Being a LGBTQ Person of Color

By living at the intersection of systems of oppression defined by race, sexual orientation, and gender, LGBTQ people of color face many specific challenges that white LGBTQ people may not. Gender and sexual minorities of color grow up in communities that operate outside of the mainstream, white-dominated culture. The complication that arises in the development of their LGBTQ identities derives from the occupation of two different, but in no way mutually exclusive spaces. LGBTQ people of color are socialized with differing norms and values from the aforementioned dominant culture and must simultaneously encounter racism and ethnic bias within the LGBTQ community because it is just as dominated by white people as the culture at large. This document lays out some of the specific challenges and strengths that come from the intersection of LGBTQ and ethnic identities. Additionally, the ways in which various ethnic communities conflate gender and gender roles will play a central role in this description of LGBTQ people of color. This document does not directly address asexuality because of the lack of academic literature on the topic.

Considering the interplay of white colonialism and white supremacy within an ethnic groups' history and current socialization necessitates itself when speaking about the lives of LGBTQ people of color. The current state of and nuances within these ethnic communities are inexplicably tied with their history with white colonialism and its residual imprints – past and present. The processes by which colonists used to assimilate ethnic groups towards Eurocentric standards persist today, and have forced

The following information about the familial structures, social expectations, and gendered obligations of LGBTQ people of color are based upon Beverly Green's "Ethnic-Minority Lesbians and Gay Men: Mental Health and Treatment Issues" (1994) unless otherwise noted.

Some ethnic groups may contain similar information; however, it is important to distinguish that these social nuances developed at different times and may function differently within cultures.

African-American
- African-American is used to describe individuals with Western African, American India, and some European genealogy, whose ancestors were forcibly brought to the Americas during the slave trade. However, there is a current movement away from African-American towards black American, as the generational gap between widens, and less people associate with or connect to the current culture.
- Family ties within the African American community create multifaceted networks of obligations and support. This network operates as protective insulation and support from the dominant, actively or passively, racist culture – this network also provides shelter from anti-black sentiments that are prevalent in other ethnic groups. Additionally, there exists an interchangeability of gender roles. Family ties are very strong because of their centralization around racism, and as such more LGBTQ African-Americans list race as their primary identity.

Asian American
Asian Americans are not a monolithic group, but rather a multiethnic one, but even so some traits are shared by cultures across the board.
- Family is the nucleus of Asian culture, and is most sharply defined by deference and obedience to parents and respect for elders.
- Many Asians do not see themselves as people of color.
- Marriage is not seen necessarily as an act of individuality but rather reflective of and shared by the family.
- Sex and sexuality are taboo topics and as such are not discussed openly.

East Asian
- East Asian is used to describe people of primarily Japanese, Chinese, or Korean ancestry.

- East Asians are pressured to choose between their ethnicity or their sexuality, because open declaration of a LGBTQ identity is seen as a threat to the preservation of the core tenet of Asian culture.
- Declaring a LGBTQ identity is also perceived as a divergence from appropriate gender roles. Men are solely expected to continue the family lineage and bring success, whether financial or honorable, to the family. Women, on the other hand, are obligated to always be dutiful and are to identify mostly with the role of daughter and wife. Additionally, the having of a LGBTQ child is considered shameful for the entire family, but is also targeted as having to do with or come from the mother.

South Asian
- South Asian is used to describe people of primarily Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi ancestry.
- The gendered expectations of women are to conform to surroundings and to experience power vicariously through a son.

Hispanic or Latin American
- Hispanic is used to describe individuals with genealogical and cultural connections to Spain; Latin@ similarly describes individuals with the same connections to Latin America.
- The family is the primary social unit, which derives its structure from defined gender roles. Men, in this instance, are expected to care and provide for the family. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be deferent and virtuous until marriage; they are also expected to create and retain emotional and physical closeness with other women.
- Saving face is considered highly important, and as such indirect methods of dealing with conflict is the norm, and it is because of this norm that the declaration of a LGBTQ identity, rather than the behavior of such, is met with resistance.

Native American/First Nation
- Native American culture revolves around spirituality, family, and preservation of the tribe. The former especially contributes to placing the role of women as mothers as one of the most important facets of livelihood. And although there is less pressure for women to marry, many women in same sex relationships have children.
- In the traditional culture, two-spirit (androgynous) members were highly valued;

Key Terminology

People of color may reject terms like *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* because they are associated too closely with a white hegemonic culture. They may use terms derived from their own native cultures, or newly created terms, to better name their identities. Here are some other ways people of color identify themselves:

Same Gender Loving (SGL): often used by people of color who are comfortable with their same-gender attraction but do not connect with the social and political connotations that come with the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

Men who have sex with men (MSM): a term created by the Centers for Disease Control in 1987 to describe men who do not use the labels gay or bisexual but who participate in same-sex sexual behaviors

Down Low (DL): a new term, now popular in the black and Latino communities, this refers to men who do not identify themselves as gay but who have sex with men as well as women partners

Two-Spirit: a term used by some indigenous/First Nation/Native American people to describe the experience of being, in Euro-American-centric terms, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. The term is a modern, pan-Indian phrase that can be applied to Native Americans who are LGBTQA.

Kathoey/Ladyboy: this Thai term is used to refer to a male-bodied person whose identity may overlap with Western notions of gay and transgender.

Khush: this word means ecstatic pleasure in Urdu. For many South Asian lesbians and gay men, the term captures the blissful intricacies of being queer and of color.

however, with the influence of colonization and imposition of Eurocentric values, these freer gender roles have changed. There exists higher pressure now not to be open about sexuality on reservations and to relocate to more urban areas in order to be open.

Sexual and Ethnic Identity Development

Discovering one's personal identity is a complicated and ongoing process for everyone. Too often, models of identity development focus on one aspect at the expense of all others. For LGBQ people of color, it is impossible to separate sexual and ethnic identities. Some models of identity development have begun to recognize this. Morales (1989) models the sexual identity development of ethnic minority gay and lesbian people in five stages: Denial of Conflict; Bisexual vs. Gay or Lesbian; Conflicts in Allegiances; Establishing Priorities in Allegiance; and Integration of Communities. The ideas behind the Morales model are helpful and point to the need to acknowledge the complex interactions between sexual and ethnic identities for LGB people of color. However, recent research conflicts with numerous elements of Morales' model. Most importantly, recent studies suggest that a structured model of consecutive stages may not accurately capture the fluid and changing pathways by which LGB people of color come to form their sexual and ethnic identities. However, Morales's model touches on general areas that are central to sexual and ethnic identity development and will serve as a good framework for developing a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

Many Asian Americans view homosexuality as a "white disease." For them, there is no such thing as a gay Asian person; the very idea of being "gay" and "Asian" is an oxymoron. (Cheng, 2011)

The first stage of Morales' model, "Denial of Conflict," says that gay and lesbian people of color begin their identity development with little perception of the consequences of ethnicity–sexuality intersections. More recent research suggests that coming to an awareness of one's sexual identity is intimately intertwined with considerations of intersectionality. Norms within a specific ethnic subculture can dramatically shape the way sexuality is perceived by individuals (Greene, 1994). In some communities, heterosexism is so entrenched that gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities may not even be considered an option (Cheng, 2011; Greene, 1994). Heterosexism and homophobia in ethnic communities may discourage LGB people of color from coming out delay public disclosure of that aspect of their identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

Morales' second stage, "Bisexual vs. Gay or Lesbian," concerns the notion that people of color with same-sex attractions often eschew the terms gay and lesbian in favor of bisexual. People of color, and especially black men, are more likely to identify as bisexual (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). LGB people of color also make use of identity terms different from the mainstream ones, such as same gender loving and down low (Poynter & Washington, 2005). In any case, the issue seems to be a matter of definitions, rather than one of orientation. In a survey of LGB youth, Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter found no consistent ethnic differences in sexual attraction as measured by self-reported erotic attractions and fantasies (2004).

I had been a member of BSA (Black Student Association) my freshman year, but was discouraged when I consistently encountered homophobic attitudes in the organization. My friends and I often laughed at our slogan for it, 'It's either Gay or BSA!'
(Poynter & Washington, 2005)

The next two stages of Morales' model are "Conflicts in Allegiance" and "Establishing Priorities in Allegiance." While the Morales model of these two stages as consecutive suggests that LGB people of color spend a period struggling with their

Gay Asian men routinely see "No Asians" on gay online dating and hookup sites. Certain gay bars and dance clubs are mentioned derogatively on websites and listservs as having been "invaded" by Asians. And gay Asian men are still characterized as having small penises. We are viewed as more "feminine, scholarly and submissive" and as "universal bottoms."
(Cheng, 2011)

ethnic and sexual identities, before finally coming to prioritize one over the other, it would be more apt to think of these as occurring simultaneously and continuously. LGB people of color experience heterosexism and homophobia within their ethnic communities as well as racism within LGB communities and are often pressured to choose one identity over the other. One particularly common and direct source of intersectional stress for LGB people of color is race-based discrimination in dating and close relationships. LGB people of color frequently experience rejection, feelings of inadequacy, and fetishization based on their ethnicities (Cheng, 2011; Díaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Szymanski & Sung, 2010).

Morales' model ends with "Integration of Communities," a stage when LGB people of color attempt to bridge the gap between their ethnic and sexual identities. Despite the difficulties, LGB people of color typically find it important to be a part of a community of some sort (Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009; Lehavot, Balsam, Ibrahim-Wells, 2009). LGB people of color have three broad options regarding integration of their communities: identification with multiple groups; identification with one group, to the exclusion of others; and identification with one group at a given time (Poynter & Washington, 2005).

You feel rejected in some way because most of this gay population looks for White guys, like guys that have blond hair and blue eyes. You kind of feel left out a little bit. And you don't feel as attractive or as desirable as another person would feel.
(Stevens, 2004)

I can take control by saying, listen, all this shit is happening. We can create these communities and we can create them the way that we want. There isn't a model for radical queer women of color to kick it. We can make that model. Like, what the hell is that gonna look like? What is my relationship gonna look like? There is no model out there but I can make it myself.
(Lehavot, Balsam, Ibrahim-Wells, 2009)

One way many LGB people of color overcome the barriers to integration is by establishing their own communities. Groups that share sexual orientation and ethnic background can be essential for helping individuals find support and empowerment.

Perhaps the most important limitation of Morales' model is the fact that it proposes an end at all. Identity development is a dynamic process that goes on throughout a person's lifetime, sometimes changing speed or even direction. The model presented below, based on work by Stevens (2004) attempts to better represent this crucial aspect of identity development.

These stages are typical of sexual identity development among LGBQ people of color. Not all LGBQ people of color go through all of these stages, and people go through them in different orders.

Self-Acceptance
- initial acknowledgement and incorporation of one's non-heterosexual identity, also known as "coming out to oneself"
- often precedes naming of identity
- one primary entry point to the model
- influenced by conflicts and agreements with other facets of identity
- occurs in consideration of individual factors but also alters these individual factors
- usually leads to disclosure to others

Disclosure to Others
- verbal or written acknowledgment of one's non-heterosexual identity, also known as "coming out"
- although some self-acceptance is typically a prerequisite for disclosure, coming out also contributes to self-acceptance
- first disclosure and disclosure to family are especially influential
- affects and is affected by individual factors, strengthening or deteriorating relationships and support systems

Individual Factors
- subjective assessment of personal supports and liabilities
- individual differences serve as a processing center for external stimuli
- perceived support networks
- confidence and self-assurance
- personally held stereotypes, such as internalized homophobia and transphobia
- feelings of rejection, isolation, and invisibility; people of color often feel this within the LGBTQA community due to racism and fetishization
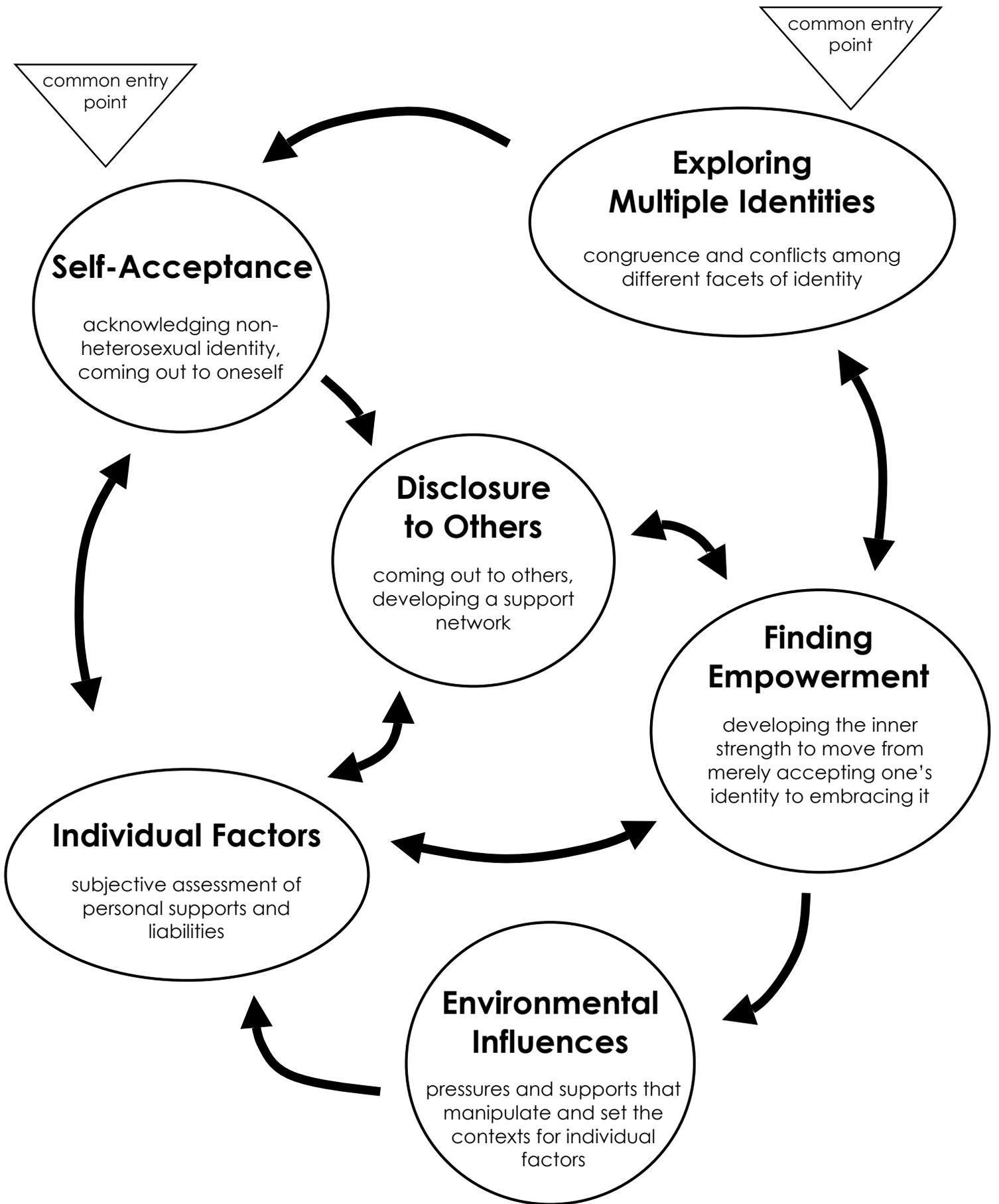
Environmental Factors
- external sources of pressure and support manipulate and set the contexts for individual factors
- relationships with family members, friends, employers, and others
- locations that may be perceived as welcoming or unwelcoming
- positive or negative signs and symbols such as prejudicial imagery or LGBTQA educational resources
- discrimination and stereotypes; people of color may also experience this within the LGBTQA community

Finding Empowerment
- Empowerment is an inner strength that moves individuals to embracing their identity and possibly integrating it into the self as a whole
- securing power and recognizing one's locus of control
- developing comfort and pride in identity
- activism and education of oneself and others
- allows disclosure to less accepting people and active improvement of environmental factors

Exploring Multiple Identities
- exploration of the intersections, congruence, and conflicts among different facets of identity
- key intersections include sexual orientation, gender, race/ethnicity, and religion
- doesn't always lead to integration; some identity intersections are resolved by compartmentalization, foreclosure, or acceptance
- requires energy, time, motivation
- empowerment prompts exploration, but exploration also supports empowerment

Self-Acceptance

acknowledging non-heterosexual identity, coming out to oneself

Exploring Multiple Identities

congruence and conflicts among different facets of identity

Disclosure to Others

coming out to others, developing a support network

Finding Empowerment

developing the inner strength to move from merely accepting one's identity to embracing it

Individual Factors

subjective assessment of personal supports and liabilities

Environmental Influences

pressures and supports that manipulate and set the contexts for individual factors

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