



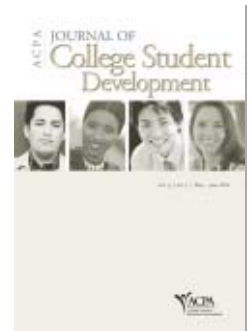
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Learning from the Experiences of Self-Identified Women of Color Activists

Chris Linder Katrina L. Rodriguez

We studied 7 women of color student activists on a large, predominantly White college campus and employed intersectionality theory and multiple identity development theory to examine how they make meaning of their multiple identities. Findings from this narrative study highlight ways students' identities led them to activism, experiences of marginalization, and finally, the nature of safe spaces where allies "do their own work" and students feel whole. We provide and strategies for student affairs practice. By better understanding these phenomena, educators may challenge practices on college campuses that unintentionally perpetuate the problem of marginalization.

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restriction of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living. (Lorde, 1984, pp. 120-21)

Audre Lorde's words resonate with many women of color student activists. In addition to the racism, sexism, and homophobia students experience in their everyday lives on college campuses, student activists also experience marginalization within social justice and activist communities. Scholars and

activists have documented a history of racism in feminist and queer movements and sexism in the Civil Rights Movement. Many White feminists who worked to secure women's right to vote and access to reproductive choice employed racism to obtain those rights. To ensure White women got the right to vote, some activists intentionally excluded Black women and other women of color from the movement (Newman, 1999). Activists used eugenics arguments to advocate for the legalization of birth control, stating birth control would assist in slowing the birth rates of people of color (Roberts, 1998). Within the Civil Rights Movement, female activists reported sexism in the assignment of menial tasks by male leaders (Cole & Stewart, 1996) as well as incidents of sexual harassment and assault at the hands of male activists (Chen, Dulani, & Piepzna-Samarasinha, n.d.). Queer people of color reported feeling invisible in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movements (Han, 2008).

Scholars highlight the 1960s and 1970s as a significant time for activism on college campuses (Roth, 2004). Similar to the larger movements in the United States, student activists advocated for inclusion on college campuses through ethnic and women's studies programs, multicultural and women's centers, and equity in campus programs and services (Roth, 2004). Although past activism advanced campus inclusion, today women of color activists continue to report marginalization

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in activist circles (Hernandez & Rehman, 2002). This marginalization suggests a need to explore the experiences of women of color activist students to further inform student affairs practice.

In this study, we sought to understand the experiences of self-identified women of color student activists on a large, predominantly White college campus. The guiding research question for this inquiry was: How do women of color student activists make meaning of their multiple identities? Participant experiences with marginalization and oppression provide significant insight into the experiences of women of color on college campuses today. By better understanding this phenomenon, educators may challenge practices on college campuses that unintentionally perpetuate the problem of marginalization.

In the following sections, we discuss intersectionality theory and models of multiple identity development as theoretical frames and narrative inquiry as methodology for this study. Next, we share the stories and experiences of participants related to racism, sexism, and homophobia in activist and mainstream activities and discuss their shared experiences. By understanding ways participants feel marginalized and welcomed on campuses, educators will learn to create more welcoming and safe environments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

To provide a theoretical context, we grounded this inquiry in related theories of multiple identity development and intersectionality. First, we summarize a progression of research on college women and multiple identity development theory. Next, through the lens of intersectionality theory, we discuss the primacy of viewing the lives of women of color through the intersections of their multiple social identities.

Multiple Identity Development Theories

Since the early 1980s, feminist scholars have argued for the inclusion of multiple identities when exploring identity development and identity politics by asking the question, “*Which* women?”—disputing the idea all women are the same (Shields, 2008, p. 300). The complexity of multiple identities and the contexts in which individuals operate cannot be described in the linear structure of former identity development theories in student affairs (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, Jones (1997) contributed to the student affairs scholarship by illuminating the complexity of multiple dimensions of identity by exploring identity development of female college students.

Building on Jones (1997), Jones and McEwen (2000) created a model of multiple dimensions of identity development (MMDI) to help scholar-practitioners understand and explain identity development in a more complex way. The MMDI highlights ways core identities and contextual influences intersect with outside identities to explain a fluid model of identity development. Specifically, women in the Jones and McEwen study described their core identity as being their “inner identity” or “inside self” as opposed to their “outside” self (p. 408). The women described core identity as having multiple intersections, and the salience of each identity depended on the context in which it was experienced. The MMDI’s strength lies in its description of both dominant and marginalized identities as they connect with the salience of the identity dimensions (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

In further investigation, Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) explored students’ meaning-making capacity related to identity development of college lesbian students. These scholars described a “meaning making filter”

(Abes et al., 2007, p. 7) of varying complexities allowing contextual influences to pass through, providing an understanding of the way students make meaning of their identities. Authors have described the meaning-making filters as formulaic, transitional, and foundational. Students using a formulaic filter to make meaning of their identities rely significantly on contextual influences to understand their identities. The meaning-making filter is thin, and identity is heavily influenced by people and the environment in which they reside. Some might describe this as a chameleon effect. The student changes with her environment to fit in. The transitional filter grows thicker, making identity development more complex. Students rely less on other people and environments to make meaning of their identities and still feel the impact of labels and stereotypes; however, students still occasionally attempt to hide or minimize their identities that do not fit in various contexts. For example, students may hide their sexual orientation if it does not fit with their religious beliefs. Finally, students using a foundational filter consistently present themselves in multiple contexts. For example, students understand ways their sexual orientation works with their religious identity, even if messages they receive from others tells them otherwise.

More recently, Abes and Kasch (2007) reanalyzed the data from the meaning-making study utilizing queer theory and suggested scholars explore student development theory as a fluid process and analyze it from critical perspectives. Specifically, Abes and Kasch suggested focusing on ways students' development of their marginalized identities leads to resistance of the dominant power structures. Findings suggested students are forced to understand their marginalized identities more quickly than their dominant identities because they must make meaning of those marginalized identities to counter the messages they have

learned about marginalized identities being abnormal (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

These identity models imply development is an individual and unique process and helping students to develop wholly is a complex task that cannot be understood by layering linear identity models on top of one another. Exploration of multiple identity development encourages student affairs practitioners and scholars to think about the ways students develop differently based on context, intersections of identities, and cognitive development. As the MMDI literature suggests, participants of our study highlight myriad ways they experience development through the lenses of their multiple identities.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory highlights ways women of color experience marginalization (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984) by focusing on how multiple identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect. Black feminist scholars first introduced the concept of intersectionality, stating a woman of color should not have to choose between her identity as a woman and as an African American person in political or personal struggles (Collins, 1990). Some scholars also included sexual orientation as a category that should not be separated from the whole (Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). Intersectionality theory emphasizes the need to understand identities as interactive rather than additive. Further, intersecting identities influence how people experience their environments and how others respond to their identities.

Several examples highlight the importance of understanding intersectionality. First, the phrase "women and minorities" renders women of color invisible. If I am both a woman and a person of color, where do I fit, or do I fit at all (Bowleg, 2008)? Similarly, a

scenario called “the librarian’s dilemma” makes visible challenges of intersectionality (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 383). When librarians receive a book on Black women’s history, they must decide whether the book should be placed on the Black history shelf or the women’s history shelf, running the risk that some people who may be interested in the book will miss it (Purdie-Vaughns, & Eibach, 2008).

Current scholarship calls for an understanding of intersectionality methodology to study experiences of people with multiple marginalized identities (Bowleg, 2008). Intersectionality theory requires researchers go beyond a single standpoint when seeking to understand participants’ experiences (Bowleg, 2008) and to understand ways identities are related to social structures. Intersectionality methodology “requires that we think about social categories in terms of stratification brought about through practices of individuals, institutions, and cultures rather than primarily as characteristics of individuals” (Cole, 2008, p. 445). Moving beyond exploring individual social constructions of identities to experiences of discrimination and oppression helps illuminate lived experiences. In addition, researchers have a responsibility to connect participants’ experiences with sociohistorical inequality to explain how multiple identities intersect and interact with systems of domination (Bowleg, 2008). In the present study, we moved past a single standpoint and considered how intersectionality and multiple identity development contribute to the experiences of women of color activist students.

Methodological Considerations

In this inquiry, we position our philosophical stance in the transformative paradigm, which centers the lived experiences of those who have been traditionally marginalized by systemic oppression. Researchers who work from a transformative perspective “consciously

and explicitly” locate themselves alongside participants who have been marginalized based on their social identities so together they can advance social change (Mertens, 2010, p. 21). Mertens (2010) advocated that transformative researchers investigate the promulgation of uneven power structures and, through the findings of such inquiry, examine the connections to political and social engagement.

Within the transformative paradigm, we utilized narrative inquiry to better understand the specific experiences of self-identified women of color activists. In essence, narrative inquiry is the study of lived experiences through story (Clandinin, 2007). By asking female students to share their experiences related to their campus activism and intersectionality and then exploring the commonalities in those stories, we collaborated with participants to co-construct meaning from those commonalities (Creswell, 2007). As researchers, our task is to understand the common themes emerging from the data to accurately represent, in storied text, the lived experiences shared by participants (Creswell, 2007).

Researcher Stance. In transformative qualitative research, researchers’ perspectives are an important part of the research process. In this study, Chris, the researcher who conducted the interviews and focus groups identifies as a queer, White, middle-class, antiracist feminist. Chris had previous relationships with each of the participants in the study, leading to a safer environment in which participants could share their experiences. The second researcher, Katrina, identifies as a bi-ethnic Latina and White, middle-class, heterosexual, Chicana feminist and provided an important perspective in analyzing the data and identifying emergent themes. Both researchers have worked as professionals in campus-based women’s centers, offering perspective and experiences in understanding women’s identity development.

DESIGN AND METHODS

In this section, we present descriptions of study participants, participant selection process, and data collection methods. Finally, we describe data analysis and trustworthiness criteria to underscore the research rigor.

Participants

Participants included 7 self-identified women of color activists attending a state university in the western United States. Participants defined their identities in their own words (see Table 1) and were active in campus and community activities, including a campus social justice retreat, multicultural sororities, living-learning communities, a student organization for multi-racial students, and women's studies and ethnic studies.

Recruitment for this study specifically sought self-identified women of color activists. Chris was serving as a facilitator at a campus-based social justice retreat and sent an e-mail to all retreat participants and to the seven campus student diversity offices to recruit participants. We chose not to define activist, allowing those who identified as activists to self-select into the study. We selected all participants who responded. Participants shared various other identities salient to them. Five of the participants identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning, influencing ways they made meaning of their multiple marginalized identities. One person shared the salience of her class privilege, and another participant noted how her experiences as a survivor of domestic violence and recovering addict to alcohol and drugs influenced her.

TABLE 1.
Participant Demographics

Name	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Year in School	Other Salient Identities
Chozen	African American, not Black	African American woman	"I am heterosexual . . . I think so."	Junior	(Author)tian, feminist, youth advocate, young woman advocate
Julia	Latina	Woman	"Straight, I guess."	Recent graduate (3 months prior to the interview)	Woman of color, "White by race, Latina by ethnicity" (lighter-skinned woman of color)
Katia	African American or Black	Female	Straight	Sophomore	"(Author)tian, but I don't go to church"
Katie	Latina	Woman	Queer	Senior	Class privilege, New Mexican
Noemi	Latina	Womyn	"I'm hetero, I guess. I usually just leave it blank, I'm like, why does it matter?"	First year	Recovering addict, survivor of domestic violence
Veronica	Latina	Woman	Bisexual	Junior	Woman of color, Mexican, immigrant to the U.S.
Victoria	Chicana, Spanish, Caucasian, Jewish	Gender-queer	Bisexual	Senior	Multiethnic, artist

Data Collection

To better understand the experiences of self-identified women of color activists, one researcher conducted 1-hour individual interviews with each participant. Participants provided a pseudonym to assist in protecting their confidentiality. A sample of the semi-structured interview questions included: Please describe your campus activism. How would you say your activism has impacted your identity and how you see yourself? How do you experience your race and ethnicity on campus? your gender? your sexual identity? Where are the places on campus where you feel safest being your whole person? In other words, where do you feel safe in expressing all of your identities? What makes those places feel safe so that you can express yourself fully?

Second, the same researcher conducted a focus group to further explore concepts raised in the individual interviews. Six of the 7 participants joined the focus group, which lasted 2 hours. The focus group provided an opportunity for us to conduct member checks as well as to further understand the ideas shared in the individual interviews. In addition, the synergy created by a focus group allows participants to explore their experiences in a new context, giving insight to both the participants and the researchers. During the focus group, we also asked participants to offer strategies for creating safe spaces and suggestions for sharing research findings.

Data Analysis and Rigor

Consistent with a transformative theoretical framework, we employed the three-dimensional space approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore ways student experiences interacted with the power structures of their environments (Mertens, 2010). From the collected participant stories, we independently read the interview transcripts line by line,

making margin notes as to preliminary themes (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the analysis process, we continually questioned the data to understand ways race and gender intersected and the effect these intersections had on student experiences (Madison, 2005).

After conferring on preliminary themes, we began to search the data loosely based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space approach. First, we looked for participant personal and social interactions within their environments, including classrooms, residence halls, student organizations, and the general campus, connecting similarities across all 7 participants. Second, we searched the data for continuity within participant stories, connecting their past and present experiences along with their future conceptualizations. Finally, we illuminated their situational experiences in terms of their physical spaces, especially those related to campus and family spaces. One approach to narrative inquiry suggests the data be represented in a storied, chronological order (Creswell, 2007). In this study, we organized the data within each theme according to participants' understanding of their activism and multiple identities in their familial and college experiences. We chose to represent participant stories by using quoted material within each of the three major themes emerging from the data. In using direct quotes, we further grounded analysis in the transformative paradigm by highlighting participant voices in sharing their own stories, limiting researcher influence.

To ensure the integrity and rigor of the research process and findings, we further describe the analysis process using four trustworthiness criteria: dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 2008). Researchers established dependability by using two data-gathering methods through individual interviews and a focus group to uncover participants' experiences. Participants

reviewed transcribed interviews to verify their accuracy. This process of member checking contributed to the credibility criteria. After each researcher independently analyzed the verified transcripts to garner the preliminary themes, we discussed the initial themes, compared our individual perspectives, and thus triangulated the data using confirmability criteria. To provide credibility to the themes, we gathered direct quotes from the data to validate each theme. The transferability criterion denotes the extent to which the research findings may be utilized in another context or site (Lincoln, 2001) and is established by using thick, rich description to represent the data through participant voices. By sharing multiple direct quotes, the reader can determine the meaning of the findings and their applicability to other settings by hearing how participants described their experiences.

FINDINGS

Participants' stories emphasized the importance of understanding how women of color activists make meaning of their multiple identities. Because the participants in this study were working as activists for social change, they had spent considerable time reflecting on ways oppression and marginalization influence their experiences, providing a deep understanding and description of marginalization in their lives.

Three categories illustrate the experiences of participants in this study: developing a path to activism, experiencing marginalization, and creating safe spaces. First, students' understanding of their marginalized identities and family experiences led them to activism. Next, participants' experiences with marginalization existed within specific identity groups and in the general campus community. Finally, participants provided significant insight for educators working to create welcoming and inclusive environments.

Developing a Path to Activism

Participants described their understanding of activism and ways their identities influenced them to get involved. For participants, activism included being informed and raising awareness in various places about issues of oppression. Katia said, "I try to speak up if I see something that's wrong." Each participant shared a specific instance when she discovered activism through one of her marginalized identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, class, immigrant status, or a combination of several identities. Katie described her experience:

What first got me into activism was my identity as a woman, and that led me into feminism. I hadn't been exposed to anything about intersecting identities until I got farther into school and then I realized that my identity as a Latina affects these things too. And then I recently came out as queer, so that's big. I think that all of these identities play into each other and I can't divide them out. . . . I look at it as bringing all of me to what I do.

Julia expressed feeling frustrated in elementary school because she received the message that girls were not capable of doing math and science. When she went to college, she took a women's studies and an ethnic studies class in the same semester, allowing her to explore her identities as a woman and a person of color. She said these experiences "completely changed the course of where I was headed with my career . . . and probably the rest of my life."

Veronica explained ways her identities motivated her to volunteer with a tutoring program for kids from low-income families:

They're trying to get [the kids] . . . to pursue higher education . . . my parents are both immigrants and we don't have much money. It really frustrates me when people from my culture look down

on women. I'm just trying to get my students—girls in particular—to push through high school.

Three participants noted specific instances when they remembered parents and family influencing them to become active in their communities. Victoria remembered her mother taking her to volunteer at the local soup kitchen from the time she was a very young girl, and Katie recalled her mother sharing experiences of growing up on a reservation and examples of racism toward Native American people. Julia's extended family significantly influenced her activist work:

It's just seeing all of those things in my family and knowing that my aunts have had domestically violent relationships and a lot of the family's in poverty; my family had land stolen from them by the government because they didn't speak English . . . it's just kind of gaining awareness of my history and where I came from.

As with many people with marginalized identities, the women of color in this study felt a burden to become activists; two expressed that becoming an activist was not a choice for them—it was a responsibility and form of survival. Victoria expressed, “It has never been something that I chose to do. I just always had this urge . . . the urge to want make a change.” Julia shared her experience of feeling responsible to be “hyperinvolved” to battle stereotypes that women of color are ignorant and lazy and to ensure women of color's perspectives are represented: “I've always been really susceptible to the feeling that I need to be that token representative, that if I'm not there, no one else is going to say it, so I should do it.”

Experiencing Marginalization

Participants described experiencing marginalization in specific identity or activist groups as well as in the general campus community.

Within specific identity groups, participants shared how they navigated their beliefs about their internal selves and the external expectations of others, consideration of their multiple identities, and challenges of their phenotype. On campus in general, participants noted experiences of marginalization in classrooms, residence halls, student organizations, and community spaces.

Marginalization Within Identity Groups. Participants explained experiences of marginalization within various identity and activist groups including feminist, racial, and GLBT communities. Examples of marginalization, dissonance between internal and external expectations, and subjective perceptions based on bodily traits provide insight into activists' experiences.

Three participants provided examples of feeling marginalized within feminist activist groups. Katie explained,

My initial activism started out with a feminist group here on campus and I was exposed to a lot of radicalism right away, which was really great, but I felt like there was kind of something missing. When I would try to talk about my experiences as a woman of color, no one really knew how to respond, and so the issues that that group was focusing on didn't really speak to me and the multiple identities that I hold, and so I kind of just slowly left that group.

Both Noemi and Veronica communicated feeling isolation within feminist circles based on race. Veronica said, “What I've heard about feminism in the U.S. is just like rich, White women, which I'm neither.” Noemi noted being asked to speak for all Latinas in a feminist organization: “I've never been told ‘you can't do this,’ but they don't ask for your opinion, or they'll ask you speak for everybody that identifies as Latina.”

Participants also shared experiences of

marginalization within racial and GLBT activist communities. Noemi explained feeling as though she needed to choose her race over her gender in some Latino communities. As a bisexual, multi-racial, Jewish person, Victoria expressed not feeling completely comfortable in many places: “I feel like I have all of these borders inside me where I don’t understand certain parts, and I’m always fighting to emerge, so I think being multi-ethnic, you’re not represented.” She explained that she felt she could not reveal some of her identities wherever she went. She communicated not being accepted by her extended family because she is “half Latina and half White.” She believed some members of her White family are “racist toward Mexicans” and felt left out of conversations with her Mexican family members because she doesn’t speak Spanish. In addition, as a bisexual person she felt marginalized in the queer community because many lesbian women will not date bisexual women and many people do not understand bisexuality and believe she is attracted to everyone all of the time. Further, she believed many people in her ethnic studies classes were “bothered by my sexuality.”

Participants described how dissonance occurred between how they see themselves, or their internal selves, versus the projected external expectations based on perceived identity from others. Katia explained her frustration in fitting into the stereotypes of her own ethnic community as promoted by the media:

It’s so hard to be accepted because in the Black community you have to be what the media puts you to be. You have to wear the latest gear, and you have to listen to certain music . . . and if you’re not those things, you’re different; if you talk a certain way, you’re different; if you sit and read, you’re different; if you don’t eat this, you’re different.

Katia also noted the conflict she endured about her voice and name:

My name . . . it’s a really White name . . . and it’s spelled weird, so when I go for interviews, people always have that look of shock, like, “Oh *you’re* Katia, you didn’t sound” . . . okay, well . . . and it’s something that I’m used to. I’m just like, I don’t know how to sound, this is just the way I talk, and I don’t want to change.

Participants also illuminated the struggle of the subjective perceptions of bodily traits. Eye shape, height, skin color, and body size are all bodily status characteristics identifying physical traits and social status (Andre, 1994). Bodily status characteristics, or phenotype (Johnson, 1997), provides social standing that shapes and influences a person’s self-concept, worldview, and connects “individuals with powerful or powerless groups” (Andre, 1994, p. 13). Individuals with multiple ethnic identities experience challenges as a result of their phenotype; Julia articulated what many participants felt:

I think one of the intricacies of trying to navigate being bi- or multiracial, especially for those of us who have lighter skin, is that we’re often marginalized in the communities of color for not being dark enough and not fitting those prescriptions for how we should be. Even not having an accent sometimes, I feel left out in certain spaces.

Julia further described how she frequently encountered issues of phenotype:

“You don’t look like a Mexican,” or they would say, “Oh we’re not talking about you, we’re talking about them.” . . . [I attended a] Latino leadership thing. And they said, look around the audience at all the brown faces, and then I felt singled out because I don’t have a brown face. That just stuck out to me as really being kind of in limbo between two worlds and not knowing exactly how I fit into either one.

Marginalization on Campus. Participants purported that hostile environments exist in classrooms, residence halls, student organizations, and shared community spaces and shared they often felt like they were over-exaggerating or overreacting to hostile events on campus because it appeared that no one else was responding to or discussing hostile environments. Katia explained her experience:

I think a lot of things that happen on this campus are very hidden and very subtle, and I liked the fact that I could talk to a group of people who I wouldn't be like, "I hope I don't offend them." Because that's a big thing, like, afraid to speak up because other people will be like, "Well you're just overexaggerating."

Participants also noted hostile experiences in classrooms created by the instructor or other students and that usually occurred without intervention from the instructor:

We were talking about experiences of people of color and . . . one woman I know who identifies as Asian talks about how people always look at her and ask her about her culture and expect her to speak for, not just like her Korean culture, but the entire Asian continent. She was talking about how hard that is and how White people will never know what that's like and will never experience it. A young White man talked about how he's expected to speak for all men and he's put on the spot a lot. Our professor asked other people to relate . . . if they felt put off by the woman's comment that White people would never experience that, and a lot of people related. I ended up saying something because I felt like we completely skipped over the woman's story, and no one really validated that for her, and everyone continued to validate the White man's feeling . . . the room was completely silent, and that's an experience I have a lot.

Another participant, Chosen, communicated

her experience in the larger community as being hostile and unwelcoming:

I have always been one that will go out alone because I just really never had a problem with that. I'm not so quick to do it here, you know, because I had to really look and see, are there any other ethnicities in [the club] other than White. You know, do the people seem friendly? And then, I've even walked in and then turned around and walked back out of establishments. You know, because I realized that I'm just totally not welcome.

The constant tension between invisibility and tokenization also existed in unsafe places. In many instances participants expressed feeling invisible and, at other times, as though they needed to speak for every person of their race. In this instance, Veronica felt invisible to her instructor:

I raised my hand because I wanted to share something more recent, like what Venezuela and Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago are going through right now. And I raised my hand, and then [the professor] started talking again, and I was like, okay, and I raised my hand again, just so she could know that I still had something to say, and somebody else raised their hand, and they were able to talk right away, and I was just like, hmmm, okay. I was in a class full of White people.

Participants shared experiences of being called on in classrooms and expected to provide "the Latina" or "the African American" perspective.

Although many believe overt hostility and racism in classrooms and in the campus community no longer exists, participant experiences suggest otherwise. Hearing these stories reminds those with privileged identities of the kinds of hostility that exists in daily life. Understanding and hearing these experiences serve as reminders to challenge hostile environments and move toward creating safer spaces on campuses.

Creating Safe Spaces

The final theme emerged as a description of safe spaces and the value of allies. Participants indicated having a safe space on campus encouraged them to explore more of their whole selves, which is critical given their daily negotiation of intersectionality. Specifically, participants pointed to the need to create safe spaces by building community to address the lack of community on campus. Next, the notion of safe space is based on the social justice knowledge and education of group members. Finally, participants articulated ally support is based on the ways in which allies do their own work in learning about social justice issues.

Overwhelmingly, participants noted the lack of student organizations and courses available for students who want to focus on social justice or the intersectionality of multiple identities. Many participants created their own organizations out of a need to be involved in meaningful activities dedicated to social justice. Julia articulated her journey:

I have been involved in a lot of really mainstream activities while I've been at [college], and I have just never felt at home in those kinds of activities because they did not focus on issues of race or gender, or sexuality or . . . disability, religion, etc. I've really found my home with, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. I just really like the radical approaches to it. It just seems like a lot of the other [organizations] look at the consequences of the problems and not at the causes of the problems themselves.

Katie shared a powerful experience about a course that was different from other courses:

I had a great experience last semester with a really diverse group of students and I've never felt so validated in front of dominant identities. The [course] was race, class and gender—and we centered

on the marginalized experiences, and so talking about that every day and how does it relate to our experience. I guess it's just talking about it every day.

Participants clearly communicated the types of spaces that allowed them to feel safe and whole on campus. Defining characteristics revolved around the individuals present more than on the physical location. Julia stated her perspective:

The only spaces where I really feel safe are like in groups of women of color, but specifically, women of color . . . who are really conscious of things that happen, cause you can be in a group of people of color and nobody has any idea about racism . . . [or] women and sexism.

Katie explained that safe spaces consisted of educated people to whom she did not have to explain her anger:

That space feels safe and open because I don't have to explain my anger to other people—they're experiencing the same things, and I don't have to explain . . . we all come from different ethnic backgrounds but a lot of us have knowledge on each other's histories, so I'm not there explaining.

Finally, participants articulated the need for social justice allies to “do their own work” on themselves. In other words, allies need to tap into their own awareness of social justice issues and check their assumptions about oppression and privilege. For example, Julia suggested,

One place to start is just knowing yourself, like self-reflexivity, just being able to understand how you fit into the larger picture is a really good place to start So, just kind of figuring out how to map yourself . . . just like where do you fit on the spectrum of privilege and what do you have that you can use to contribute to other people's lives to make them better?

Katie offered pointers that social justice allies need to be self critical. We've done enough work educating and leading our own movements, so it's time for people to do their own work and educate themselves. If you really care, I think you will do your own work.

Veronica reminded us, "just be aware of your privilege 'cause sometimes it's really invisible and that's why it's a problem."

Participants explained their experiences on a college campus and articulated the incidents that maintain a climate of marginalization and oppression. Equally, participants spoke to those experiences that provided a sense of safety and self expression of wholeness. In the next section we discuss implications of this research and strategies for practice.

DISCUSSION

Intersectionality and MMDI theory provide a framework for discussing the findings in this study. Intersectionality theory offers language to discuss multiple identities, explore an indefinite number of identities salient to individuals, and approach identities as intersectional, rather than additive (Shields, 2008). Further, MMDI theory allows student affairs professionals to consider intersectionality in the context of student development theory.

Intersectionality Theory

Consistent with intersectionality theory, participants in this study described the need to understand their identities as intertwined rather than separating them based on the context in which they found themselves. Participants described feeling marginalized in various identity-based spaces, including racial, GLBT, and feminist groups, when they had to hide or downplay various marginalized identities. For example, participants reported feeling as though they needed to minimize

their sexual orientation in various cultural centers and that they needed to express their gender over their race in feminist circles. Often, participants chose not to participate in organizations or programs in which they were forced to choose one identity over another. Similar to previous women of color activists, they intentionally sought ways to build community with other people who valued and understood ways their identities intersected to inform their experiences.

As previous intersectionality scholars highlight, constant negotiation of multiple identities leads to exhaustion and burnout (Lorde, 1984; Ropers-Huilman, 2008). Julia explained how she mentally prepared for her day to ensure she had the energy to address oppression and survive in a hostile environment,

I think it's when I leave my house with the mental preparation to be able to deal with things that day. When I'm in a bad mood, when I'm feeling depressed, or when I haven't thought about things, when I haven't really had time to focus in the morning, and be like, all right let's do this, then when I go somewhere, I'm so not prepared to respond to what happens.

In addition, negotiating identities also contributes to isolation and poor retention of students of color on predominantly White campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Participants shared specific examples of feeling marginalized in classrooms based on their race, gender, and sexual orientation. Further, participants shared experiences of not having safe places to discuss feelings of isolation in the classroom, leading them to feel as if they were "overexaggerating" or being "too sensitive." When students believe their problems are not real or that they are overexaggerating, they may not seek important services or resources on campus designed to assist in managing stress. For example, if a student believes that she is

overreacting to a racist or sexist comment in a classroom because no one else responds, she is unlikely to discuss her feelings in formal or informal consultation with faculty or staff because she feels as though her comments will not be welcomed or validated.

Negotiating multiple marginalized identities also limits opportunities for learning and development (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). When students do not feel safe in classrooms, they spend mental energy trying to survive, rather than learning. Outside the classroom, students may attempt to hide parts of their identities or work to assimilate to the dominant culture to ensure they are accepted by their peers. Internalizing oppression related to marginalized identities distracts from opportunities to engage in identity development processes. Multicultural offices, women's centers, and GLBT resource centers provide opportunities for students to engage in identity development processes related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, if staff and other students in these programs do not recognize the complexity of intersectionality, they may unintentionally contribute to students' feelings of marginalization by ignoring salient aspects of their identities.

Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity Theory

Most participants used a foundational filter, as described in the MMDI literature, to make meaning of their multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007). Consistent with the foundational meaning-making filter, participants in our study described feeling frustrated by stereotypes, labels, and external expectations in understanding their identities. They consistently presented their multiple identities, specifically choosing not to go to spaces where they could not bring their whole selves. In few instances, participants explained using a transitional meaning-making filter, intentionally hiding one or more of their marginalized identities.

Usually, students used a transitional filter in settings where they did not necessarily choose to be, including classrooms and family settings. In instances when participants employed a transitional filter, they were personally comfortable with their own identities, but they felt as though others could not understand how their identities were consistent with each other. Two women described specific instances when they hid identities from their fathers who had previously minimized ways they made meaning of their identities. In classrooms, participants described negotiating when to speak up if they observed or felt marginalization and when to keep quiet, hoping not to draw attention to themselves and the ways they made meaning of their identities.

Consistent with the Abes and Kasch (2007) research, participants in our study described a complex understanding of the ways they experienced oppression in mainstream campus and in identity-based groups. Because participants experienced multiple forms of oppression, they came to understand their marginalized identities quickly and engaged in activism to challenge dominant structures that did not fit with their understanding of their own identities. For example, two participants noted a responsibility for activism based on experiences with their marginalized identities. Because they did not feel comfortable in dominant power structures (i.e., classrooms and student organizations), participants created their own organizations to challenge oppressive systems and took classes in women's studies and ethnic studies where they could feel more consistent with all of their identities.

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Participants provided insight and suggestions for supporting women of color activists,

many of which were reinforced through a review of the literature. Overall, participants recommended validating experiences by providing safe spaces and programs to explore multiple identities and understanding and educating about systems of power and privilege.

Women of color activists experience marginalization through invalidation and minimization of experiences. Validating experiences is a crucial part of supporting women of color activists (Hasseler, 1999). By validating experiences, rather than trying to rationalize them, people feel heard and supported. As Katie said, “Really listen to stories and validate those experiences, and don’t become defensive right away.” In the same vein, anger is a legitimate response to marginalization and should be accepted as such (Hasseler, 1999; Hurtado, 1989). Participants recommended specific strategies for validating experiences with marginalization.

Provide Safe Spaces and Programs to Explore Identities. Participants particularly noted the importance of creating safe spaces, as defined in the findings section. Components of safe spaces included knowledge and education about marginalization and allies who would speak up when they observed potential marginalization. In these safe spaces, participants noted the importance of programming to help students explore their identities, both dominant and marginalized, and how those identities intersect (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Kim, 2001). The default function in higher education is to center the experiences of dominant groups without naming it as such or to focus solely on students’ marginalized identities. For example, most large-scale programs are created with the “typical student” (i.e., dominant) in mind and services that support marginalized identities focus on one at a time (i.e., gay lesbian bisexual transgender resource centers, multicultural centers, etc.). Programs in student support offices should be created to explore more than

one identity at a time. For example, staff in multicultural centers can plan programs at which students explore their sexual orientation in the context of their racial identity.

In addition, when planning large-scale campus programming, staff should incorporate various identities and experiences, yet use caution when planning diversity-related programs. Although cultural celebrations are a crucial part of exploring identity and raising awareness, they are not the sole answer. Paying attention to “process and product” is equally important (Thompson, 2002, p. 349). Katie shared, “Respecting ethnic difference in general doesn’t involve eating our food or wearing our clothes. I think it was Anida Yoeu Esguerra who said [it’s like] ‘masturbating in our culture,’ so don’t do that.”

Understand and Educate About Systems of Power and Privilege. As Victoria so eloquently stated, “Just be aware of your privilege ‘cause sometimes it’s really invisible and that’s why it’s a problem.” One way to honor this suggestion is to create programs for students to explore their dominant or privileged identities. Student affairs educators can help students explore their dominant identities by creating safe spaces for students to discuss what their dominant identities mean to them. Sometimes, this means highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups without relying on members of those groups to provide all of the education. Examples include groups for men to discuss sexism, groups for White students to discuss racism, and groups for heterosexual students to discuss homophobia. People who have explored their own privileged identities should facilitate and lead these conversations. For example, White people who have done a significant amount of work to understand ways people of color experience racism and how White privilege operates should conduct conversations with White students about White privilege. These facilitators provide

excellent insight and credibility in discussing this topic without relying solely on people of color to relive and share damaging experiences only to have unsympathetic listeners question and invalidate those experiences. Further, privilege groups should have mechanisms to ensure accountability is in place. Although people with marginalized identities should not be responsible for facilitating the groups, their perspectives should be included in developing and maintaining the groups.

Further, student affairs educators should understand their own privilege is crucial to supporting students with multiple marginalized identities. Student affairs educators spend a lot of time and resources providing social justice education opportunities for students on their campuses, and sometimes neglect their own work around these issues. Understanding systems of power and privilege is ongoing work. Student affairs educators should read social justice publications, attend conferences and workshops related to social justice issues, and ask students about their experiences in hopes of improving campus climates. As the women in the study suggested, self-awareness is the key to creating safe environments.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we sought to explore the experiences of women of color student activists by contextualizing theories of intersectionality and multiple identity development. Student activists have a deep understanding of oppression and provide rich and thoughtful descriptions of marginalization and oppression. Participants' stories offered specific examples of marginalization on campuses and strategies for addressing marginalization. As shared by the participants in this study, people with dominant identities must work to better understand privilege. Future research that explores ways students with multiple dominant identities experience privilege on campuses would further illuminate dynamics of power and oppression on college campuses, contributing to the creation of more safe and welcoming environments.

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