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Toward Intersectional Identity Perspectives on Disability and LGBTQ Identities in Higher Education

Ryan A. Miller

Little has been published on the intersections of disability and queer identities among college students. I propose 5 intersectional identity perspectives based on semistructured interviews with 25 students at a research university who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer students with disabilities. Students articulated relationships among their disability and queer identities as (a) intersectional, (b) interactive, (c) overlapping, (d) parallel, and/or (e) oppositional. Students adopted multiple perspectives simultaneously to resist oppression, navigate changing contexts, and build resilience and community, suggesting implications for researchers and practitioners who might adopt a more nuanced view of students' intersecting identities.

Despite the increasing prevalence of research on intersectional identities, little has been published on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students with disabilities (Harley, Nowak, Gassaway & Savage, 2002; Henry, Fuerth, & Figliozzi, 2010), a group considered “the invisible of the invisible” (Morgan, Mancl, Kaffar, & Ferreira, 2011, p. 5). In higher education, minimal research published in top-tier journals has addressed the experiences and identities of students with disabilities (Peña, 2014). While relatively more research has explored LGBTQ identities, significant gaps still exist considering students' multiple identities, including disabilities (Renn, 2010,

2015). These voids in research signal that knowledge on queer students with disabilities and their identities is virtually absent from the higher education literature (Duke, 2011). I aimed to bridge these gaps by considering how 25 students at one institution approached conceptualizing the relationships among their multiple identities. One question guided this study: How do LGBTQ students with disabilities describe the intersections of their LGBTQ and disability identities? To situate this study, I first addressed the theoretical perspective of intersectionality and then reviewed key examples of research about college student identities taking up this perspective, followed by a review of the research about LGBTQ students with disabilities.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: INTERSECTIONALITY

For this study I drew upon the concept of *intersectionality*, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989) in critical legal studies and extended by women of color writing on intersectional experiences of race, gender, and class (Hill Collins, 2000). Predating the term itself, discussion of intersectionality as a concept appeared prior to the 20th century (see Cooper, 1892/1988). An intersectional framework entails centering the voices of people marginalized by race, gender, and other social identities; spotlighting both individual and group-level notions of identity; focusing on

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power relations; and striving for social justice as a goal (Jones & Abes, 2013). Hill Collins (2000) explained that a Black feminist standpoint “challenges additive analyses of oppression and instead views each system of oppression as a unique component of an overarching, interlocking matrix of domination” (p. 270). Groups at the intersections face distinct experiences shaped not only by their multiple identities but also by systems of privilege and oppression (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Torres et al. (2009) asserted that truly intersectional studies must address microlevel (individual) experiences while also analyzing the role of macrolevel factors such as systems of power and privilege: “It is not enough to simply acknowledge that all individuals possess multiple identities and these identities interact. . . . Multiple identities must be connected to the larger social structures in which they are embedded” (p. 587). Three of the questions raised in an autoethnographic study of identity development (Jones, 2009) helped to illuminate intersectionality in this study: “What is the lived experience of identity construction and negotiation when multiple identities are considered? How is identity experienced at the intersections? What are the sociocultural contexts and structures of power and privilege that influence and shape identity?” (p. 289). These questions helped guide analysis of the data collected in this study. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) called for research “conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (p. 795).

It is important to distinguish between the use of multiple identity and intersectional frameworks, even though these terms have sometimes been used interchangeably (see Jones & Abes, 2013, pp. 139–142). Multiple identity frameworks, including the reconceptualized

model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), positioned social identities as discrete units and addressed the salience of particular identities—that is, which identities might be more significant than other identities to an individual at any given time. An intersectional perspective eschews salience as an “additive construction [that assumes] the facets of identity can be separated, are independent of one another, and are unidimensional” (Stewart, 2010, p. 302).

INTERSECTIONAL RESEARCH ON COLLEGE STUDENT IDENTITIES

Scholars studying college student identities using intersectional frameworks have considered race, sexual orientation, and, to a lesser extent, disability as “anchor points” (Christensen & Qvotrup Jensen, 2012, p. 112) for analyzing intersecting identities. This section offers several key examples of these intersectional studies (for additional analysis and examples, see Jones & Abes, 2013, pp. 149–155).

Several scholars have addressed Black college students’ intersecting identities. Stewart (2010) analyzed zir evolution as a researcher across two studies (Stewart, 2002, 2008, 2009) that investigated the multiple identities of Black collegians. In Stewart’s (2009) study, students “perceive[d] their identities as multifaceted, dynamic, and fluid” (p. 260) as well “interconnected and synergistic” (p. 265), and most used spirituality as a lens to understand their identities. Stewart (2010) drew upon Bowleg’s (2008) advice for researchers investigating intersectionality to eschew questions that assume identities can be ranked or added, resist additive assumptions such as presuming identity salience, and avoid interpreting data in an additive way, requiring that research be placed in its context.

Studies have also addressed the experiences of trans* and queer students of color, using

intersectional frameworks to address the convergence of race, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation. The asterisk in trans* refers to “the expansiveness and constantly expanding communities of trans* people” (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 169). Nicolazzo (2016) used both intersectionality and queer theory to explore the experiences of two Black nonbinary trans* college students related to identity management and visibility, including the concepts of “passing, realness, and trans*-normativity” (p. 1173). Means and Jaeger’s (2015) case study explored one Black gay male college student’s spiritual journey through interviews, photovoice, and observations. Guided by constructivism and a queer theory framework for understanding the experiences of queer people of color (specifically African Americans), Means and Jaeger concluded that the participant, Alexander, used “support mechanisms to reconcile his identities and to resist messages of homophobia and racism” (p. 21). In another exemplar study, Harper, Wardell, and McGuire (2011) analyzed the identity development processes of one participant, Tyson, a biracial gay male student and fraternity member. Tyson faced “pressure to prioritize and value some identities over the others” (p. 90), to which he responded by “unabashedly acknowledg[ing] the various intersections of his identity” (p. 91) and by performing his identities differently according to context. The researchers critiqued the division of services based on single identities in higher education and recommended that scholars and practitioners embrace students’ “complex individuality” (p. 93).

Sexual orientation is also offered as a point of departure in several other studies. One study addressed intersections of sexual orientation and spirituality among 47 students coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Payne Gold & Stewart, 2011), revealing that students experienced irreconciliation, progressive

development, arrested development, completed development, and reconciliation among their multiple identities. In another study, Abes and Kasch (2007) positioned queer theory as an intersectional framework to analyze one lesbian college student’s intersections of identities, including sexual orientation, religion, social class, and gender. The researchers told the participant’s identity story through a constructivist-developmental narrative followed by a queer narrative, with the conclusion that queer identity development required “resisting power structures that define one as abnormal” (p. 630). In another example of using multiple analytic frameworks (constructivism and intersectionality) to examine intersecting identities, Abes (2012) analyzed the intersecting identities of one lesbian college student based on data from a longitudinal study.

Relatively fewer intersectional studies about college students have used disability as a point of departure. In an extensive literature review on research about students with disabilities, Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, and Lauterbach (2016) identified just one article explicitly employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework (see Tevis & Griffen, 2014). Kimball et al. concluded: “Disability is all-too-often treated as distinct from other college student identities” (p. 92). Employing a strengths-based perspective, Tevis and Griffen (2014) analyzed the stories of three academically successful women, all with at least one physical disability. Independence and advocacy (including self-advocacy, advocacy for others, and mentor advocates) emerged as common factors in the participants’ academic success.

Researchers in the studies reviewed here relied upon qualitative methods, with most research informed by constructivist and critical paradigms and most considering the intersections of race, gender, and sexual

orientation, with several other identities (disability, gender identity, spirituality) that have been explored relatively less frequently. Several scholars focused on one or two students' experiences in depth (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Harper et al., 2011; Means & Jaeger, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016). Researchers across the studies demonstrated the complexity of students' intersectional identity development journeys, with some (e.g., Payne Gold & Stewart, 2011) identifying particular options and paths toward understanding the intersection of two or more specific identities and others offering interpretations through multiple epistemological and analytic lenses (Abes, 2012; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Nicolazzo, 2016).

LGBTQ STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Conceptually, scholars have considered the links between compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006) as mutually constitutive phenomena (see Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Sherry, 2004). In empirical research, a small but growing body of work has considered the intersections of disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation among youth (Duke, 2011) and adults (e.g., Appleby, 1994; Shakespeare, 1999; Whitney, 2006); however, researchers have rarely addressed experiences of undergraduate and graduate LGBTQ students with disabilities (Renn, 2015). Duke's (2011) metasynthesis of 24 publications on LGBTQ youth with disabilities—including research in primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as community-based educational settings—included two publications specific to higher education, both of which were descriptive and nonempirical (see Harley et al., 2002; Underhile & Cowles, 1998). Additional research since Duke's review has begun to address this gap. In a qualitative

study Henry et al. (2010) explored the experiences of one gay male student with a physical disability to better understand how he “navigates his surroundings and utilizes the resources available, or lack thereof” (p. 378). The participant talked about discomfort discussing sexuality in the disability services office, including his perception of counselors as impersonal and unapproachable on topics other than disability.

Miller, Wynn, and Webb (2017) explored the identity disclosure decisions of 31 LGBTQ undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities across two qualitative, interview-based studies: one study conducted with 25 students at a research university and the other with 6 students at a comprehensive institution, both located in the South. Participants decided to disclose their multiple, intersecting identities contextually and strategically, as well as to draw comparisons between queer and disability disclosure and to occasionally avoid disclosure altogether. Additional research also addressed the classroom experiences of queer students with disabilities, detailing microaggressions faced by students in the classroom targeted at disability, queer, and racial identities (Miller, 2015), as well as students' use of social media for queer and disability identity-making, including processes of going online to seek validation and community (Miller, 2017). For this study I sought to expand this literature base by applying an explicitly intersectional framework to consider the identities of LGBTQ college students with disabilities.

METHODS

Given the goal of understanding the experiences of queer students with disabilities and how they viewed their multiple, intersecting identities, a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory approach guided this study (Charmaz, 2014). I employed a constructivist lens, assum-

ing “there is no single reality about the experience of one’s intersecting identities, only multiple constructed realities about one’s own experience of intersectionality” (Bowleg, 2008, p. 317). Using grounded theory methods allowed me to answer the research question by eliciting in-depth information directly from participants about their experiences. Use of this approach entailed simultaneous engagement in data collection and analysis, as well as sampling for theoretical purposes (i.e., in this study, sampling participants until no additional intersectional identity perspectives emerged) and writing analytic memos to aid in analysis (Charmaz, 2014). In addition, this study incorporated scholars’ advice specific to intersectional research including asking open-ended questions that do not imply that identity is additive and analyzing data accordingly (Bowleg, 2008, 2013) and carefully considering and explicating the contexts in which research takes place (Cuádras & Uttal, 1999).

Study Site and Participants

In intersectional research, it is necessary to consider the site under study in an attempt to build “a bridge between individual experience and social context” (Cuádras & Uttal, 1999, p. 179), a bridge necessary to construct because individual experiences influence and are influenced by context. For this study, I purposefully sought a university site meeting several criteria, namely academic and programmatic offerings including a disability services office, queer resource center, gender and sexuality studies courses, and a disability studies program, as well as student organizations related to these areas. A large, predominantly White flagship research institution in the Southern United States meeting these criteria and within the closest proximity for me became the study site, enabling me to collect data in person. Students

commented on their mixed experiences in a climate characterized by high-profile bias incidents perpetrated against students of color and other marginalized groups. The university’s location in an urban center perceived as liberal in comparison to the staunch conservatism of the overall state and region exacerbated students’ climate concerns.

After receiving institutional review board approval, I purposefully sampled enrolled students who met the criteria of identifying as LGBTQ and with a disability of any kind who would thus serve as information-rich cases poised to help answer the research question (Charmaz, 2014; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). I asked leaders of student organizations, academic departments, and student affairs offices related to disability and LGBTQ identities to send recruitment e-mails and social media messages. Once the study began, I reengaged previous sites of recruitment for additional participants and also asked students who participated in the study to contact others who might fit the criteria (snowball sampling; Jones et al., 2014). Most students initially approached me after learning about the study via the queer resource center or LGBTQ student organizations. In an effort to achieve maximum variation of the sample (Jones et al., 2014), I intentionally reengaged sites of recruitment focusing on disability, as I suspected that the perspectives of students primarily involved in LGBTQ activities might differ from the perspectives of those more engaged in disability-related activities.

Ultimately, 25 students participated in the study (Table 1). I did not ask students to complete a demographic questionnaire or survey, as I wanted to avoid a checkbox approach to quantifying identity and limiting students’ responses by structuring predesignated categories. Instead, I compiled the terminology that students disclosed in interviews. The sample thereby included 12

students who identified as women and/or female, 8 as men and/or male, 4 as cisgender, 4 as trans*, 2 as nonbinary, and 1 as genderqueer. Several students identified with more than one term to describe gender and/or sex. Due to the lack of a demographic questionnaire or specific questions distinguishing among the concepts in the interview protocol, sex, gender, and gender identity are conflated as participants used multiple terms interchangeably. Table 1 includes the gender pronouns students used.

A majority of students (14) identified as queer, but students also used terms including gay (10), bisexual (4), asexual (2), lesbian (2), polyamorous (2), as well as the following identities, named by 1 student each: *demisexual* (someone who experiences sexual attraction only when an emotional connection is present; Decker, 2015), *panromantic* (a person who does not define romantic attraction by gender), *pansexual* (a person who does not define sexual attraction by gender), *quoiromantic* (someone who has difficulty distinguishing between romantic and platonic attraction; Asexuality Blog, 2014), and straight. Students used multiple terms to describe their sexuality and said that they used different terms contextually.

Most participants in the study identified with more than one disability. In total, students named 33 distinct ability/disability labels, including 1 participant who identified simultaneously as temporarily able-bodied and disabled to draw attention to the false binary of abled/disabled by pointing out the presence of both ability and disability. Students identified as White (18), biracial or multiracial (5), Mexican American (4), Chicana/o (3), Jewish (3), Native American (3), Latina/o (2), people of color (2), Polish (2), and as Black, Chinese, French, Irish, Italian, and multicultural (1 student each), with many students adopting more than one term simultaneously. Students who identified as Jewish perceived the identity variously as cultural, ethnic, and/or religious.

Data Collection and Analysis

When students contacted me about the study, we first arranged a time to meet one-on-one to discuss the research, goals, and my background and positionality prior to the informed consent and interview process (Charmaz, 2014). I asked students to participate in one to two intensive, semistructured interviews (Charmaz, 2014) designed to probe students' college choice and experiences, personal and social identities and identity intersections, and advice for institutional leadership. These in-depth interviews allowed participants to "represent their experiences in their own voices" (Cuádriz & Uttal, 1999, p. 160), a technique well suited to studying intersectionality. Example interview questions included: How do you describe or identify yourself? Tell me about a typical day and how your identities shape your daily experiences. How do you decide whether and how to disclose your identities to others? What places on campus do you consider inclusive and welcoming? I followed Bowleg's (2008) advice to avoid asking additive questions that rank identities (e.g., Which identity is most important to you?), and instead asked participants to "discuss [their] identities and experiences however they best resonate with [them]" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 315).

Taking into account the histories of exploitative research about queer people and people with disabilities, as well as varied needs that abilities/disabilities necessitate, I told participants that I wanted to provide maximum flexibility in the interview process so they could share their stories as they saw fit. I invited students to choose the interview time and location, to determine whether we met for one longer interview or two shorter interviews, and to review the protocol in advance and decide the order of topics discussed and whether to skip any questions. Some students preferred less structure, as I asked one or two

TABLE 1. Participants Overview

Pseudonym	Classification	Pronouns	Disabilities ^a	LGBTQ Identities
Abby	Graduate	she/her	Narcolepsy	Queer
Adrianna	Graduate	she/her	Addiction, anxiety, brittle bones, depression, eating disorder, OCD, PTSD	Bisexual
Aurora	Undergraduate	they/them	Anxiety, depression, neurodivergent	Nonbinary, polyamorous, queer, trans
Carlo	Undergraduate	he/him	ADHD	Gay
Christopher	Graduate	he/him	ADHD, dyslexia	Gay
Dani	Graduate	she/her	Visual disabilities	Gay
Desi	Undergraduate	he/him	ADHD, anxiety, Asperger's, depression	Demisexual, queer, trans
Diego	Graduate	he/him	Anxiety, depression, narcolepsy	Gay, queer
Elijah	Graduate	he/him	Bipolar disorder	Gay
Ella	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, depression, hard of hearing	Queer, trans
Eva	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, depression, eating disorder, PTSD	Bisexual
Haley	Graduate	she/her	Depression, pregnancy	Queer
Jackie	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, autoimmune disease, brain malformation, depression	Asexual, queerromantic
Kristen	Graduate	she/her	Anxiety, depression, mental health	Bisexual, queer
Madison	Graduate	she/her	ASD, health problems, injuries, mental health	Queer
Maria	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, depression, mental health, PTSD	Genderqueer, queer
Marie	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, depression	Lesbian
Miranda	Graduate	she/her	Anxiety, ASD, Asperger's, Lyme disease, neuromuscular condition, OCD	Asexual, panromantic, queer
Rodney	Graduate	he/him	ADHD, depression, heart condition	Gay
Sandy	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, auditory processing disorder, depression, epilepsy, OCD, panic disorder, sensory processing disorder	Gay, lesbian, queer
Sebastian	Graduate	he/him	Lyme disease	Gay, queer
Shannon	Undergraduate	she/her	Anxiety, depression, health problems, injuries	Bisexual
Taylor	Undergraduate	they/them	Anxiety, depression, mental health, PTSD	Nonbinary, pansexual, polyamorous, queer, trans
Will	Undergraduate	he/him	Asperger's	Gay
Zachary	Undergraduate	he/him	Tourette syndrome	Gay, queer

^a ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; ASD = autism spectrum disorder; OCD = obsessive compulsive disorder; PTSD = post-traumatic stress disorder.

questions and they elaborated about their experience at great length; others chose a more highly structured format. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. I began analysis while continuing to conduct interviews, drawing upon the constant comparative method: that is, comparing data within and across transcripts and analytic memos throughout the duration of the study to establish understanding of and patterns within data, participants, and contexts (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

I employed five coding processes associated with grounded theory. In the first cycle of coding, I conducted *in vivo*, process, and initial coding (Saldaña, 2009). After completing each interview, I coded transcripts line by line with *in vivo* codes (identifying short excerpts of direct quotes) and process codes (identifying action or gerund words to represent processes from each section of text) to gain a better understanding of each participant's perspectives. After the first line-by-line reading of transcripts, I developed initial codes across all interviews to begin identifying topics, content, and patterns throughout the data. Initial coding is an "open-ended approach" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 100) through which the researcher begins to "define what is happening in the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343). Rather than strictly using participants' words, during initial coding I applied my own labels to topics represented in multiple interviews, such as affirmation, belonging, conformity, discrimination, and identity. Intersectionality and related codes emerged frequently during initial coding.

In the second cycle of coding, I employed focused and axial coding procedures (Saldaña, 2009) to hone in on the relationships participants described among queer and disability identities through the theoretical lens of intersectionality. Focused coding reorganizes and condenses initial codes into a smaller number of categories. I identified the "most

frequent and/or significant" initial codes to develop focused codes (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343). Lastly, I looked for relationships among the focused codes and then further condensed and recoded these focused codes into axial codes, which represented primary categories of the study as a whole. Because the data were split into multiple codes in previous rounds of coding, axial coding represented an attempt to "strategically reassemble [the] data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 218) and to "relate categories to subcategories" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 147). This article reflects a subset of data from the larger study, specifically from the axial code: complicating intersectionality. The five intersectional identity perspectives that compose the Findings section were the most significant and frequently appearing patterns related to participants' depictions of the intersectionality of their disability and queer identities. Upon completion of data analysis, each participant's perspectives on the intersectionality of their identities were reflected in two or more of the five perspectives presented.

This article also represents a reconsideration of the data through a constructivist lens, as the research question focused on individual participants and their understandings of their intersecting identities. The larger study drew upon the principles of situational analysis, a postmodern extension of grounded theory Clarke (2005) developed to capture the social worlds and arenas of human and nonhuman elements within research (see Miller, 2017). Some aspects of the study, including situational maps, were specific to Clarke's recommendations, but were not applied to the data presented here.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Williams and Morrow (2009) outlined techniques to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research, which include promoting integrity of the data, balancing reflexivity and subjectivity,

and clearly communicating and applying findings. I sought to enhance the credibility of the study by collecting extensive data (including more than 40 hours of audio-recorded interviews, as well as field notes and analytic memos) and by engaging with participants and peer debriefers to reflect on my interpretations and presentations of data (Jones et al., 2014).

Intersectional research designs must “illustrate the researcher’s effort to interpret implicit data” that comes along with conducting complex studies (Torres et al., 2009, p. 590), data that must also be analyzed through the lenses of systems of oppression and historical and social context (Bowleg, 2008). I sought to interpret such data by engaging with several peer debriefers, including several colleagues and graduate students who identified as queer and/or with a disability. I also shared transcripts as well as emergent findings with participants and invited their feedback. Most students reviewed their transcripts and offered minor corrections; about half of the participants provided broader feedback on the study that supported my analysis, including the five intersectional identity perspectives presented. Several participants shared with me that the intersectional identity perspectives helped them to feel validated and less alone in their experiences, offering some evidence of authenticity criteria essential in constructivist research (Morrow, 2005).

I sought to balance subjectivity (participants’ words and interpretations) with my own reflexivity (my interpretations informed by my positionality and philosophic commitments) in part by intentionally reflecting on my own identities and relationship to the research topic (Morrow, 2005; Torres et al., 2009). I recalled the origin of this study dating back to the time I directed an LGBTQ resource center on a university campus. Working with students who disclosed their multiple identities, I

quickly realized that I had not received adequate preparation for understanding disability. Turning to the research literature with a colleague who directed the disability resource office, we were disappointed to find little guidance. While reflection on my identities as a White, queer, cisgender man and first-generation college graduate paved the way for my activism and career in student affairs, I needed to begin deeply considering the role ability/disability played in my life as a temporarily able-bodied person (a person currently without a disability as defined within my social/cultural context). Since that initial realization, I became more committed to disability justice. I explained this background to students who participated in this study, finding that my queer identity often helped established rapport between us and that my interest in learning more about disability prompted students to share rich descriptions of their experiences with me, though I speculated that my not having a disability might have discouraged some students from participating in depth. Though I conducted the study within a specific context and have sought to ensure dependability by thoroughly describing the research processes and resulting findings, I invite readers to determine whether this study offers transferable insights to their own environments (Jones et al., 2014).

FINDINGS

Participants conceptualized their views on the (dis)connections among disability and queer identities in various ways. Every participant in this study drew upon more than one of these five perspectives when discussing the relationship between their queer and disability identities. Participants thus demonstrated a rich and complex view of how intersectionality operated in their lives, requiring that they deploy multiple perspectives depending upon

their context. While the student participants described their identity intersections using their own language, I grouped these perspectives and tentatively named them, information that I then shared with participants and discussed further during member checking and while sharing tentative study findings (Charmaz, 2014).

1. Identities as Intersectional

Some participants, 10 of the 25, articulated explicitly intersectional understandings of their queer/disabled identities drawing upon social justice discourses. These students viewed their identities as inseparable and mutually constitutive. Those who drew upon this perspective received exposure to intersectionality through coursework (most often in ethnic studies and women's and gender studies) and experiences with activism and leadership on campus, often facilitated through the campus LGBTQ and women's center or the multicultural center. These experiences gave students a language and interpretive lens for their identities, even though some connected more with intersectionality as an abstract concept than personally as a guiding force in their lives.

Participants who evidenced this perspective viewed queer and disability identities as inseparable and part of their overall self-concept. Two participants, Haley and Ella, provide examples of this perspective. Discussing her intersecting identities, Haley declared: "I can't really break them apart." She reflected upon the combination of her multiple identities that created a unique positionality for herself: "Every time someone asks me what my identities are, I want to give them this really long list. Because the more I think about my life, the more I realize that people who have one of my things but not the others would so not see the world the same way." Haley's words demonstrate an

intersectional philosophy on identities that some participants echoed. Similarly, Ella stated that, "everything is connected and [every identity] is important to me at some point," sharing that she had explored various identities—gender, religion, ethnicity—during her time as an undergraduate. "From the gender studies, feminist perspective, they all intersect to me. You can't really deal with one without dealing with all of them. . . . They're all tied together and not always in really linear ways." Ella described the intersectional nature of both her privileged and oppressed identities and the need to foreground identities left out of the conversation. She also mentioned the strain of being the only trans* person in any given classroom space and feeling compelled to advocate for herself and her communities, yet feeling restrained by her experiences of anxiety and depression.

Some students who evidenced this perspective viewed intersections of queer and disability intersections as primarily theoretical rather than applicable to their own identities and lives. Abby, a graduate student in social sciences, expressed awareness of the conceptual links between queer theory and disability studies: "I see the links between the disruptive potential of queerness and the disruptive potential of disability and how they're really both about calling out structures for their assumptions about heteronormativity and able-bodiedness." However, she reflected that "it's not that simple" in her own life. Abby described the impact of narcolepsy on her daily life, resulting in a strict sleeping schedule and precluding late-night social life that made her and her partner look "a lot more like the domestic gay stereotype" than queer rabble-rousers who took to the bars and the streets. Nonetheless, Abby sought to push the boundaries of intersections between queerness and disability by acknowledging that her activism may differ due to her daily experience

of disability. In online spaces, she saw the most potential for discussing the intersections of queerness and disability (see Miller, 2017).

2. Identities as Interactive

Evidenced by 18 participants, an interactive view positioned identities as mutually dependent, as in the intersectional view described above, but called specific attention to the actual sites of the intersections and the ways in which being queer was qualitatively different because one also identified with a disability, and vice versa. Such a view functioned as one way that participants could build resilience by articulating their identities as mutually beneficial and reinforcing, that is, having an interactive effect on each other; however, some participants thought the identities could reinforce one another negatively as well. In addition, participants who identified as asexual endorsed the notion that their asexuality interacted with their disabilities in distinctive ways.

In the interactive perspective, students viewed their identities as dynamically informing and building upon one another. Exemplifying this perspective, Aurora (who used they/them gender pronouns) explained a snowball effect in identifying as queer, trans/nonbinary, and *neurodivergent* (a person whose mind functions differently than those who are neurologically typical; Hughes, n.d.). They came out as queer at 15, “after I had been in a long-term psychiatric facility or residential treatment center for two months. I came out and I kind of feel like some part of me died, and now I’m this new person.” They explained that “all these things started popping up.” The development of their identities informed one another in an interactive fashion, and Aurora concluded that their development is “still a continuous evolution, continuous self-creation of mine where I’m trying to figure out who I am, what groups I belong to.”

Some students adopted an interactive view that suggested a beneficial link between queer/disability identities. Introspective about his identities and imaginative about the relationship among them, Christopher described an intense connection among his sexuality, disability, and field of study in the arts, which required creativity:

When I actually started medication for the first time two years ago—I said, “I don’t want my creative side to go away.” Because what makes my creative side work is that I am constantly thinking about—that’s one of the things people actually value about me. They’ll say, “Have you thought about this?” And I’m like, yeah, I thought about that, 12 steps ago. Because of that nonstop, racing mind that we have as people with ADHD, that has kind of fueled what I do.

Christopher believed that being detail-oriented as a gay man and having the “racing mind” associated with ADHD helped him excel in his craft, but he feared that medication might diminish those traits.

While Christopher viewed his identities as mutually reinforcing in a positive way, several participants perceived a negative relationship among queer/disability identities. For Elijah, having bipolar disorder and being gay meant being “closeted twice.” He said that after receiving information about this study, he started thinking more about the intersection of the two: “I think I was just as closeted being bipolar and having a psychiatric disability as I was with my sexual identity. . . . Being perhaps closeted twice, it’s clearly detrimental because it creates increased psychological stress.” Elijah described bipolar disorder fading to the background and “no longer dominating my psychological landscape,” allowing him time and space to think about being gay. Keeping both identities hidden created a “negative feedback loop” for him: “Then, you don’t

have one thing you're hiding from people: you have two things you're hiding from people." To Elijah, having a psychological disability and a nonnormative sexuality would stretch a person's coping mechanisms and create a "loop of psychological distress."

Lastly, three participants described an interactive link between disability and asexuality. These participants identified on the asexual spectrum, including identities such as asexual (Miranda), demisexual (Desi), and quoiromantic (Jackie). Jackie viewed her identities as "pretty cohesive," and noted how disability and depression affected her sexuality because she did not "have the energy or will to form a lot of relationships in the first place, even if it's just friendship." Desi also felt that disability—in his case, Asperger's— Influenced his demisexual identity, "because of the inability to be close to somebody." He noted that, "It's generally just hard for me to really want to be around somebody for an extended amount of time or even to reach the point where I would want to have sexual relationships with them." Lastly, Miranda considered the links between the autism spectrum and asexuality, a link that she felt in her own life and identities: "I guess they do kind of play off of each other, but sometimes one will push the other to the background and so forth." Miranda said she had noticed a high proportion of people on the autism spectrum also identifying as asexual.

3. Identities as Overlapping

Seeking to explain the link between identities, 18 students described a significant overlap in the population that identifies both as queer and disabled and/or an overlap in queer/disability experiences. Adopting an overlapping view functioned as one strategy to identify and build community, seek solidarity with others, and combat a sense of isolation and historical and present mistreatment of queer/disabled people.

In addition, many participants saw mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, as prevalent within queer communities and fueled in part by the systemic oppression of LGBTQ people.

Participants endorsing an overlapping perspective believed that people with disabilities had a visible place in queer communities and/or that queer people played a key role in disability communities. Casting the communities as hospitable to intersecting identities meant that queer/disabled students might have a place within both communities and that their experiences could be validated. Haley saw an overlap in the population, a realization that helped her feel less isolated: "I've just realized today that all of my depressed friends are queer. Anyway, there's definitely parallels and intersections, but I think that there is something to the fact that, it's not just me." She also speculated about the power of intersectional organizing: "It's not just that I have this weird thought that queer and disabled people are a small segment of society. I think that's intentional. The fact that it's hard to imagine queer, disabled people organizing is intentional." Haley began to realize that she knew more queer/disabled people than she initially thought and that this identity intersection could lead to useful political organizing and activism.

Other participants who exemplified this perspective saw an overlap in experiences between the populations that could lead to greater empathy and understanding. For example, Madison viewed queer communities as hospitable to disability. She speculated that the queer community is "probably more accommodating for people with different physical abilities than any other community that I've been in, and I think that's just because they're aware of how important being accommodating can be, and so they do that for everyone." Conversely, Miranda found

disability communities particularly inclusive of queer identities:

I almost feel like there's a higher than normal proportion of queer people in the disabled community. I think maybe it's because there's a higher level of comfort there, because there's an openness to it. I think that could be because a lot of people who are disabled and who have made community for themselves have so often been marginalized that it's an open setting.

Miranda believed frequent experiences of marginalization might lead overlapping communities to become more attuned to such marginalization.

Many participants discussed heightened levels of depression and anxiety in queer communities as an area of overlap, due in large part to systemic oppression. Desi explained: "I see a lot of queer-identified people who fall into depression. Again, similar to what happened to me [with] the weight of the world crashing upon them, or because they're in bad situations around their family." Desi noted that identifying as queer in a heterosexist society left individuals open to significant marginalization, particularly from families of origin, which could negatively affect their mental health. He also noted that he could easily relate to others with this experience. Picking up on this theme, Marie discussed the prevalence of mental health issues in the queer community, which she framed as "an acknowledgment among the LGBTQ community that the rates of mental health issues are much higher than in the general community." She continued explaining that, "I've always gotten a really great response when I've talked to a friend who identifies as part of the community when I talk about my mental health problems." This positive response helped Marie feel less stigmatized in discussing mental health with other queer people.

4. Identities as Parallel

Most participants, 21, drew comparisons between experiences of understanding themselves as queer and disabled. In other words, students conceptualized the identities by constructing parallels or analogies between the identities. Students used a parallel view of identities as a strategy to build resilience by drawing upon personal resources. They used past experiences to explain and make sense of new experiences. By recognizing that they had navigated oppressive incidents and contexts in the past, these students were better prepared to face new obstacles put before them. The parallel perspective manifested in two primary ways: students viewed development of queer/disability identities as sequential, and students compared processes of disclosing queer/disability identities to others.

Some students described a sequential process of developing their identities. In most cases, students identified as queer prior to identifying as a person with a disability. They shared that the knowledge they gained while developing a queer identity informed their processes of later identifying with a disability. Carlo explained that he explored identifying as gay before college, but then in college, disability came to the forefront: "Being gay—I've dealt with that most of my life. But it kinda flipped when I got to college, so now it's like the ADHD part." He recognized that systems of oppression positioned both disability and queerness as stigmatized character flaws:

Gay was always: . . . "It's the devil!" or "You need to stop masturbating," or whatever. "We can fix this. It's a character flaw." And ADHD: "You're lazy, you're not focused, you're a slacker, it's a character flaw," once again.

In another example illustrating a sequential

process, Zachary reflected that he wanted to explore a possible disability identity (in his case, Tourette's syndrome), an exploration process he utilized when coming to understand himself as queer:

My queerness was also something I was scared of touching and figuring out as well. . . . I do want to figure [my disability identity] out. I think it would help me, probably. Same with my queerness. For a long time, I didn't want to think about it. I think it helped in the end to figure it out.

He shared that he thought about disability frequently, "but I haven't really had the chance to think critically about it," and participated in this study as one way to explore the identity.

Others compared identities based on undertaking similar experiences, particularly around disclosure of identities. Sandy expressed that in her experience, queer-friendly people in her life would also want to discuss and understand disability. This became a way for her to identify potential allies in her life. Also thinking about identity disclosure, Dani grew frustrated by the constant need to come out: "The biggest way I see them both influencing my life in the same way is that in both my disability and my sexuality, I have to come out over and over and over again, or people won't know." Despite an ongoing need for disclosure rooted in heterosexist and ableist assumptions, Dani appreciated having the choice to come out or not: "That's a plus, in the sense that I can also choose not to."

In another example related to disclosure, Marie associated the two identities in part because of the ways in which her parents invalidated both: "In my head they're very much connected, especially because of the way they were handled by my parents." She felt she repressed her sexuality and anxiety due to family circumstances growing up. Her parents expressed skepticism about the legitimacy of

both identities, reinforcing her belief that she needed to keep them hidden: "In my mind those two things are very connected in this necessity to keep them hidden because of that reaction." She spoke about her approach of "putting up a front" of competence and hard work so that disability and sexuality would fade into the background in others' perceptions of her.

5. Identities as Oppositional

Perhaps more than any other, the oppositional perspective, held by 17 participants, illustrates the strain students felt experiencing multiple oppressions. In this perspective, while still acknowledging the presence of both disability and queer identities, students rejected an explicitly intersectional framework, particularly when faced with significant obstacles that prevented them from easily embracing these identities. The oppositional view also functioned at times as a self-protective strategy that enabled them to add or rank identities as though identities functioned separately—and thus to escape identifying with the weight of multiple forms of oppression, at least temporarily. When adopting an oppositional view, these students showed evidence that they still were aware of intersectionality as a theory, but thought it held little relevance to their current experiences. Students also shared examples of altering how they expressed or disclosed their identities in particular contexts in an effort to reduce stigma.

In the oppositional perspective, participants highlighted differences between the identities and their own experiences of both. Carlo saw having ADHD and being gay as "separate threads I guess—I don't really view them as intersecting." Likewise, Adrianna did not see her queer and disabled identities "in conversation with each other," but viewed a link between identifying as queer and developing psychological disabilities based on

oppression and marginalization: “The statistics show that queer people tend to run into more violence, so I think that has something to do with it, but I don’t really think about it so much.” Though Adrianna acknowledged both disability and sexuality, she believed that the two did not substantially relate to each other. Perhaps the strongest exemplar of the oppositional perspective, Will understood his sexuality and disability as “this constant clash of the two different identities.” He viewed being gay as pulling him in an extroverted direction, while having Asperger’s meant he was naturally introverted. This clash led Will to work on changing how he expressed both identities. He described learning to “tone down” traits associated with Asperger’s in order to have give-and-take conversations with others, and to push himself to behave more socially in queer-identified spaces, even though he admitted sometimes becoming overwhelmed in the campus LGBTQ center or at student organization meetings. He lamented: “It’s easier to just like stay inside and shut the world out than it is to like try to interact with other gay people sometimes, but it is hard to pretend you’re extroverted in a world designed for extroverts.” Will described an affinity for the queer community on campus—despite its emphasis on being social—and expressed doubt that he would want to engage in a disability-identified community or space: “Would I even go there? I probably wouldn’t.”

Several other participants reflected on the difficulty of holding both identities and how others might perceive the two. At times, students conveyed shifting descriptions of how they shared identities with others in an effort to escape negative stigma. Kristen shared the difficulty and emotional labor of “trying to keep these lives separate in certain regards” and the demands of keeping up with disclosure and active identification in contexts

such as school, work, and personal settings. She thought that identity could be understood and expressed intersectionally, but that it could waiver depending on context: “It can be really marginalizing to identify in an already marginalized population—to further be kind of pushed out of—that you are not really a part of that, and you’re not really a part of this population.” This reflected a self-protective strategy to resist identifying with multiple stigmatized identities in some contexts. Diego acknowledged an association of gay men with HIV/AIDS and said that he felt compelled to name his disabilities (narcolepsy, depression, and anxiety) so that others would know that he was not HIV-positive: “I usually don’t say ‘disabled’ unless I explain my disability.”

DISCUSSION

Queer students with disabilities in this study variously viewed their identities as intersectional, interactive, overlapping, parallel, and/or oppositional. These five perspectives functioned as discourses that students used to make sense of their experiences living at the intersections of identities and to describe their social realities. Construction and utilization of these discourses demonstrated resilience, creativity, and a complex level of introspection, and became practical tools for navigating and resisting oppression. While many students in this study drew upon the discourses of intersectionality and social justice to describe their understandings of self, they also communicated portraits of identities as variously complementary and integrated, segmented and “clashing,” as one participant noted. Students adopted multiple perspectives simultaneously to resist oppression, navigate changing contexts, and build resilience and community. All students drew upon more than one of these discourses, demonstrating that they could navigate multiple contexts

and deploy these perspectives as needed. Viewing students' multiple strategies for discussing identity intersections as assets supports Bowleg's (2013) call for expanded intersectionality research to incorporate both interlocking oppressions as well as strengths of individuals living at the intersections.

Sometimes these discourses suggested that identities did not neatly intersect or inform each other; however, these experiences must be placed into a context of intersecting forms of oppression, not just of intersecting identities on an individual level. These identities are "interdependent and inseparable, depending on each other for meaning" (Abes, 2012, p. 189) even when a student's view of the relationship among specific identities may be strained. This study thus supports and extends previous intersectional research that suggests students articulated and showcased their identities differently according to context (Harper et al., 2011; Nicolazzo, 2016; Stewart, 2008), and that, in responding to marginalization, students developed strategies for resisting oppression (Means & Jaeger, 2015) and practicing resilience (Nicolazzo, 2017). Just as Payne Gold and Stewart (2011) proposed that students may develop and reconcile the intersection of LGB identities and spirituality in distinctive ways, this study reveals unique perspectives at the intersection of disability and queer identities, beginning to fill a gap in research about collegians with disabilities that is rarely intersectional (Duke, 2011; Kimball et al., 2016).

Prior considerations of LGBTQ students with disabilities (Harley et al., 2002; Henry et al., 2010; Underhile & Cowles, 1998) generally focused on obstacles in the campus environment and discrimination experienced by students, as well as ways that student affairs personnel and faculty could increase their multicultural competence. Recommendations offered by Harley et al. (2002) and Underhile

and Cowles (1998) included the creation of educational workshops, support groups, and identifiable safe spaces. While acknowledging the importance of equity-minded faculty and staff and inclusive campus resources, I take a different approach by framing students' perspectives on their identities as assets that enabled them to navigate oppressive contexts and as discourses that helped them make sense of their social worlds.

Previous empirical research in this area includes a study of one gay male student with physical and learning disabilities (Henry et al., 2010). In the interview protocol, the researchers asked the participant whether being gay or being disabled is the "lower priority" for him (p. 382), framing the question in an additive manner that assumed one identity must take priority (Bowleg, 2008). The participant attributed most academic challenges and discrimination he faced to his disabilities and not to his sexuality, but also shared that he encountered disability discrimination within the gay community. While Henry et al. (2010) concluded that the participant's views of his identities placed him within multiple options of Reynolds and Pope's (1991) multidimensional identity model, I utilized an explicitly intersectional framework to analyze how 25 LGBTQ students with disabilities understood their identities. The presence of an oppositional identity perspective in this study suggests that students did not always view their identities as intersectional (as was the case in Henry et al., 2010); however, it is noteworthy that all participants embraced at least two of the five perspectives and thus fashioned a multiplicity of views regarding their intersecting identities. Perceptions of opposition or disconnection among identities suggest the considerable influence of and emotional toll exacted by navigating multiple forms of oppression (Stewart, 2008).

Tensions have emerged in this study.

Scholarship on intersectionality rejects additive or rank-ordered approaches to conceptualizing identity (Bowleg, 2008, 2013); however, four of the five identity perspectives that emerged from participants rely, at least minimally, on the idea that identities can be compared or even considered “separate threads,” in the words of one participant. Even though I tried to avoid asking additive questions (Bowleg, 2008), many of the responses I received appeared, at first glance, to be additive; however, such a conclusion fails to acknowledge the social contexts in which students are operating and the presence of multiple forms of oppression that have structured much of their lives. For example, students who viewed their intersecting identities as oppositional often drew upon this perspective in part as a strategy for self-protection to avoid overtly identifying with multiple stigmatized identities in a given context. This also perhaps reflects the reality that it is “difficult for participants to fully articulate intersectional identities” (Torres et al., 2009, p. 589). Bowleg (2013) described this challenge as “how to balance and represent both the trials and tribulations of interlocking identities at the micro level and actively resist interlocking oppressions at the social-structural level” (p. 765). In this study, such a perspective might entail seeking to understand not just how students view their identities, but the reasons why students might employ particular discourses and arrive at particular perspectives based on contextual factors.

LIMITATIONS

In this study, I offer a situated account of how LGBTQ students with disabilities at a predominantly White research university approached making sense of their multiple, overlapping identities. These perspectives are based on a snapshot in time and will continue to change over time and in new contexts,

a limitation that could be addressed by future longitudinal inquiry. While exploring intersectionality, I chose to zero in on LGBTQ and disability identities (Christensen & Qvotrup Jensen, 2012), but it is important to acknowledge that, for some participants, race, class, and/or religion deeply informed their identities and daily experiences. This study is also limited by its predominantly White and cisgender sample, which necessitates additional research focusing on trans* students and students of color.

IMPLICATIONS

This examination of the intersections of disability and LGBTQ identities as experienced by undergraduate and graduate students, offers further evidence to “critique the ‘one-identity-at-a-time’ approach employed by most college and university administrators, especially those who work in student affairs and multicultural affairs” (Harper et al., 2011, p. 92). For practitioners, the intersectional identity perspectives presented here suggest a continued need to understand the broad contours of social identity categories and communities while also acknowledging that students will understand their own identities in complex and potentially distinctive ways. Instead of assuming a shared or common experience, even when students share one or several identities, practitioners might endeavor to uncover the many paths students take toward making sense of their identities. Differing perspectives suggest the need for targeted educational and developmental approaches toward working with students. For example, an out, queer student on campus beginning to explore her experience with anxiety and depression will have different needs and concerns than a student with a physical disability present since childhood beginning to address his sexual orientation identity in greater depth. Such

students will likely respond differently to an institution's attempts to promote programs related to diversity and identity development and to curricula that addresses these topics.

The identity perspectives presented in this study might also offer linguistic possibilities for dialoguing about intersectionality. Conflicts within classrooms and identity-based student organizations and resource centers might stem from varied intersectional identity perspectives. Rather than viewing these perspectives as perpetually in irresolvable conflict, students and educators might adopt a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the many ways intersectionality might manifest in higher education and particularly within institutions that have often artificially attempted to divide people based on singular identities. As Nicolazzo (2017) has suggested, this perspective entails "interrogating the very structures that keep offices siloed and staffs unable to work together beyond onetime, stand-alone programs in the first place" (p. 152).

Scholars studying intersectionality should not assume that participants necessarily view their identities as explicitly intersectional,

which may require changes in how researchers recruit participants and analyze data. This study also supports the notion that intersectional researchers should avoid asking additive questions that imply "identities are independent, separate, and able to be ranked" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 316), and instead allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words. In addition, future work that deconstructs the umbrella categories of disability and LGBTQ is needed. While these broad categories might present opportunities for building coalitions, there are also specific needs at a fine-grained level that an umbrella approach might ignore. In this study, I attempted to take up Price's (2011) call for "*both* local specificity *and* broad coalitions for maximum advantage" (p. 18), recognizing that future inquiry will necessitate both approaches.

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