbolic meaning of these occurrences may have a stronger impact than the actual occurrence. For example, when gay and lesbian people have to fill out various administrative forms (e.g., for an employer's human resources office), they are often asked about their marital status and given answer choices such as *married* and *divorced*. Since most gay people in the United States live in a state where their unions are not recognized, they may have to respond that they are single even if they are in a long-term union. Not being able to find oneself on the form, as one witness in the California marriage trial (*Perry v. Schwarzenegger*) referred to this experience, is a reminder that one's same-sex union is not recognized or respected by one's state. Such a mundane occurrence can be stressful not because of any real threat or demand on the person—feeling a form is not a stressful event—but because it reminds the person of his or her rejection and exclusion. Because of such symbolic meaning, minor stressors can have an impact on the person well beyond their apparent magnitude. *Nonevents* are anticipated experiences that do not take place (Neugarten et al. 1965). Concrete examples previously discussed include being denied a promotion, or not being married by a certain age (Williams et al. 2008; Wheaton et al. 1999). Nonevents can also have a symbolic meaning if they reflect one's group exclusion from social institutions, such as marriage.

We take Selye's (1982) notion of harmony to refer to a sense of well-being in one's environment. The notion of social well-being (Keyes 1998) draws on such work as Durkheim (1951), and Antonovsky (1987), and emphasizes the fit between individuals and their social worlds. Social well-being encompasses the extent to which individuals feel they make valued social contributions, view society as meaningful and intelligible, experience a sense of social belonging, maintain positive attitudes toward others, and believe in the potential for society to evolve positively (Kertzner et al. 2009).

In this paper, we aim to capture this elusive experience of harmony with one's social environment, including the experience of stress related to minor everyday conditions and nonevents, in the lives of sexual minority men and women. We used narrative methodology to allow our participants to describe the hard to define, elusive experiences that are a part of minority stress. We asked sexual minority women and men to reflect on the question: "What do you think your life would be like without homophobia, racism, and sexism?" In this paper, we report on the participants' responses to this one question.

Methods

Participants

Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted as part of a larger epidemiologic study on stress, identity and

health (Meyer et al. 2008). This larger study included 524 participants (396 LGB) who were recruited through venue-based sampling techniques, to ensure ethnic, cultural and sexual diversity. Between February 2004 and January 2005, 25 staff outreach workers recruited participants at 274 venues within 32 New York City zip codes. Potential participants were approached by outreach workers, screened, and later called to be interviewed if they met inclusion criteria, quota sampling requirements, and other sampling protocol rules. Inclusion criteria included the following: (a) resident of New York City for 2 or more years; (b) self-identified as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual; (c) White, Black, or Latino race/ethnicity; (d) 18 to 59 years old; (e) male or female gender matching biological sex at birth.

Participants in the in depth interviews were randomly selected from the larger study's LGB sample. The qualitative study sample included 57 sexual minority men and women, of whom 22 are Black, 19 are Latino, and 16 are White. The mean age of participants was 33, and the sample was fairly evenly split between men and women. Participants were generally well educated, with over 80% having more than a high school education (see Table 1 for Participant Demographics).

Procedure

Selected participants were invited to participate in the research interview that took place at the research office or other locations if they were more convenient to the participants, including the participant's home. An in-depth semistructured interview that lasted approximately 40 min took place immediately following the administration of a quantitative questionnaire. The interview was developed by the study investigators and refined through a pilot phase (Narvaez et al. 2009). The interview included questions targeting three domains: (a) personal definitions of participants' identities

and social roles; (b) the intersection between identities and the settings in which they are enacted, including work, family, and community life; and (c) stressors associated with these identities, roles, and settings.

To help the participants orient to this task, at the beginning of the interview, interviewers used as a probe a sheet of paper with a drawing of a large circle with lines emanating from it. Participants were asked to write identities, statuses, and roles that described who they are on the lines emanating from the circle, inside the circle itself, or anywhere else on the page in a way that, in the participant's judgment, best represents the entries (identities and roles) spatially. Four lines were prelabeled as *race/ethnicity*, *gender*, *age*, and *sexual orientation*—the main categories by which participants were recruited into the study—but participants were told they did not have to respond to these if they chose not to. They were told they could write as many or as few identities as they wished and were asked to think of this portion of the interview as separate from the prior quantitative interview so that they could use as labels identities they had already referred to or ignore such identities in this task. Throughout the qualitative interview, interviewers were instructed to challenge participants to explain their responses, where necessary. Interviewers probed narratives based on standard qualitative interviewing guidelines, using probes investigators designed to optimize data quality and reduce social desirability biases. More about the method can be found in Narvaez et al. (2009). An example of analysis of data using this measure to study intersectional identities and stressors related to them is given by Meyer and Ouellette (2008).

Instrument

To query the intangible sources of stress related to minor events and nonevents, we asked participants to reflect on this question: "What do you think your life would be like

Table 1 Sexual orientation identity and demographic characteristics

Variable	Ethnic groups							
	Black (n=22)		Latino (n=19)		White (n=16)		Total (n=57)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	32.73	8.78	31.63	8.24	33.69	11.66	32.63	9.37
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Male	11	50	9	47.4	8	50	28	49.1
Female	11	50	10	52.6	8	50	29	50.9
Gay or homosexual	12	54.5	7	36.8	8	50	27	47.4
Lesbian	6	27.3	7	36.8	8	50	21	36.8
Bisexual	4	18.2	5	26.3	0	0	9	15.8
High school education or Less	6	27.27	3	15.79	1	6.25	10	17.5

without homophobia, racism, and sexism?" The question came at the end of the interview, after participants described in narrative form, their identities and stressors. The question was designed to elicit from the participants their reactions to and descriptions of an imagined life in a world free of inequalities, stigma and prejudice.

In talking about what life would be like without stigma and prejudice, participants told us about the impact of prejudice on their lives as they actually experienced them. What the participants provided us in response were narratives about lives without the "isms." They were not simply declarative statements, but rather full and nuanced descriptions that met all of what are now Bruner's six classic criteria for narratives (Bruner 1990, 2004): (a) the teller emerges as an agent, (b) who depicts action, (c) in the pursuit of goals, (d) within specific contexts or settings, (e) through certain means or instruments, and (f) who meets what Burke (1945) called "trouble," or the conflict between self as agent, action, goals, setting, and/or instruments.

With this question, we asked the participants to imagine their lives in a world that we knew would be difficult to conceive of. This question was abstract and, in that, differed from the other interview questions, which included more concrete inquiries into participants' identities and the stressors they have experienced around these identities. Therefore, it was the one question for which interviewers— and the investigators—had the fewest expectations. In asking this question we not only had no expectation of what may be a right or wrong answer, as was the case for the entire interview, but also there was also no wrong or right way for participants to *understand* the question. That is, we allowed—indeed, required of—the participant to offer her or his own interpretation of the question. The interviewer was left to converse in the spirit of whatever approach the respondent had chosen.

Analysis

Our data source consisted of full verbatim interview transcriptions including interviewers' and participants' words, pauses, and expressions of emotion, including instances of overlapping and unintelligible speech. Each of the four authors did multiple readings of the transcripts alone and together, with writing and conversations between readings. We engaged in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) in which we sought themes or patterns of relationships between key concepts. We focus on themes and patterns related to minority stress theory (Meyer 2003). These concepts primarily relate to identity, prejudice and stigma, and adverse life events. In our iterative process of analysis and reflection, new concepts were added, the concepts with which we began were clarified, and the

relationships between and among them were elaborated. In our thematic analysis, we relied on comparative inquiry across cases. We turned insights gained from a single individual's narratives into questions that we posed to and across other individual cases. Moving between deductive and inductive forms of analysis, we approached the narratives with prior conceptualizations but allowed the interview material to confirm or disconfirm our preconceptions and to introduce new ideas. The themes on which we collaboratively and consensually settled present the key understandings we gained from our participants. Given our emphasis upon persons in context, our narrative approach is similar both in theoretical stance and methodological approach to the narrative personality and culture studies of Gregg (1998) and the person in historical context work of Cohler (2007) and Hammack (2008).

Results

Some participants first reacted to the life we asked them to imagine with a sense of incredulity. As one gay Latina expressed it, "My life would be, my life would be different, but … it's hard to even imagine it." A gay Latino man said, "It would probably be too good to be true [laughs]." But, although participants felt that a world without stigma is not attainable, they still contemplated how this world might look in the future.

When initially pondering what it might be like to live in a world without inequality, several participants looked beyond the borders of their own lives to describe broader, collective implications. In doing so, participants tended to characterize the impact of this social transformation as radically utopian, not simply for LGBs, but for citizens in general. From this perspective, freedom from inequality would mean that marginalized and nonmarginalized groups and individuals would benefit. Broadly characterizing this, a Latino gay man explained that "Life would just be bliss." Similarly, a Latina lesbian said that "Everything would be in abundance, love" and a White lesbian said "all people would be able to take a collective sigh of relief." Some participants described that, although there may still be suffering in the world, uniquely social sources of suffering would probably no longer exist. A Black gay man said that "we would probably not be at war [in Iraq] now … not everybody is going to be rich and there still [would] be sickness in the world, but some of these other social issues that we created and fucked up the world with would disappear…."

Of course, participants also reflected on the ways in which living in a world without inequality would affect their own lives. Several participants characterized this

imagined world as "paradise." And, when explaining the implications of this, participants often referred to the absence of anxiety—that they could live without the need for perpetual vigilance to protect themselves from harm. Not having to "worry" was something many participants talked about, for example, a Latina lesbian said that she would "be a lot more peaceful … without constantly having to worry…." Another Latina lesbian explained that "…it would [be] much easier. You don't have to hide so much. You can just be free to be."

However, as they imagined a world without inequality, participants were quickly awakened to an awareness of their lives as lived in the world, as it truly is. After an initial response of disbelief, participants thoughtfully reflected on the implications of living in a world without inequality. In their reflections, we identified three prominent narratives. The first type of narrative we describe is that of *lost possibilities*, in which participants examined their own life histories to explain the life course consequences of inequality. The second type of narrative, *safety and acceptance*, refers to narratives in which participants describe the ways in which inequality currently deprives them of a sense of safety and acceptance, and how living without inequality might in the future radically transform their lives, bringing them into harmony with their social worlds. Finally, as participants imagine a world without stigma, they describe an imagined loss of some essential and positive aspects of themselves, which paradoxically, would be missed in a world with no stigma. The third type of narrative, *positive marginality*, refers to narratives in which participants articulate positive personal orientations vis-à-vis stigmatized aspects of their identities.

"I Probably Would Be at Home": Lost Possibilities

Even though the question did not specifically direct participants to think about their childhood, they thoughtfully reflected on the ways in which inequality has influenced them over the course of their lives. They described how inequality deprived them of critical possibilities and resources. A prominent domain of thwarted possibility that participants emphasized was structural, and related to missed opportunities for obtaining a quality education early in life. For example, a Latina lesbian spoke about the deleterious influence of racism early in her life, and articulated that in the absence of racism, she "would have gotten a different education … a much better one than the one that I got." Similarly, a bisexual Latina said, "if sexism wasn't there I would have had more opportunities." She explained that unlike her brother, she had "very limited options" when selecting a high school. When she was growing up there were few quality schools for girls.

Similarly, a gay White man explained that in the absence of homophobia, he "would have finished high school." But because of the intense distress he felt, he dropped out of high school and left home because, he said, "I was coming out and I didn't know how to deal with it."

Although participants noted the ways in which homophobia, racism, and sexism impeded access to a quality education, the ways in which participants articulated *how* educational opportunities were thwarted differed according to the source of inequality they were describing. When discussing racism and sexism, participants described their lack of access primarily as a function of the structural and collective consequences of racism—for example, that quality schools were unavailable in the neighborhoods in which they grew up.

In doing so, they described racism in collective terms, and referred to intergenerationally reproduced systems of inequality, intertwined with socioeconomic disadvantage, which have dire consequences for education, social mobility and health. Participants also described the processes whereby racism exerted its impact as visceral and literally fused with the air that they and members of their communities breathe. A Latina lesbian explained that racism affects "funding for the health of our communities," and that this influences members of her community through creating an environmental context in which "there is a high incidence … of asthma … for children, it has a lot of bad air."

Another Latina described her poor educational experiences but, equally important, explained that exposure to poor quality education was a collective stressor, noting that poor youth of color routinely encounter substandard educational resources. She said: "in certain communities, there's not as much money and schools don't have much money and you have all the crowded classrooms … you're in a building that looks like a jail, you know, with forty kids in a classroom in 90 ° weather." A Black lesbian described her difficulties climbing the socioeconomic ladder and explained that living in a world without racism would have altered her inherited socioeconomic position, eliminating the intergenerational consequences of racism:

> The whole history of your family could be different if you were a different race, because of the oppression from generation to generation to generation trickles down to each generation, you could know that you're intelligent or that you should be further in life…. My father, he only went to the ninth grade … but their socioeconomic background, due to racism … that affects me, cause that is me, I came from that … it puts you at a disadvantage from day one.

In contrast, when participants discussed the influence of homophobia they described it as the consequence of a more

interpersonal process of discrimination and violence, which often resulted in having to leave their schools and, sometimes, their homes in order to escape homophobia. A White gay man described leaving Lebanon, his country of birth, explaining:

> I realized I could not be myself, meaning gay, there, because of homophobia, and I was not going to change the whole world and culture. It was just much easier for me to change place rather than the country. So maybe if there was no homophobia I would still be in Lebanon, and I would be gay there.

Describing this in the context of contemplating life without homophobia, participants expressed nostalgia for home that reflected the pain of dislocation and lost family and community. This sentiment was articulated simply and poetically by a bisexual Latino man who explained that he would still be living in Texas, where he grew up: "wherever I was living, I know it would be easier…. If homophobia wasn't an issue, I probably would be at home." Moreover, participants explained that seeking refuge from home at an early age had long-term consequences: a White lesbian explained that had she not had to confront homophobia as a teen and flee her home town "my life might have taken a fairly different trajectory, just because I wouldn't have had to come up against, you know, all those conflicts, you know, at that critical decision point in my early adulthood." Similarly, a Latina lesbian explained "I would have gotten a different education … my neighborhood would have been different, everything about my life would have been completely different."

"I Would Be Louder": Safety and Acceptance

In contrast to narratives of lost possibilities that related to past circumstances, narratives that described a lack of safety and acceptance tended to focus on the present and future. For all participants, lack of safety and acceptance were described as all-encompassing stressors. Moreover, lack of safety and acceptance was described both in terms of fear of violence and discrimination and a pervasive sense of ill fit with the world.

Narratives of life without homophobia pivoted around no longer having to live in fear of acts of physical violence and unfair treatment. For example, a gay Black man described being threatened by a man who "looked at the way I was dressed or my mannerism and he thought that maybe I was getting close to him because I wanted to be intimate with him or something like that, so he pulled a knife on me." Several participants described being perpetually fearful of physical attack as a consequence of expressing affection to intimate partners in public spaces. In a world without homophobia, a gay Black man described, he would be "more comfortable to … be more intimate with my boyfriend … when we're in public and stuff … holding hands and kissing." A Latino man described that without homophobia, he could forgo fears of expressing affection to his boyfriend, and would be able to "kiss him in any restaurant. I could do all the things that straight people do and not be charged or not be chased down the street because I'm a homosexual man." And, while some participants were grateful for their relative safety in expressing affection in areas historically perceived as gay neighborhoods, like Greenwich Village, they had a clear understanding that tolerance within the gay enclave did not generalize to other urban spaces. For example, this Black gay man explained:

> If society was more tolerant towards us, we wouldn't just have to go down to the Village and hold hands, we could walk down the street and hold hands…. I look for the day … when you can just kiss your partner on the subway or at the bus stop or on the bus or, whether you're in the Village or in a restaurant or in the midtown or in the Bronx.

Participants also described exposure to an antigay workplace atmosphere. For example, a White lesbian said that, because of her openly homophobic supervisor, she needs to speak in "third person invisible" at her job, so that she does not inadvertently disclose that she is a lesbian. As she explained it:

> It's just sad that you have to spend that much energy, or places like, you know, my job [at a teen-oriented television station] where your immediate supervisor or the executives around are so homophobic, really, that you have to talk in what I used to call the third person invisible. You know, be-, you know, we went, you know, never saying a name, he, she, you know, my friend and I, and, and that's so exhausting! You know, like you try to tell a story what you did for the weekend, and then, you're just exhausted [laughs] after half hour you wonder why!

A gay White man, who served in the U.S. Navy, described being court-marshaled upon the discovery of his sexual orientation. Even participants who had not been directly targeted by homophobia at work expressed vigilance and fear of potential prejudice, discrimination, and violence. A bisexual Latino man said he feared coming out because of the ways in which disclosure of his sexual orientation could jeopardize future career possibilities, a reality he doubted will abate during his lifetime.

Participants also described an overarching sentiment of ill fit with the world, and explained that fitting-in often demands fundamentally denying or distorting core aspects of themselves. A White lesbian described the scrutiny that routinely comes with being a sexual minority, explaining, "you live as a lesbian, and you're … always under a microscope…."

In contrast, participants described a world without inequality as a world in which LGB people would be accepted and able to express themselves. This is reflected in a bisexual Latino man's metaphoric use of the word *louder*: in a world without inequality "I would be, louder… I wouldn't be so, discreet about my, you know, being able to be with a guy." Similarly, participants described a world without stigma as one where they are no longer required to explain and justify themselves as LGB. In describing this, participants referred to the vigilance currently required in their everyday interactions as they worry about explaining themselves to others and managing the consequences of rejection and judgment. A White lesbian said that in a world without inequality "…there would be a lot of explanation that you wouldn't have to do, you know, like a lot of explaining or justifying why you feel the way you do." Similarly, a White gay man explained that in this imagined world, he would no longer need to devote emotional energy to worrying about the consequences of rejection; that he "would be able to not have, have that portion of your brain thinking, what's going to happen if somebody knows or finds out, or whatever." Participants understood this imagined world of acceptance as a world where they would be able to pursue future aspirations, including access to social institutions, as this Latina explained: "if there wasn't that kind of prejudice I could just…marry whoever I wanted to…."

"Oppression Doesn't Just Stop Things": Positive Marginality

While longing for a life without prejudice, almost every participant saw his or her identities and life as being inextricably interwoven with experiences of homophobia, racism, or sexism. In a world without stigma, they would not be who they are now. A White lesbian's first reaction to our question was: "[laughs] I don't know if I'd have a life without racism, homophobia, or sexism! [laughs] It would be a hundred percent different!" Her reaction is echoed in others' responses, like this Latina who said: "I don't know, just like, I wouldn't be who I am, that's basically what I have to say, because racism and homophobia affect every single aspect of your life." And, like a Latino who wondered if life would be "less interesting" without exposure to discrimination, a Latina lesbian declared that life without prejudice would be boring because central identities emerged in her opposition to oppression: "I can't imagine that. So much of my life revolves around countering that, I don't know how my life would be if that wasn't the case." And this White, gay male said:

But then on the other hand, you know, we would not have Eli Wiesel writing incredible things about the Holocaust if it hadn't happened, you know. So, you know, like I was saying before, oppression doesn't just stop things, it recreates, it doesn't just put a lid on it, it completely shapes the whole container.

For these participants, the self that resulted from confronting homophobia, racism, and sexism over a lifetime is the self they cherish.

Seeming to contradict responses we described above from other participants, as well as their own comments elsewhere in the interview, participants spoke of the *positive* aspects of having been exposed to stigmatizing processes. They not only saw themselves as different because of being sexual minorities, and for some, persons of color, and women, but as *better* people for that. In the words of a White lesbian, "…in some ways I'm, I'm almost grateful that I am lesbian, because it was sort of the only thing that saved me, you know, from a life of [a] pretty, pretty limited world view…." Similarly, a Black lesbian explained that, although her experiences of prejudice were "awful and depressing," her political awareness, confidence, and other valued aspects of her personal development emerged in opposition to such experiences.

Participants spoke of social identities and roles that have been enhanced in response to exposure to stigma, such as that of employee, mother, or neighbor. For example, a White lesbian explained:

…I think that's why I'm a good high school teacher, is I completely identify with the angst of, of rebelling against the com-, you know, the norm. And wanting things to be different and I spend a lot of my energy and my time, my conversation, the music I listen to, the movies I go to, the kind of parties I go to, the kind of friends I have, the kind of stuff I like to do, is all connected somehow to the isms.

Participants also noted that embraced stigmatized identities link marginalized persons to a community of similarly marginalized others. A White gay male explained how embracing the queer label was his response to being a member of a minority group. He explained that he and other sexual minorities were oppressed by heterosexuality, and claiming a *queer* label expressed resistance to that unequal power dynamic. For many participants, the view of the world provided by positively marginal personal and social identities formed the foundation for their conviction to work for social change. A White lesbian said that experiencing prejudice made her "feel responsible for changing other perceptions about gay and lesbian people … I am out on purpose, like it is a very political move … I am a, an ambassador for my people [laughs], kind of representing."

But the road to self-acceptance and to a positive sense of one's self in the presence of homophobia, racism, and

sexism was not seamless, nor does it seem to be a characteristic that one either has or does not have, or a static position. Rather, participants' narratives suggest that the ability to recognize positive aspects of their identities comes out of a struggle. A Black lesbian explained how she achieved strength in the face of harsh realities:

> … you have to experience some things, you're going to have to go through some things, and you've got to get strong in some areas, to where you going to get to that point where you're going to have a peaceful mind, where you can say, well over here, she's saying this, it doesn't faze me, and, over here, my community, where I live at, it doesn't bother me that they're shooting down the block, well, it should bother you, but once you clear your mind, okay, this is me, this is mine, I got to take care of me and my kids or whatever, and once you get that peace inside, even if people talk about you, you wouldn't feel it.

Discussion

In this study, we elicited and analyzed participants' narratives about the kinds of stressors that are often not articulated—stressors that have to do with the absence of a sense of harmony with one's social environment. Although researchers have described major stressors and conditions that affect LGB individuals, little research describes the more mundane but significant minor events and nonevents. These more intangible stressors are harder to define and articulate. To access them, we employed qualitative interviews that allow more flexibility than does a quantitative questionnaire in capturing these constructs.

Quantitative measures require a construct that is well articulated and understood, for which measures can be designed and assessed. But with emerging and even elusive constructs, such as Selye's (1982) concept of lack of harmony that we attempt to understand here, the narrative approach allowed us to turn to the participants and ask them to define the issues for us. The narrative methodology we employed is uniquely suited to assess these aspects of minority stress because it allows participants to articulate complex and sometimes subtle experiences without requiring them to refer to any particular tangible experience, such as a life event or experience of discrimination. This made for a nuanced and complex exploration of the issues—for example, it allowed our participants to simultaneously express losses, threats, and strengths.

Participants described the multiple ways in which stigma and social inequalities related to homophobia, racism, and sexism affect their lives beyond the major life events and more minor experiences and conditions that researchers

often write about. In responding to our question, participants chose to consider different aspects of life without stigma. They reflected on their lives at present, as well as on past events and opportunities, and future trajectories. They told us about what the world might be like, describing a utopian existence—described as "bliss"—very different than the lives they currently experience. In thinking about their pasts, they poignantly described the many ways that homophobia, racism, and sexism have limited opportunities and caused them to leave—sometimes, escape—home, thus transforming their life trajectories.

Participants of color narrated community histories of how racism has fueled deprivation across generations. In pondering the influence of inequality on their lives, these participants characterized stigma as a collective stressor that has functioned to deprive them of structural and interpersonal possibilities, including a quality education and meaningful relationships with their families.

A major theme related by many participants relayed the lack of safety and acceptance that LGB people experience. In thinking about a world without stigma, some participants said that they would fit into the social environment—as they imagine straight people feel now. They especially talked about the ability to walk "down the street," freely expressing intimacy with a partner. They talked about not having to conceal who they are—being "louder" as one participant described it.

Lastly, although participants expressed grief over the ubiquity of stigma and social inequality, they also, strikingly, described resilience. As participants began to reflect about life without homophobia, racism, and sexism, they realized that who they are—their core identities, qualities, and characteristics—is intertwined with the struggles they have experienced because of inequality. In contemplating the utopian future with no inequality, some participants became nostalgic about the identities that would be lost.

These narratives are consistent with what Unger (2000) has called the experience of *positive marginality*. Positive marginality is the ability to view one's stigmatized characteristics as positive aspects of one's identity, and to see one's self and similarly stigmatized others as members of a community who are not personally responsible for their social positioning, but who do have the power to work for change on behalf of themselves and the group (Unger 2000). This work, and our participants' narratives, reminds us that sexual minorities, like other minorities, have not succumbed to a life at the margins. Early work on the construction of an identity in response to prejudice and stigma indicate the possibility of ambivalence (Goffman 1963), and even security and contentment (Allport 1954) with one's in-group. This paper extends this perspective by specifying the potential for a *positive personal identity* among LGBs. In

describing positive marginality, participants demonstrated the resilience and resolve that minorities must, and indeed do, develop in response to their stigmatization and oppression.

Indeed, sexual minorities have developed, at least since the 1969 symbolic start of the gay liberation movement with the Stonewall riots, many institutions and social arrangements that specifically cater to sexual minorities (D'Emilio 1983). These include neighborhoods and enclaves where gay people can feel more at ease—something many of our participants referred to—including community centers, businesses, recreation and entertainment outlets, and alternative media. The gay liberation movement has also developed and disseminated alternative values and norms that say *gay is good* and has provided models of gay life that include successful family and intimate lives and even children—models that counter heterosexist messages learned throughout the socialization process. These are also reflected in many of our participants' narratives, which underscore the idea that "oppression doesn't stop things." The challenge for researchers is to capture both aspects of stigma without neglecting either the negative experiences and conditions which are at the root of stigma, or the resilient ways in which individuals enact acts of survival and resistance.

Although the number of participants in subgroups defined by race/ethnicity and gender is small, themes of *intersectionality* were apparent in the narratives. Intersectionality points to the importance of paying attention to the effect of intersecting social identities, such as those of race/ethnicity and gender among LGB people (Bowleg et al. 2004). Traditionally, researchers have focused on sexual minorities, racial/ethnic minorities, and women as three separate spheres of study. Intersectionality researchers point out that intersectional analysis shows that there are unique qualities that emerge from thinking about the intersection that can be obscured by thinking about each social identity separately (Collins 1998; Crenshaw et al. 1996). Our analysis found distinctions between White, Black and Latino LGBs in how they talked about past and present. For example, Black and Latino participants discussed a history of oppression prior to their coming out, reflected in the schools they attended and the neighborhoods in which they lived. Also, Black and Latino participants were aware that the select enclaves of "gay neighborhoods," such as Greenwich Village, where they can feel relative safety in walking down the street, were rare. They longed for a time when they can be safe in a wider array of neighborhoods and urban spaces. Thus, the narratives give a glimpse into the complex intersection of sexual and racial/ethnic identities in considering the lives of LGB people of color. They point to the impact of racism on their opportunities and the stressors that LGBs more generally face in communities of origin and families.

Our research is limited in many ways. First, the themes we describe emerged within the context of the interview and the study as a whole. It is possible that the study topic—identity and stress—and the many quantitative and qualitative questions that contextualized our assessment led participants to focus on aspects of their lives that they do not routinely think about. More generally, the small sample and qualitative interviews cannot be taken to represent the entire population of LGB people. The themes we describe serve to suggest the experiences of LGB people around their sexual minority identity. We did not aim nor suggest here how prevalent such themes may be in the lives of LGB people. In order to assess to what extent such themes or experiences are common or not, surveys with representative samples are necessary. Still the narrative approach allowed us to uncover themes that are not typically addressed by researchers and that can have significant impact on the mental health and well-being of LGB people.

The findings show that in addition to life events—such as antigay violence, abuse, and discrimination in hiring or promotion—participants describe homophobia, racism, and sexism as enduring and pervasive social forces that chronically and systematically exclude them from social institutions. In thinking about life without homophobia, racism, and sexism, participants revealed that, indeed, minorities experience society as anything but harmoniously fitting. Researchers need to pay greater attention than they have to date to describing these stressors and understanding their effects. Among these stressors are minor events and conditions that are mostly intangible. Prominent among these were experiences such as not being able to walk down the street freely because of the fear of expressing affection to one's intimate partner. To a great extent, that experience epitomizes in a very fundamental way the very opposite of Selye's (1982) sense of harmony with one's environment.

The challenge of the experience of disharmony is that interventions are not easily apparent. A sense of harmony extends far beyond the mere absence of prejudice. It does not mean that one is not being discriminated against, harassed, or subject to violence. Although, clearly, these are important and urgent goals for public policy and individual-level interventions, these alone would not facilitate a sense of harmony and well-being. For example, participants in our study discussed the importance of access to social institutions, such as marriage. But the narratives also highlight that for many LGBs, access to basic safety and being able "to be who you are" is, in many cases, painfully missing. As theorists and researchers have shown, a sense of coherence and well-being are essential elements of a fulfilling and happy life (Keyes 1998; Kertzner et al. 2009).

Our observations should direct policy makers to pay more attention to the more intangible stressors that impinge on the lives of LGBs. They need to explore and suggest what interventions and policies may be developed that would protect the full social citizenship of LGBs. Clearly, reducing stigma and prejudice is a necessary step towards

providing LGB people with a sense of safety. Similarly, opening social institutions that are now closed to LGB people—such as marriage, service in the military and other protections against discrimination—will allow LGB people to more fully participate in society. But a full sense of harmony may still be a challenge to achieve.

One clue for possible interventions lies in the participants' narratives about positive marginality. Interventions and public policy efforts can be directed not only at eliminating prejudice but also at strengthening minority communities. For LGB people in particular, who do not grow up within their sexual minority community, facilitating paths to affiliation with the community can lead to greater sense of positive marginality even if sexual minority identity is still marginalized. How to facilitate affiliation with the community is something researchers can address. One challenge for identification and affiliation with the gay community is that LGB people must, through "coming out," work to access a gay community; they do not have ready access to a community as is the case, for example, for racial/ethnic/national minorities who are socialized within their minority community. Another challenge is that gay and lesbian identities are anchored in social and cultural settings that are continually shifting. One generation's community may not fully address the needs of the next generation (Herdt and Boxer 1996; Savin-Williams 2005). These and other questions need to be addressed to help design effective interventions.

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