UNDERSTANDING A LATINO QUEER IDENTITY AND ITS POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study uses the qualitative method of content analysis to examine past literature focused on a Latino Queer identity and/or the notions of Queer identity in higher education. The research analyzes secondary data and discusses: a) differing notions of “Queer”; b) advances and limitations of Queer Theory; c) differences between a Queer identity and a Latino Queer identity in higher education; d) significance of coming-out in college; and e) educational policy implications that a Latino Queer identity conveys. Understanding a Latino Queer identity allows for a building of new paradigms for the inclusion of categories that had been previously secondary in analyses of social life. This is important within colleges and universities that serve as institutions whose purpose is to foster leadership by encompassing concerns of constituencies and actively deconstructing discriminatory practices.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Intersex, Questioning and Allied (LGBTQIA) community is commonly known to have emerged out of the Stonewall Riots of 1969, a moment in history that is known to ignite a prominent gay and lesbian liberation movement, especially among young adults and youth, after a police raid of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village (Kumashiro, 2001). Out of the riots responding to the police raid came gay pride events and the first gay pride parade directly addressing the constant persecution and harassment in Greenwich Village that led to the breaking point at Stonewall Inn. A new “out and proud” community emerged that provoked not only activists, particularly student activists in their demand for gay rights but also sparked an interest among scholars in the study of homosexuality. Homosexuality or bisexuality has been traced to individuals who have held positions of leadership, philosophers, and artists who have contributed to the culture and knowledge of today, including Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Plato, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci (Mohr, 1994).

However, these historical references to a homosexual identity have largely been conceptualized by a male-centered, Eurocentric idea of what it means to be gay or Queer. Although studies have emerged that look at the gay and lesbian community, the research primarily highlights the health risks of living such a lifestyle. Contemporary structures of what it means to be Queer have mostly been Hollywood-defined to encompass an upper-class, trendy persona, such as those depicted in television series, such as Queer as Folk and Will & Grace. On the rare occasion when the gay and lesbian community is visited with the cross-sectional identity of race and ethnicity, studies narrowly
emphasize the higher risks of being infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), essentially creating an atmosphere of fear when self-identifying as a Queer person of color. A Stonewall-constructed gay and lesbian community therefore has been formulated that defines certain notions of gay and Queer excluding a diverse set of definitions or constructions of what it means to be Queer and fails to recognize the contributions that a variety of communities have made. For example, when revisiting the important historical reference point of the Stonewall Riots of ’69, much of the anger that initially ignited the outrage is rooted in the bravery of many Latina and African American drag queens that frequented Stonewall in Greenwich Village (Kumashiro, 2001).

Few previous studies have examined the social process of cross-sectional identities encompassing race and sexuality emphasize a cultural deficit model, placing blame on communities of color and regarding racial minorities as too homophobic, or unable to accept different sexual identities (Almaguer, 1991; Garcia, 1998). Although not innocent in reproducing social inequalities along the lines of gender and sexuality even within the Civil Rights struggles of racial minorities, the systematic oppression of LGBTQIQA people and the discrimination towards perceived non-heterosexual behavior is perpetuated beyond distinct cultures, and does not solely exist within racial minority communities (Horacio, 2001).

Within the context of higher education, few institutions focus on issues that affect the LGBTQIQA student community, hindering these schools to affectively address discriminatory practices that pertain to groups that may identify as Queer and to empower these students to act in resistance. Because education, especially higher education, tends to emphasize its slogan of “building tomorrow’s leaders,” colleges and universities have the responsibility of recognizing and instilling empowerment within this growing student population. What does this mean when attempting to understand a Queer student community? Do traditional ideas of coming-out or revealing one’s sexual orientation incorporate a Latino identity? And what does coming-out as a Latino Queer imply for higher education policies? These questions are considered in this study in order to begin to understand what a Latino Queer identity suggests for higher education policy.

**PURPOSE OF STUDY**

This research does not strive to outline the experiences of all self-identified Latino Queer students but rather offers resources for colleges and universities to constantly rethink educational practices by understanding how the collective identity of being Latino and Queer expands traditional notions of the role higher education plays. This change would require institutions of higher education to expand notions of leadership to include a Queer consciousness instead of an apathetic Queer community on campus resulting in a silencing of Queer issues. Colleges and universities can then be more
active in offering resources to self-determined communities that struggle for social justice. At the most basic level, this study seeks to influence colleges and universities to begin collecting data on their LGBTIQA student in order to be more inclusive of all its constituencies.

**Literature Review**

The term “Queer” is commonly used, especially among youth, as an umbrella term encompassing the LGBTIAQ community (Kirsch, 2000). “Queer” as an identity has taken many forms. Historically, Queer was used as a derogatory term for those who did not identify themselves as heterosexual. However, just as the term “Chicano” was redefined in the 1960s as a tool for empowerment, much of the upcoming gay and lesbian youth reclaimed the term “Queer” also as a form of empowerment or a way to define themselves (Kirsch, 2000). In this aspect, “Queer” has certain sociopolitical connotations when claimed by those who reject traditional sexual and gender identities and are ‘breaking the rules’ of sex and gender. This usage allows the term to retain a non-normative status but suggests that a person can be heterosexual and Queer or a conforming homosexual can be “non-queer” (Kirsch, 2000). Queer, for the purposes of this research, encompasses a political sexuality where alliances are made on common grounds as an identity through action and consciousness. Queer in this manner is available for anyone to adopt who is actively involved in the political and social justice agenda against a heteronormative society.

In contrast to Queer, “homosexual” or “gay” are very different terms. These terms tend to describe a specific sexual orientation. Psychologists historically used the term *homosexual* as a medical condition to describe a mental disorder of people who had homosexual tendencies (Garcia, 1998). The word *gay* is more commonly used, but is derived and more specifically relates to same-sex attraction between two men. Even with the restrictive definitions of these terms, they are more widely used in popular culture to describe perceived non-heterosexual behavior. Many youth and the popular hip-hop artist Eminem have even claimed the word “gay” as a synonym for “stupid”, when using the term in the phrase “that’s so gay.” Guzman (2006) describes *gay* as a hegemonic term that has been claimed by a white, male society acting as a gender and racial exclusive character.

Similarly, to describe a form of bias against this marginalized group, *homophobia* is a commonly used term describing the act or belief that homosexuality is wrong or immoral (Rhoads, 1994). Homophobia however directly relates to a fear of homosexuality and does not encompass other sexual/gender minorities such as bisexuality or transgendered. Homophobia may also be considered as an act or a lashing out against gay or lesbian people but does not critically examine the institutionalized sexual/gender prejudice. The term *heterosexism* has consequently been adopted to describe the systematic oppression of LGBTIQA people and is not found in the
individual per se but rather as a socially constructed bias that upholds a predisposition to heterosexuality and heterosexual behavior (Rhoads, 1994). This opposition offers its notion of Queer to not only issues related to sexuality but includes issues of gender and desire (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 1997). Structures of heterosexism draft the relationship between homophobia and sexism. Gender roles are maintained, in part, by homophobia because of the fear of being called gay or lesbian when stepping outside of the construction of what it may mean traditionally to be a man or a woman.

The definitions discussed in this paper are critical in understanding what the term Queer may suggest for certain groups and only touches the surface of what Queer students may experience on a daily basis. Knowing the discourse of a community is the beginning to understanding a Latino Queer identity and is important when delving into scholarly work and positioning these terms in academia.

**Advances and Limitations of Queer Theory**

The definitions and explorations discussed previously in this paper have lead scholars to develop a new theoretical framework of the concept of Queer. *Queer theory* adopts a social constructionist perspective and posits new ideas that sexuality and gender are neither innate nor natural, but it is limited in exploring other paradigms or questions about what a chosen sexuality conveys (Sullivan, 2003; Kirsch, 2000). The framework debunks the idea of stable genders and sexualities and exploits incoherencies in them, which sustain a normalized heterosexuality (Jagose, 1996). The term *Queer theory* was formulated in the early 1990s by de Lauretis (1991) but was conceptualized as a by-product of third-wave or lesbian feminism in the ‘70s. It refers to gender and sexuality as more fluid and not fixed on terms such as those spelled out in the acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered). Sexuality and gender can therefore be constantly changing within an individual and these ever-changing dynamics calls for a degrouping of what is commonly known as the “Queer community” without placing all LGBT people into a collective basket.

Queer theory has moved beyond ideas of sexuality and gender and is disseminated to define and explain anything that is non-normative. Queer theorists have ‘queered’ all aspects that may not fall into the social norms, even delving into and Queering ‘straight’ sex (Sullivan, 2003). But this broad and widely used definition of Queer theory has received criticism, the first originating from the woman who first coined the term. De Lauretis, barely three years after she introduced the phrase at a 1989 conference in University of California, Santa Cruz, abandoned the term on the grounds that it had been conquered by the mainstream forces and institutions that it was originally used to resist. She now perceives the framework as “devoid of political or critical acumen she once thought it promised” (Jagose, 1996, p. 2).
The desensitizing of the theory is due to its emphasis on individuality and the focus on labels rather than on social change and transformation of the social structure (Kirsch, 2000). Now more than ever we live in a culture that is “oriented towards separating the individual from the social, promoting an ideal that we are all unique, special, unfettered by structural forces outside our control” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 3). This takes concentration off a collective identity that brings alliances on common grounds developed through identity as being or identity through cause. While Queer Theory investigates how sexuality and gender are defined, it does not socially position these terms. Whether innate or socially constructed what does sexuality and gender convey when existing in a shared system of meanings and behaviors? Queer theory does little to answer these questions of overlapping themes and fails to recognize the intersectionality of identities. The stress on individuality and regarding everyone as unique draws separations and segregates what it may mean to be Queer and a person of color.

**The Intersectionality of being Latino and Queer**

In *Queer Aztlan*, Moraga (1993) describes how she reformulated notions of Queer to encompass Chicano nationalism. Scholars such as Almaguer (1991) have taken a rigid look at examining the Latino Queer community in the U.S. in comparison to the more salient White Queer community. Although he recognizes that there is a difference, Almaguer describes the U.S. Chicano gay identity through the experiences of men in Mexico who have sex with other men, essentially decontextualizing the formation of such a gay identity. Two commonly held misconceptions also arise in his writing about sexuality and “Latino culture:” 1) the Latino family being sexually repressive and rigidly structured around machismo; and (2) religion, in the form of Catholicism, in its blessing of heterosexual unions condemns non-heterosexual practices (Trujillo, 1991; Ramirez, 2003). Although these misconceptions may be argued, it is important not to apply these characteristics as specific to the Latino community, and solely argue that the Latino community is more homophobic than other groups.

Patriarchy and religion cross cultural lines and these oppressive institutions affect other communities as well as the Latino community. “Despite the strong tradition of heteronormativity in the Latino communities, Latinos and Latinas in the U.S. have been a part of the LGBT communities at least since World War II” (Ramirez, 2003, p. 7). Chicana writer, Ana Castillo mentions that, from her experience within the Latino community, sexual talk was common among men and women, at times, even in the presence of young children (Trujillo, 1991). The true geo-political issue is the invisibility of the Latino Queer community (Ramirez, 2003). There is a vibrant Latino Queer community, but the overall Queer community is “overwhelmingly white and devoid of strong Latina and Latino representation” (Ramirez, 2003, p. 9). The rise of the Latino Queer culture was in large part due to Chicanas. Chicanas and Latinas started writing rich literature that discussed...
the intersections of race and sexuality (Almaguer, 1991). In the early 1980s, Lesbian feminists began conceptualizing the framework for a Latino Queer identity with the collection of work in This Bridge Called My Back (1983). This is when such discussion began. Two prominent writers during this period were Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga.

Moraga and Bracho conceptualized a Queer Aztlán after realizing the limitations of a Queer Nation and the failure of Chicano Nationalism to accept gay men and lesbians (Moraga, 1986). She describes the metaphysical space of a Queer Aztlán as a sense of belonging. Alfaro also depicts this feeling of being trapped between two worlds in this excerpt from his poem.

**Orphan of Aztlá**

I am a Queer Chicano

A native in no land

An orphan of Aztlán

The Pocho son of farm worker parents

The Mexicans only want me

when I talk about Mexico

But what about Mexican Queers in L.A.?

The Queers only want me,

when they need to add color

add spice

like salsa picante,

on the side

With one foot on

each side of the border,

not the border between

México and the United States,

but the border between Chicano and Queer,

I search for a home in both

yet neither one believes that

I exist

As this poem suggests, students in higher education may feel trapped or unrecognized when deciding which student organization to choose from, whether a Queer organization or a Latino/Chicano organization, each group only seeing a fraction of their Latino Queer identity. Because of this experience, some students feel pressured to hierarchize oppressions and choose to be active within one community only. In his piece *El Chicano y El Joto* (1996), de León describes how his two identities could not be balanced, and that when he finally came-out in college he paid less and less attention to the Chicanismo he had held inside himself.
Many colleges and universities do not give validation to these intersecting identities. Although institutions of higher education have recognized racial issues and even others have addressed Queer issues, they fail to combat the oppressive status of higher education in its complexity in their “inability to acknowledge multiple and intersecting oppressions” (Snider, 1996, p. 2). Often these struggles fall short in recognizing the differences between being Queer, and being a racial minority and Queer. Latino Queer students experience different hurdles or obstacles when formulating an identity than other students might. Some students come to the “…conclusion that not only is sexual orientation not THE defining identity for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in the way it appears to be for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people – it may not even be a defining identity for them…” and relegated to lesser importance (Clark, 2005, p. 11). Being Queer for Latinos carries different implications on higher education then being White and Queer carries.

**Latino Queer Identity in Higher Education: Coming-Out in College**

Higher education has served as a pivotal point for many students to “come-out.” The college life often represents independence and entails new social networks. Waiting until college to come-out is still highly prevalent in Queer youth. Although most lesbian and gay adults recognize their affectional orientation to themselves during adolescents, most did not come-out until they entered college (Rhoads, 1994). Coming-out however can be highly subjective as well. Is a student considered “out” if his parents back home do not know, but everyone else does? Certain authors have written on the developmental process of sexual identity, creating a variety of stages involving self-recognition, self-statement, positive self-esteem, etc. that people pass through when coming-out (Garcia, 1998). Although these linear models may recognize a social aspect of how context may affect a person’s state of mind they are too rigid when discussing identity or culture (Garcia, 1998). These models fail to recognize that identity and culture are socially constructed. Sexual identity is not so deterministic, based on biology. Although a social constructionist theory may not highlight where same-sex attractions stem from, a Queer identity is constructed and more fluid. And “rather than assuming that ‘culture’ is something that is always already done and ‘completed,’” it is instead more malleable and open for re-interpretation and contestation (Ramirez, 2003, p. 77).

The coming-out process in itself has largely been constructed from a white, middle-class perspective. The “coming-out” discourse within the gay and lesbian community fails to see race as a factor in revealing sexual orientation (Rhoads, 1994). This factor is problematic because it overlooks the difference between those who are able to come-out in a privileged setting and those who must discount multiple “othered” identities. Snider offers the following on this point:
Rarely does the dominant faction of the lesbian and gay community address the fact that one's social and cultural positioning and access to privilege prior to coming out directly affect the manner in which one's coming out is imparted and received... It is assumed, a priori, that being out is beneficial, that being 'true' to yourself is vitalizing force (as if there is a unitary self, and it would know the truth presented to it.) Within this discourse, a rigid dichotomy between the 'true' self and the repressive/ด self is assumed, and not coming out is seen as a reflection of internalized homophobia (1996, p. 3).

Most scholars recognize that coming-out is an ongoing process as individuals continue meeting new acquaintances that they “come-out” to because of the assumed norm of heterosexuality (Garcia, 1998; Snider, 1996; Rhoads, 1994). Yet it is rarely recognized that “being out” is a status that is afforded primarily to White people. An LGBT identity is easier for white people to put on (Clark, 2005). With multiple oppressed identities for Latinos or other people of color, coming-out may be a more complex decision. Latinos may also have to deal with the burden of having other stigmatized identities, such as linguistic, national origin, religious, and socioeconomic. Higher education administrators need to understand these differences of coming-out in order to be more inclusive of all its Queer students and to facilitate a positive coming-out process for students who desire to be out and create change.

**Methodology**

This study’s methodology takes a comparative content-analytical approach to the literature formulated around the research question to better understand Latino Queer identity and its implications on higher education. An excess of 15 articles and books were reviewed and interpreted that pertained to the areas of study that discussed either Queer identity in higher education or the Latino Queer community in general. The researcher analyzed textual information produced within the last 30 years.

**Discussion**

Education, more specifically higher education has the potential to be a catalyst for the development of active students and act as a conduit for social change. Institutions of education in the past have seen active students challenge their own structures of power. Colleges and universities are being forced to analyze social issues to encompass concerns of constituencies that had been excluded from academic-theory building. Feminist writers, in particular, are altering the foundation that concerns itself with the place of women in society. Other major identities of race, class, and sex, also became central in the inclusion of historically disenfranchised categories. A traditionally White, middle-class charged curriculum has been disputed and the original idea of the ‘college experience’ is disrupted. No longer can we
argue that all students are equally advantaged or privileged and therefore require the same needs.

Even so with the emergence of radical social critiques within the context of higher education, institutions can act as social reproduction agents, reconstituting the dominant cultural patterns (Rhoads, 1994). As we see the cost of college continue to rise, access to student loans and grants is eroding. As a consequence, the gap in educational opportunities between rich and poor has become more evident, transforming quality education into a luxury of the wealthy and, primarily, white. College and university programs that are aimed at increasing diversity and retention rates of marginalized students are portrayed by some as superfluous and are in constant threat of budget cuts. This attack on higher education needs to be challenged but theories that apply themselves to social issues have yet to completely convince the public and university administrators of this necessity.

Sexual minority students, at times, are not included within the theories or discussions that emerge on how to recruit and retain historically disenfranchised communities. While some college and universities acknowledge the presence of Queer students, few institutions gather and maintain data on the number or needs of sexual minority students. Albeit Queer theory has surfaced within an institutional context, the framework came to be when radicalism was viewed as passé. Moreover, its limitations have created apolitical resources that serve the needs of students only at an individual level, such as psychological counseling. As a result, the intersections of a racial or ethnic identity and a sexual minority identity have received minute attention by educational institutions. These two identities have therefore been segregated, not accounting for a student population that identifies both as Queer and as a member of a racial minority group (Wilson, 1996). Institutions of higher education should consider the following:

- PRIDE or LGBTIAQ centers need to take an active role in addressing and existing as a place where students are safe to organize as a collective Queer student voice to challenge heterosexism, racism, sexism, and classism on or around their campus.
- Such centers must take the focus off the individual and become more proactive about looking into the factors that contribute to the prejudice towards differing sexualities.
- Resources need to offer culturally-sensitive information, and not simply translate the text that already exists.
- Queer events on campus need to be outreached to the entire student population rather than to only those students who are “out” or White.
Campus and classroom curriculum should be more inclusive of different sexualities, offering to students or requiring them to address issues of a heteronormative society.

Campuses should collect data on their Queer student population and conduct campus climate surveys that concentrate on sexuality. Taking these actions, colleges and universities would allow for an atmosphere where Latino Queer students may be better understood by the institutions that seek to foster leadership within their student population. In return, these campuses would produce quality education that is inclusive of all its constituencies and consequently increase student learning outcomes and retention rates of the population.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the research design, there are number of limitations to be noted. Time did not allow for the research to include human subjects, eliminating the possibility to construct surveys or interviews that would have offered an in depth analysis of the research question. Because there was no statistical analysis of the data, the external validity of the design was jeopardized and findings or discussion therefore cannot be applied to the population. The analysis is also restricted due to the availability of material.

CONCLUSION

The experiences and concerns of Latino Queer students must be validated, recognized, and acted upon by an institution that wishes to foster leadership in its student population, which, in turn, increases rates of retention and academic success for this community. Higher education institutions serve as “producers of cultural discourse, and that ‘knowledge’ embedded into their productions serves as powerful regulatory role for social process” (D’Augelli, 1989, p. 4). This indicates an obligation for colleges and universities to examine historical and contemporary perspectives of “Queer,” understand intersectional identities of Latino and Queer, are aware of differing coming-out processes, and challenge the limitations of Queer theory. Colleges and universities subsequently act consciously to avert the oppressive structures that disenfranchise a Latino Queer identity, and therefore seek to deconstruct them.

Colleges and universities must take a more active role and collect data on their sexual minority population and become conscious about the multiculturalism that exists on their campuses. Many campus PRIDE or LGBT centers do not have reading material in Spanish or offer information about the different coming-out processes. These culturally responsive actions can be taken to facilitate a campus environment more open to fluid and intersecting identities. As a result, Latino Queer students will be able to empower themselves for positive social change within the college context without having to fraction off their identities. Feeling included may improve rates of retention, which
could be more closely examined, and Queer advocacy centers can be more
efficient in addressing the entire student body.

In addition to these outcomes that are offered in this exploratory study, the
research puts forward an expanding concept of Queer and the social process
of Queer Latino students, especially in terms of coming-out and also within
the limitations of Queer theory. What is learned from this research is minimal
to what actions need to be taken. Inadequate studies have been conducted
within academia and rarely do institutions of higher education initiate their
own research analyzing the needs of these students. Understanding a Latino
Queer identity involves more than what has been discussed in this study. Not
only do identities need to be contextualized but also this research opens the
doors to an in depth examination with the possibility of different qualitative
methods being implemented. With this, higher education can be more
inclusive of identities from marginalized communities and implement policy
that seeks to eliminate heterosexism. This will not only be beneficial for a
Latino Queer community but the college campus on which these actions
are taken. Institutions can in turn rise up, with its students, as colleges and
universities that stand against all systems of oppression.
REFERENCES


