

A Dynamic-Ecological Model of Identity Formation and Conflict among Bisexually-Behaving African-American Men

Patrick A. Wilson

Published online: 11 June 2008
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Abstract Understanding how ethnic, sexual, and masculine (ESM) identities form and possibly conflict among African-American men may be important to consider in explaining bisexual behavior in this population. It is proposed that the bisexual behavior among African-American who are primarily sexually attracted to other men may be a function of conflicting ESM identities. Comprehensively understanding the formation and conflict of ESM identities requires an examination of individuals, social contexts, and interactions between individuals and contexts. The current article presents a dynamic-ecological model of identity formation and conflict among ethnic minority men who have sex with men and uses the model to demonstrate how bisexual behavior among African-American men may be examined.

Keywords African-American men · Bisexual behavior · Ethnic identity · Sexual identity · Masculine identity · Ecological factors

Introduction

Over the past two decades, epidemiological data have suggested that HIV/AIDS continues to be a major health threat among African-American men who have sex with men (MSM). Data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have shown that from 1990 through 1999 AIDS prevalence among Black MSM increased by 15%, while the prevalence among White MSM decreased by 21% (Blair,

Fleming, & Karon, 2002). Likewise, surveillance data has indicated that HIV prevalence among Black MSM is increasing. In 1999, 30% of HIV cases among Black men were transmitted via male-to-male sexual contact (CDC, 2004), while data collected in 2005 indicated 40% of cases among Black men via this mode of transmission (CDC, 2007). Given these trends, social scientists have begun to focus on the multitude of unique stigmatizing factors associated with African-American MSM and their well-being. In much of this research the suggestion has been made that the dual-stigmatizing nature of having ethnic minority (i.e., African-American) and non-heterosexual identities (i.e., gay or bisexual) may be important to consider in explaining poor health outcomes in this group (Miller, Serner, & Wagner, 2005; Millett & Peterson, 2007; Stokes, Miller, & Mundhenk, 1998). However, little work has specifically examined how bisexually-behaving African-American men (i.e., those who engage in sexual behavior with both men and women) who are primarily sexually attracted to other men develop ethnic, sexual, and masculine (ESM) identities or how these identities may conflict.

The three major goals of this conceptual article are to: (1) briefly review theory demonstrating why a dynamic-ecological framework should be employed in order to fully understand the formation of ESM identities; (2) present a conceptual model of ESM identity formation and conflict among ethnic minority MSM that is grounded in the dynamic-ecological perspective; and (3) use the model to demonstrate how bisexual behavior among African-American men may be better understood by examining ESM identity formation and conflict among these men.

In examining identity formation among African-American men, this article focuses on the possibility that African-American men who engage in same-sex sexual behavior (including those who identify as gay, bisexual, heterosexual, or use other labels to designate sexual orientation) may experience

P. A. Wilson (✉)
Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School
of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 W. 168th Street,
New York, NY 10032, USA
e-mail: pw2219@columbia.edu

“conflicting identities.” Conflicting identities refer to social identities that an individual perceives to have inconsistent value-orientations, levels of stigmatization, and cultural beliefs ascribed to them. For African-American men who are primarily sexually attracted to other men, bisexual behavior may represent one attempt to resolve the sense of conflict that they experience. Other researchers have suggested that African-American MSM possess conflicting identities, focusing primarily on their ethnic and sexual identities (Icard, 1986; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1994; Morales, 1990; Peterson, 1992; Savin-Williams, 1996), and the poor health outcomes that are posited to be related to experiencing the conflict (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Peterson, Folkman, & Bakeman, 1996; Stokes & Peterson, 1998).

It should be noted that the epidemiological term *MSM* is used purposefully here to refer to men who have sex with other men, regardless of whether they also engage in sexual behavior with women. Likewise *bisexually-behaving* or *MSMW* is used to refer specifically to the group of MSM who have sex with both men *and* women. While the terms *MSM* and *MSMW* should only be used to describe behavior and not identity (Young & Meyer, 2005), the terms allow for the diversity in sexual identities (e.g., gay, bisexual, heterosexual, etc.) among African-American men. African-American men who engage in bisexual behavior may not self-label bisexual or form a bisexual identity solely on the basis of their sexual behavior. However, regardless of the labels these men may use to describe their sexual identity, a conflict may arise from their same-sex sexual behaviors aligning with those that society uses to categorize gay and bisexual men.

It should also be pointed out that the term *African-American* as opposed to *Black* is used in this article in an effort to distinguish between African-American ethnicities and Caribbean-American or African immigrant ethnicities. The historical and social context in which African Americans function may be different than that for other immigrant Blacks; accordingly, this article focuses on men of African-American ancestry. The terms used by researchers to convey ethnicity among African-Americans have changed over time; though research presented here may use the term *Black*, its application is to U.S.-born African-Americans.

Bisexual Behavior and Sexual Identification among African-American Men

There is an assortment of ways in which bisexually-behaving African-American men may self-label with regard to sexual identity. Researchers have described bisexual men in different ways—one consistent theme is in the variation in identity and behavior extant in the population. For example, Stokes et al. (1998) identified four types of bisexual men: “men in transition” (i.e., men who adopt a bisexual identity to ease anxiety around their same-sex attraction, but ultimately identify as

gay), “experimenters” (i.e., men who have very few sexual experiences with men), “opportunity-driven men” (i.e., men whose sexual experiences with other men are for economic reasons or who are in situations where women are not available, such as prisons), and “men with dual involvement” (i.e., men who are emotionally and sexually involved with male and female partners). Stokes et al. noted that Black men, relative to White men, were more likely to be opportunity-driven or to remain “in transition,” never identifying as gay and maintaining romantic relationships with women despite high levels of sexual attraction toward men (relative to levels of attraction toward women). In critiquing researchers’ focus on the ubiquitous “down low” (DL) phenomenon to describe Black MSMW, Ford, Whetten, Hall, Kaufman, and Thrasher (2007) highlighted the heterogeneity in the meaning of DL by providing 10 different uses and meanings of the term. All 10 involved some level of bisexuality, though the researchers noted that the term DL could be applied to men who socially identified as gay, bisexual, heterosexual, queer, and *two spirited*, among other labels. The findings of these and many other researchers highlight the importance of understanding the variability in identity and sexual behavior among African-American men.

Among African-American men and women, bisexual self-identification and behavior appears to be more common than in other racial groups (Millet, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005; Rust, 2000). Likewise, studies specifically examining MSM have documented higher rates of bisexual self-identification among African-American men compared to men of other ethnicities (Doll et al., 1992; McKirnan, Stokes, Doll, & Burzette, 1995; Thomas & Hodges, 1991). Research also suggests that bisexual behavior among heterosexually- and gay-identified men is more common among African-Americans than other groups. In one study of gay, bisexual, and heterosexually identified MSM, researchers observed that, compared to White and Latino participants, a significantly greater proportion of MSM who identified as heterosexual were African-American. In another study examining the concordance of sexual behavior and identity in a multi-ethnic sample of men and women, 49% of heterosexually identified men reported sexual contact with men and women in the prior three months. African-American men had the highest proportion of discordance (i.e., heterosexual identity and bisexual behavior) of men from all the ethnic groups represented in the study (Ross, Essien, Williams, & Fernandez-Esquer, 2003).

It is important to note that behavioral bisexuality not only occurs among heterosexually identified African-American men, but also among those who are gay-identified (Millet et al., 2005). For example, in examining bisexual behavior in a sample of over 5,000 HIV-positive men Montgomery, Mokotoff, Gentry, and Blair (2003) observed that 22% of gay-identified Black men in their sample reported having both male and female partners in the last five years.

The Intersection of Sexual Identity, Behavior, and Attraction among African-American Men

Sexual attraction, sexual desire, and sexual behavior do not always map on to each other among African-American men (Lichtenstein, 2000; Miller et al., 2005; Morton, 2007; Wright, 1993). Very little work examining the discordance between sexual behavior and sexual identity among African-American men has examined the role of sexual attraction as it relates to sexual behavior and identity. Sexual attraction, though central to conceptual models of sexual identity, remains under-researched (Diamond, 2005). Nonetheless, same-gender sexual attraction, like same-gender sexual behavior, may not lead to gay or bisexual identity formation among African-American men (Stokes et al., 1998).

Morton (2007), working off conceptual models developed by Klein (1990) and Wright (1993), developed a framework to understand sexuality among African-American MSM by incorporating aspects of sexual identity, behavior, and attraction. In the model, Morton identified several groups of men who exhibit discordance in sexual identity, attraction, and behavior. Morton's research, along with the empirical data on bisexual behavior among African-American MSM, suggests that men in this group may possess identities, behaviors, and attraction levels that fall along a continuum from homosexual to bisexual to heterosexual. In other words, African-American MSM may have sexual partners that are men only, or both men and women. Within each of these behavior categories (i.e., sex with men only, sex with both men and women), men may self-identify as gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. Finally, within each these behavior-identity groups, there will be African-American MSM who are sexually attracted to primarily men and to men and women equally.

This article focuses on African-American men who are behaviorally bisexual, who identify as heterosexual or bisexual, and who are primarily sexually attracted to men. Thus, the focus here is not on men whose sexual identity, sexual behaviors, and sexual attraction are aligned (i.e., bisexually-behaving African-American men who are equally sexually attracted to men and women, and who identify as bisexual). Rather, a dynamic-ecological model of ESM identity formation and conflict is used to explain bisexual behavior among African-American MSM who have a primary sexual attraction toward men, but whose sexual behavior and identity would suggest otherwise.

It is posited that there is a cultural component to bisexual behavior among African-American men who are primarily sexually attracted to men. The prevalence of bisexual behavior among African-American men may result from the way ESM identities form and conflict for these men, and the strategies employed in an attempt to resolve the conflict they experience. There are different ways that bisexually-behaving African-American men who have a primary sexual attraction toward to

other men will identify and express themselves with regard to their ethnicity, sexuality, and masculinity. These identities are not only a function of men's perceptions of themselves, but also the characteristics of the social contexts in which they construct their identities.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Dynamic-Ecological Perspective

Defining Identity

Before exploring ways in which identity formation can be examined using a dynamic-ecological perspective, it is important to explain how identity, identity formation, and identity conflict are understood in the current research. Identity can be broadly defined as having two components: awareness of a personally important distinguishing trait that connects a person to widely understood social and cultural groups and self-labeling in an effort to denote membership in the group themselves (Côté, 1996a; Gecas & Burke, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Having an identity (or, more specifically, a *social identity*) can serve as a way for individuals to let themselves and others know to what social group(s) they belong and what is important to their self concept (i.e., what defines who they are as a person). Identity formation (also referred to as identity construction) denotes to two interrelated processes, one which can be described as a *cognitive process*, and the other as a *cultural process* that unfolds over time. In the cognitive process, a person is socially cued to identify with a group based on their awareness of a social, behavioral, or physiological characteristic that they possess (Côté, 1996a; Tajfel, 1982). These traits may include, but are not limited to, race/ethnicity (in the case of ethnic identity), sexual feelings and behaviors (in the case of sexual identity), and biological sex (in the case of masculine identity). In the cultural process, a person interacts with symbols, meanings, and norms that are found in cultural discourse of the specific group. During this continuously unfolding process, the person associates with the social group by endorsing the shared values, ideologies, and norms of the group and identifies his or her self as a member of the group by incorporating the ideologies and meanings ascribed to the group into their self-concept (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Tajfel, 1982). Finally, identity conflict, as indicated in the previous section, denotes the experience a person may have in which they perceive one or more of their identities to have value-orientations, cultural beliefs, and/or levels of stigmatization that are inconsistent with those of another identity that is salient to their overall self-concept. Much of the theoretical work examining identity conflict has taken place in sociology (e.g., Burke, 1991; Stryker, 2000; Stryker & Macke, 1978; Thoits, 1983). As noted by researchers in the field, identity conflict is resolved as a function of personal factors (i.e., the importance

of the identity to the overall self-concept) and ecological factors (i.e., social-contextual demands).

The Dynamic-Ecological Perspective

A dynamic-ecological model is used to examine how identity formation and conflict may explain bisexual behavior among African-American men. The ecological perspective is exemplified by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995), as well as other theorists (Lerner, 1983; Magnusson, 1988; Trickett, Watts, & Birnam, 1994). The use of a framework of this type allows for the interaction between persons and the contexts in which they develop. Bronfenbrenner's *process-person-context-time* (PPCT) model serves as a quintessential example of the ecological perspective. The model has two propositions: (1) human development takes place through processes of complex, reciprocal interactions between a person and the persons, objects, and symbols in his/her immediate setting; these enduring interactions are called *proximal processes*; and (2) the form, magnitude, content, and direction of the proximal processes vary as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person and the contexts in which development occurs.

Several researchers have noted the importance of ecological factors in understanding ethnicity, sexuality, and masculinity. For example, Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon (2003) presented a model of adolescent gender and sexuality—based on Bronfenbrenner's PPCT theory—that incorporated factors at multiple levels of analysis, including the individual, social network, and sociocultural levels. Herdt and Boxer (1995a), in exploring bisexuality, suggested that identity should be conceptualized as a function of culture that “links features and components of individual persons' experiences with their conduct in social settings and networks” (p. 74). Prominent researchers in the fields of psychology, sociology, sexuality, and gender studies have expressed similar sentiments when examining the formation of ethnic identity (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996; Nagel, 1994; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), masculine identity (Connell, 1987; Hunter & Davis, 1992; Kimmel, 1996), and sexuality (Diamond, 2005; Rich, 1980; Stokes et al., 1998). Collectively, these researchers and others note the importance of ecological factors, such as families, peer groups, cultural norms, social and political movements, and the historical context in understanding the formation of ESM identities.

The notion that a person forms each of his or her different social identities in a collective fashion, and not on an individual basis, is a key component of the dynamic-ecological perspective. Very few scholars have integrated multiple identities into their models (Frable, 1997), though research has suggested that the processes through which ESM identities are formed are interconnected and overlap with regard to timing and sequence. For example, researchers have observed that, in

the process of forming their ethnic identities, young ethnic minority MSM may foreclose their sexual identity development by not self-labeling as gay or bisexual (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Kenamer, Honnold, Bradford, & Hendricks, 2000; Myrick, 1999; Stokes, Venable, & McKirman, 1996). Similarly, several scholars have noted the integral role gender plays in sexual identity formation (Brooks-Gunn & Graber, 1999; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Shively & DeCecco, 1977; Tolman et al., 2003; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Bem (1996, 2000) provides a compelling conceptualization of the role of gender in influencing sexual orientation in his “Exotic Becomes Erotic” theory. According to the theory, children's gender conforming or nonconforming behaviors shape sexual attraction, and ultimately sexual orientation, such that children become erotically attracted to those they feel different from in terms of gender role behavior. Using this framework, boys who do not conform to gender expectations (as determined by culture and society) will experience attraction toward other boys and thus develop a homosexual identity. The work of Bem and many other scholars suggests that there may be potentially strong interconnections among ESM identities.

The social constructivist philosophy, which is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, also serves to theoretically buttress the dynamic-ecological framework. The social constructivist perspective describes the interplay between people and contexts such that both persons are thought to actively create and change their social contexts and social contexts are thought change persons (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Kelly, Azelton, Burzette, & Mock, 1994; Trickett et al., 1994). Identity formation occurs as a dynamic process involving the interplay between individuals and their social contexts. In this sense, identity is not only shaped by context, it is also *constructed* by individuals through changing social values and norms related to the content and meaning of an identity.

The social constructivist perspective has been incorporated into several well-known theoretical models of ESM identity. For example, Nagel (1994) expressed the importance of using a model of ethnic identity “that emphasizes the socially ‘constructed’ aspects of ethnicity, i.e., the way in which ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities” (p. 152). Nagel argued that people construct and reconstruct their ethnic identity according to situational and social prompts. Similar notions have been put forth by researchers interested in understanding sexuality and masculinity. For example, Connell and Dowsett (1993), expanding on seminal work by Foucault (1978) and Gagnon and Simon (1973), highlight the continuously emerging sexual categories that are generated by society (including epidemiological conventions that blur the line between social and behavioral designations, such as the idiom “MSM”) as proof of the social

constructivist nature of sexual identity. They note, “we can see in the culture around us, beyond the signs of changing styles in sexuality, evidence of the production of whole new categories” (p. 71). Likewise, masculinity has been conceptualized as a socially constructed concept that is a function of historical, current, and newly emerging cultural and social values (Courtenay, 2000; Hunter & Davis, 1992).

In sum, the dynamic-ecological perspective has three central tenets, which are integral to understanding ESM identity formation and conflict among ethnic minority MSM:

1. Ecological factors affect ESM identity formation and conflict.
2. ESM identity formation and conflict occur through dynamic, interrelated, and overlapping processes in which identities shape each other.
3. ESM identity formation and conflict occur through dynamic processes in which individuals shape their social contexts, and thereby shape their identities.

A Dynamic-Ecological Model of Identity Formation and Conflict among Ethnic Minority MSM

A dynamic ecological model is employed to describe ESM formation and conflict among ethnic minority MSM. The model does not make reference to specific ethnic groups; it can be applied to MSM from a variety of ethnic groups. The model has been designed as a conceptual framework that can be used to examine the experiences of ethnic minority MSM, as there may be unique differences between ethnic minority MSM and MSM from ethnic and cultural groups that do not have “minority” status based on conventional U.S. racial/ethnic categories. Men in the former group may contend with multiple stigmatized identities (i.e., ethnic and sexual) and thereby experience greater stress due to dual-minority status and a heightened sense of conflict between identities (Icard, 1986, 1996; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1996).

The experiences ethnic minority MSM have in forming ESM identities, and the conflicts that may exist between identities, are best understood using a model that considers the interactions, and changes in interactions, that occur between individuals and their social contexts. Explaining if, why, and how different identities conflict for ethnic minority MSM requires performing three related tasks: (1) examining men’s exposures to three overlapping domains of ecological factors: social networks, community norms and values, and macro-contextual factors, (2) focusing on individual-level identity formation processes as they occur for multiple, related social identities, and (3) exploring the dynamic interactions between men and their social ecologies, and interactions between different domains of ecological factors.

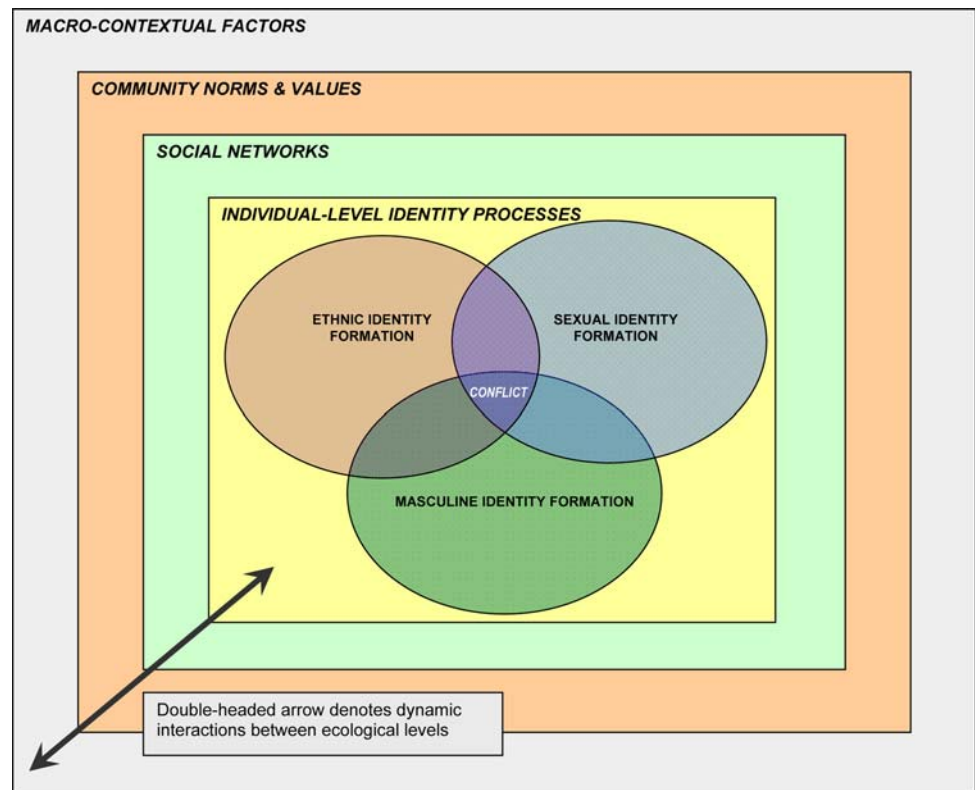
A conceptual model elucidating the process of identity formation and conflict among ethnic minority MSM is presented in Fig. 1. The model can be used to perform the three tasks necessary to understanding identity formation and possible conflict in this population. As shown in the model, the three domains of ecological factors noted previously shape the formation of ESM identities. These domains overlap and are hierarchical, suggesting that social networks are embedded within communities, and communities within the greater society (i.e., macro-contextual factors). The overlapping ovals of ESM identity formation indicate that the dynamic processes through which men form their ethnic identity are affected by sexual identity formation, the processes through which they form their sexual identity are affected by their masculine identity formation, and so on. The double headed arrow connecting the individual, social network, community, and macro-contextual levels suggests dynamic interactions that occur as ecological factors shape men’s identities (and other ecological factors at adjacent levels of analysis) and men shape their social contexts. Finally, the three dynamic processes of identity formation among ethnic minority MSM are juxtaposed in such a way that ESM identities may conflict, as highlighted in the space in which the three identity formation ovals overlap.

There are three key points that should be highlighted with regard to the model. First, the process of identity formation does not necessarily involve self-labeling. Rather, as noted previously, the identity formation process starts with a cognitive process involving awareness of a trait that links a person to a broader group. Thus, in the case of sexual identity (which could potentially be a key area of concern in applying the model to MSM who do not identify as gay or bisexual), feelings of romantic and/or sexual attraction toward men will begin a gay or bisexual identity formation process, though the process may not end with self-labeling and personally identifying as gay or bisexual (Troiden, 1989).

A second point to consider is that, though it is not explicitly noted, the proposed model does not completely disregard the biological essentialist viewpoint in explaining ESM identities. Indeed, biology and genetics play an important role in influencing, but not defining, sexuality and gender (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; McClintock & Herdt, 1996). The applicability of genetics in explaining race and ethnicity is problematic (Foster & Sharp, 2002), though that debate is on-going. The focus here is on social and ecological factors that shape the formation of ESM identities, and that may play a role in determining behavioral bisexuality among African-American men.

Third, it should be pointed out that not all ethnic minority MSM experience a conflict in forming ESM identities. For some ethnic minority MSM, ESM identities never conflict and are easily integrated into the self concept. Instead of conflict, these men may experience synergy and unity in the overlapping processes of forming ESM identities (Meyer & Ouellette,

Fig. 1 A dynamic-ecological model of identity formation and conflict among ethnic minority MSM



2008, in press). Though statistical estimates are unavailable, research suggests that this group may represent a minority, as studies indicate many ethnic minority MSM (notably those who are African-American) may, at some point in their development, experience a conflict in forming ESM identities (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Miller et al., 2005; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1994; Morales, 1990; Peterson, 1992; Savin-Williams, 1996; Stokes et al., 1998).

Using a Dynamic-Ecological Model to Explain Bisexual Behavior among African-American Men

Bisexual Behavior as a Function of Ecological Factors

In order to understand bisexual behavior among African-American men, we must first examine how these men are socialized in relation to their ESM identities, and the conflict that they may experience in the identity formation process. There are three broad domains of ecological factors that may influence the formation and possible conflict of ESM identities among bisexually-behaving African-American men. These domains of ecological influences include: social networks (i.e., families and peer groups), community norms and values (i.e., in the African-American and lesbian, gay & bisexual communities), and macro-contextual factors (i.e., socio-historical context).

Social Networks

ESM identities among African-American men form as function of multiple levels of ecological influences, but perhaps the most important of these is the social network. Notably, the families and peer groups to which African-American men belong have a considerable effect on their ESM identities through the process of socialization. Socialization refers to the process in which people are communicated messages regarding codes of conduct and expected behaviors of members of a social group. These messages may bolster the individual's sense of identity in potentially hostile social settings they may encounter throughout their development.

Racial socialization is the major mechanism through which the family shapes ethnic (Jackson, McCullough, & Gurin, 1997; Jackson, McCullough, Gurin, & Bowman, 1991), sexual (Morales, 1990; Trujillo, 1997), and masculine (Staples, 1978) identity formation among African-American men. Research has shown that African-American parents prepare their children to the personal and social realities of being an ethnic minority in the U.S. by fostering and reaffirming a positive sense of ethnic identity among their children and preparing children for prejudice (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Wilson, Cooke, & Arrington, 1997). Studies have demonstrated that racial socialization has a direct impact on ethnic identity formation among

African-American children and adolescents (Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, & Notaro, 2002; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992; Stevenson, 1995), generally showing that higher levels of racial socialization are positively related to the internalization of ethnic identity (the final stage of development in many epigenetic models of ethnic identity). Thus, the family may have a profound role in the ethnic identity formation of bisexually-behaving African-American men.

Family socialization messages also affect sexual identity development for African-American men. Men's tendencies toward self-labeling as gay, bisexual, or heterosexual may be steadfastly tied to their family members heteronormative expectations and values (Trujillo, 1997), and not simply their romantic and sexual feelings. Morales (1990) suggested that within families of ethnic minority MSM, the perceptions that African-Americans have regarding their family's expectations for them affects their formation of a sexual identity. Research supports Morales' assertion. For example, Stokes, Venable, and McKirnan (1997) observed that men who identified as bisexual were less likely to perceive acceptance for homosexual behavior among family members compared to gay-identified men. The study also showed significant differences between White and Black gay men in levels of self-homophobia (higher for Black men) and disclosure (lower for Black men). Researchers interested in examining bisexual behavior among African-American men have noted that these men perceive implicit expectations from their families to maintain a heterosexual appearance (Miller et al., 2005; Peterson, 1992; Stokes et al., 1998; Wright, 1993). Alternatively, if bisexually-behaving African-American men perceive support for a non-heterosexual identity from their family, they are more likely to actually label themselves as gay or bisexual compared to if they had not perceived support. Studies examining family support among African-American MSMW are scant; however, this proposition has been supported in research examining other groups of MSM (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001).

Socialization messages stemming from the family are strongly tied to the formation of masculine identities, and, moreover, the meaning of masculinity among African-American men. Research conducted by Hunter and Davis (1992, 1994) demonstrated the centrality of the family in African-American men's conceptualizations of what is important to their masculine identity. In analyzing qualitative data in which Black men noted the meaning(s) of "being a man," the researchers noted, "what men expected of themselves [as a Black man] was framed not only by family role expectations but by their perspective on identity and...connections to family and community" (Hunter & Davis, 1994, p. 29). Thus, the family may play a significant role in determining not only how bisexually-behaving African-American men think about their masculinity identity, but also whether they feel they fit into their family's and community's normative definition of manhood.

The influence of the peer group constitutes another social network-based ecological factor that influences ESM identity formation among African-American men. Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang (2001) found that social interactions with peers from one's ethnic group significantly predicted high levels of ethnic identity among ethnic minority adolescents, supporting the notion that socialization may play a role in the way peers influence identity formation. Peers of bisexually-behaving African-American men may promote or discourage norms, values, and behaviors that are consistent with African-American ethnic identity. Research suggests that as adolescents develop a strong sense of ethnic identity, they more frequently interact with same-ethnicity peers about issues related to ethnicity and culture (Phinney, 1989, 1993). Embracing norms regarding African-American identity and maintaining positive rapport with peers may both be important aspects of ethnic identity for bisexually-behaving African-American men. Similar to messages received from families regarding ethnicity, the peer socialization experiences these men have will differ depending on the normative beliefs of their peer groups. Nonetheless, research suggests that many African-American youth begin to endorse beliefs that are reflective of the larger community's beliefs at a very early age. These normative beliefs, as will be discussed later, are often focused on heterosexuality, religiosity, and community solidarity. In this sense, homosexuality may be considered at odds with what it means to be African-American (Doll & Beeker, 1996; Ford et al., 2007; Kennamer et al., 2000).

The formation of sexual and masculine identities among African-American men is also subject to peer group influences. Brooks-Gunn and Graber (1999) noted that "the experience of the construction of the self in connection to or in relationships with others...clearly has implications for how adolescents construct their sexual identities—whether they feel unassured or competent may be based in part on whether they have incorporated aspects of interactions based only on friendship or parental acceptance or rejection" (pp. 174–175). While some bisexually-behaving African-American men are involved in peer groups that support the formation of a gay or bisexual identity, many perceive their peers to be intolerant of homosexuality (Stokes et al., 1996). Bisexually-behaving African-American men who are a part of peer groups that do not accept homosexuality may experience difficulties in forming a sexual identity that is not heterosexual. Indeed, research conducted with ethnically diverse groups work suggests that the pressure to conform to peer group expectations may hinder efforts to form non-heterosexual identities (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

African-American men's constructions of masculinity are inexorably linked to the attitudes and norms of their peer groups (Harris, 1992; Payne, 2006). For many bisexually-behaving African-American men, sexuality may be manifestly tied to their masculinity and both will be influenced by

expectations of peers. Franklin's (1994) concept of peer group controlled masculinity may be useful in understanding how sexuality, masculinity, and peer group membership are related for African-American men. Peer-group-controlled masculinity reflects the propensity of some African-American men to turn to their same-ethnicity peer group for their masculine identity. Franklin noted that African-American male peer groups are characterized for having strict expectations for heterosexuality among group members. This idea has been documented in other adolescent developmental research—masculinity for many African-American men is bounded by norms that promote male dominance, strict gender roles, and perfunctory heterosexual behavior (Franklin, 1985; Fullilove & Fullilove, 1991; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Staples, 1982). The majority of bisexually-behaving African-American men, like all men, must not only reject femininity in demonstrating their masculinity, they must also reject the possibility of homosexuality (Kimmel, 1996). Scholars have noted that the rejection of homosexuality may be more salient to African-American men than other groups in their formation of a masculine identity (Lemelle & Battle, 2004; Staples, 1978; Stokes et al., 1998). In sum, the socialization experiences that bisexually-behaving African-American men have within their families and peer groups may affect identity formation and conflict in such a way that bisexual behavior, and self-labeling as heterosexual, represent ways to resolve the possible conflict they experience.

Community Norms and Values

The African-American community possesses norms and values that may inhibit sexual identity formation among bisexually-behaving African-American men. Conversely, the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community represents a context that promotes the formation of gay or bisexual identity (Herdt & Boxer, 1995b), but may also be perceived by African-American men as having values that are contrary to those of the Black community. Thus, the level of exposure that bisexually-behaving African-American men have to African-American and LGB communities, and to the normative belief systems of these communities, will shape the formation and conflict of ESM identities.

The African-American community has strong expectations that Black men follow heteronormative cultural expectations of opposite-sex partnering and procreation (Icard, 1996; Morales, 1990; Peterson, 1992; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). The cultural derivatives of chattel slavery and the subordinate minority status of African-Americans include strong intergenerational family ties that encapsulate complex networks of obligation and support (Stack, 1974). Scholars have noted that homosexuality among African-American men exacerbates the community's perception of a lack of available African-American heterosexual men to serve as husbands and fathers (Ernst, Francis, Nevels, & Lemeh, 1991; Gibbs, 1984; Hutchinson,

1994). As such, homosexuality has been conceptualized as a threat against the African-American community based on strong normative support for heterosexuality. The impact of this threat led to the conceptualization of homosexuality as a mental health disorder in contemporary research on African-Americans (Akbar, 1991; Cress-Welsing, as cited in Hemphill, 1991), though it has been excluded from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* since the early 1970s. The African-American community's heteronormative values may affect bisexually-behaving African-American men in such a way that they perceive being gay or bisexual as abnormal and in strong conflict with the expectations of their families and ethnic communities (Doll & Beeker, 1996; Wright, 1993).

The prominence of religion within the African-American community has served to promote homophobic attitudes and negative cultural norms toward heterosexuality in the community. Without question, the Black church plays an important role in the lives of African-Americans (Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999). Slavery, institutional racism, and prejudicial beliefs among Americans throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries made the church a source of great support and guidance for African-Americans. Thus, the values and beliefs of the Black church provide the cornerstones of principles for the community itself.

The Black church's intolerance of homosexuality and popular beliefs that homosexuality is sinful has been well-documented (Mays et al., 1992; Peterson et al., 1992; Woodyard, Peterson, & Stokes, 2000). Work conducted by Schulte and Battle (2004) suggests that higher levels of homophobia among Blacks compared to Whites are not due to ethnic differences. Rather, the authors suggest that "religion plays a more important part in the everyday lives of African-Americans than European Americans...[it] may have a greater impact on beliefs, philosophies, and views toward a variety of issues—including homosexuality" (p. 138).

Perceptions of intolerance of homosexual behavior may affect bisexually-behaving African-American men in such a way that participation in the Black church promotes sexual secrecy, decreases self esteem, and thwarts the development of a non-heterosexual identity (Icard, 1996; Peterson et al., 1996). Because religion and African-American identity may be inexorably tied for many African-Americans, this connection is important to understanding the dissonance bisexually-behaving African-American men may feel regarding their ESM identities. Behavioral bisexuality paired with disidentification from the gay "lifestyle" can represent a way for African-American men who experience same-gender sexual attraction to contend with the conflict between the values of the African-American community and their desires to engage in sexual relationships with men.

The identity conflict that bisexually-behaving African-American men may experience does not stem solely from the values of the African-American community. Racism and

prejudice permeate the LGB community, just as they do mainstream heterosexual American society. DeMarco (1983), in a study of Black gay men within the Philadelphia LGB community, noted that negative assumptions, images, and stereotypes were the driving forces behind racism in the gay community. Men in his and other studies reported experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination based on White men's ethnic stereotypes regarding expectations of minority sexual prowess, intellectual and economic inferiority, and physical attributes (Beeker, Kraft, Peterson, & Stokes, 1998; DeMarco, 1983). Such sentiments not only suggest extant racism within the LGB community, but also represent ways in which African-American men's masculinity may be weakened through participation in the White gay community. Research has shown that African-American gay and bisexual men report feeling invisible within the mainstream LGB community (Beeker et al., 1998; Icard, 1986; Stokes & Peterson, 1998). The subtle and overt racism that ethnic minority gay men experience in the mainstream LGB community may be more injurious than that encountered in conventional society—this is largely because men may lose the support against racism ordinarily available to them from their ethnic community had they not been involved in the gay community (Icard, 1996; Peterson, 1992; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004).

The importance the LGB community places on “coming out” may also be inconsistent with the values of the African-American community. Within the LGB community, disclosure of one's sexuality is thought to be an ubiquitously positive experience leading to self-acceptance and confidence (Smith, 1997). The negative connotations to the phrases used to describe persons who have not come out (e.g., “being in the closet,” “being closeted”) capture the LGB community's emphasis on public disclosure of sexual identity. This normative value may conflict with the values of the African-American community and affect the formation of ESM identities among bisexually-behaving African- bisexual men. Several studies have shown that African-American men who engage in bisexual behavior are less likely to publicly or privately disclose their same-sex behavior compared to their White counterparts (Millett et al., 2005).

A useful way of understanding how this may occur comes through examining the concept of *heterosexual privilege* (Clarke, 1983), which refers to the benefits minorities receive through heterosexual identification—the benefit of not having to contend with the stigma of being a member of a sexual minority group. For some bisexually-behaving African-American men, the public perception of one's sexual identity as heterosexual may be beneficial in negotiating multiple stigmas—the fewer stigmas one has to contend with socially, the greater the opportunity for psychological well-being. Some researchers have noted that, though heterosexuality remains the accepted standard, a bisexual identity is considered more acceptable than a gay identity in the African-American community (Doll,

Peterson, Magana, & Carrier, 1991; Peterson, 1995; Rust, 2000). Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (2001) noted that “bisexuals [have been] depicted as ‘fence sitters’ who...distanced themselves from [homosexual] identity to benefit from heterosexual privilege” (p. 183). Indeed, this “fence sitting” may play an integral role in the way bisexually-behaving African-American bisexual men handle conflicting ESM identities. These men may choose to self-identify as heterosexual or bisexual, and not as gay, as a stigma management technique. Conversely, African-American men who publicly identify themselves as gay may downplay their African-American identity in an attempt to reduce stigma within the LGB community.

Macro-Contextual Factors

The processes through which bisexually-behaving African-American men construct and form their ESM identities are affected by macro-contextual factors. Specifically, features of the sociohistorical context play an important role in shaping identity formation and conflict among these men. While there is no empirical research demonstrating the relationship between sociohistorical context and identity formation, the theoretical work on this topic deserves mention. Côté (1996b) suggested that the sociohistorical context influences the overall socialization experiences of developing individuals and elicits responses in parents that encourage the development of certain identity traits in their children. Using this framework, it becomes clear that the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the resurgence of Black nationalism through the emergence of hip-hop culture in the 1980s and 1990s, and increasing multicultural and same-sex unions of the current decade each impact ESM identity among bisexually-behaving African-American men.

The meanings of being African-American, of being gay, bisexual, or heterosexual, and of being a man have changed over time. Nagel (1994) argued that ethnicity and the meanings of ethnic identity vary not only as a function of large-scale social movements, but also by public policy, economic factors, and immigration/migration. In this sense, ethnic identity is strongly influenced by historical events. Linked to masculinity, notions of the Black man as “an endangered species” (Gibbs, 1984; Hutchinson, 1994) are undoubtedly linked to the way African-American men view their ethnicity, and the meaning of their ethnicity in terms of a commitment to the African-American community as a provider and contributor to the community's overall social and economic well-being. Bisexually-behaving African-American men experience these shifts in meaning. These shifts may be linked to a greater emphasis on the primacy of their ethnic identity and a lessened likelihood of forming a non-heterosexual identity (Stokes et al., 1998).

Bisexually-behaving African-American men's sexual identities are also shaped by macro-contextual factors. Icard (1996) theorized that the experiences of different generations of

African-American MSM differentially affected sexual identity formation. Older MSM (over 65 years old) were raised during a period of time in which homosexuality was widely viewed as a deviant and pathological behavior. Thus, these men were likely to reject sexual identity labels such as gay or bisexual. MSM between 20 and 59 years old have witnessed a period of increased opportunities for African-Americans as a result of the civil and women's rights movements. Men in this generational group have seen increases in the visibility and acknowledgement of LBG persons and the rights of LGB individuals. Thus, men in this generation may perceive more opportunities to integrate their ESM identities than older African-American MSM. Finally, adolescent males (12–19 years old) with homosexual experiences have been socialized in an era in which societal attitudes on homosexuality have become more tolerant. However, young African-American MSM are also developing in a world where the risk of HIV/AIDS and peer violence (stemming from racism and homophobia) are more salient features of the sociohistorical context than in prior time periods.

The formation of a masculine identity is also affected by macro-contextual factors. In reviewing research examining the development of masculinity among Black men through various sociohistorical contexts, Bush (1999) emphasized the importance of understanding the evolution in the meaning and enactment of masculinity among African-American men through three overlapping, related sociohistorical contexts: the experience of slavery, the increasing matriarchal structure of African-American families and communities, and the economic oppression of African-American men. Bush noted that understanding the socio-historical contexts in which African-American men construct their masculine identities was important because “it is out of this framework that Black males construct their behavior and relationships with their wives, children, communities, and one another” (p. 54). While this statement appears to be relevant primarily to heterosexual men, it demonstrates the strong links between masculinity and heterosexuality across sociohistorical contexts, and has implications for how we understand masculinity among bisexually-behaving African-American men. With changing times and trends these men's masculinity will continue to be tied to their sexuality, and more specifically, their heterosexuality (Marable, 2000; Staples, 1978). As such, engagement in sexual behaviors with women may represent one way for bisexually-behaving African-American men who are primarily sexually attracted to men to maintain ESM identities that are aligned with their sociohistorical context.

Bisexual Behavior as a Function of Interrelated Processes of Multiple Identity Formation

Research has suggested that the formation ESM identities take place through interrelated, overlapping processes. The sequence and timing of identity formation processes suggest a greater

affect of certain identities on others. For example, ethnic and masculine identity formation may exert a greater influence in shaping sexual identity than vice versa. The formation of African-American identity appears to begin in early childhood (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992) for African-American men, as does masculine identity formation (Bowser, 1991; Franklin, 1985; Staples, 1978). Sexual identity formation has been shown to commence in adolescence (Brooks-Gunn & Mathews, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Herdt & McClintock, 2000) and may continue through middle adulthood for some African-American MSM (Icard, 1996). While many bisexually-behaving African-American men may experience feelings of sexual attraction toward other men in childhood, the available research suggests that many of these men are likely to have experienced extensive socialization and support from family and peers regarding the meanings of “being African-American” and “being a man” prior to self-labeling their feelings or behaviors about their same-sex attraction. For example, Plummer (2000) noted that socialization to be homophobic occurs among boys prior to sexual identity formation. He stated that “homophobic terms enter boys' vocabulary during primary school, well before puberty and their own sexual maturity” (p. 7). While Plummer was not specifically referencing African-American men in his work, research makes it clear that ethnicity shapes African-American men's meaning of masculinity. Indeed, research supports the hypothesis that ethnic and masculine identity formation occurs in tandem (Abreu, Goodyear, Campos, & Newcomb, 2000), and that this can create a form of “Black masculinity” among African-American men (Bush, 1999; Hunter & Davis, 1992, 1994).

The timing and sequence of ESM identity formation plays a role in bisexual behavior and identification among African-American men. Early in their psychological development, African-American men are, as a part of their formation of ethnic and masculine identities, socialized to be heterosexual and to actively pursue sexual relationships with only women (Franklin, 1985; Staples, 1978). The notion of being gay or bisexual may not fit into preformed ideas of around the meanings of being African-American and being a man. Furthermore, because ethnic and masculine identities are likely to be personally important to defining African-American men (Hunter & Davis, 1994), the formation of a gay or bisexual identity may not represent a possibility. A quote from a participant in Beeker et al.'s (1998) qualitative study of young African-American MSM exemplifies this point: “It's just being a Black man; a Black man cannot be strong if he's gay. If you're gay, you need to hide it” (p. 64). Likewise, Miller et al. (2005), in their study of primarily heterosexually- and bisexually-identified African-American MSM, observed that “the social construction of Black masculinity, developed in response to racism, may affect the willingness to disclose a non-heterosexual identity, or indeed, social conditioning may make a gay identity impossible to accept at

the individual level” (p. 31). For some African-American men, bisexual behavior allows for sexual desires toward men to be expressed, while maintaining sexual and romantic interactions with women, which can allow men to “hide” their same-sex attraction and portray a heterosexual identity to the outside world. In a similar fashion, African-American men with a primary sexual attraction toward men may consider a bisexual identity more acceptable, and in less conflict with their African-American and masculine identities, than a gay identity (Doll et al., 1991; Peterson, 1995; Rust, 2000). Identifying as bisexual may not threaten African-Americans men’s masculine ideologies and reduce their anxiety around having homosexual desires (Stokes et al., 1998). In both cases, the sequence and timing of ESM identity formation processes should be considered in explaining bisexual behavior and identification among African-American men.

The ways in which bisexually-behaving African-American men form ESM identities may be unique from the ways other groups of MSM develop identities. For example, work by Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) suggested that ethnic minority MSM differ from other MSM in the development of their sexual identities in two ways: the rate of same-sex sexual experience prior to the formation of a gay or bisexual identity and the extent to which they disclose their sexual identity. They found that African-American adolescents labeled their same-sex attraction later in adolescence than did White youth. African-American gay and bisexual youth reported that sexual activity with other men preceded self-definition as gay or bisexual more frequently than any other ethnic group in the sample. Other studies have specifically shown that MSM (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) and specifically MSMW (Floyd & Stein, 2002) are more likely to engage in same-sex sexual behavior before identifying as gay or bisexual. An earlier study by Dubé (cited in Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999) found that men who engaged in sex before identifying as gay or bisexual reported difficulties adjusting to their sexual identity and higher rates of heterosexual sexual behavior. Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) posited that African-American MSM may experience a prolonged period of questioning or denial of their sexuality relative to the experiences of White, Latino, and Asian MSM. During this phase, which may continue indefinitely, African-American men may be more likely to demonstrate bisexual behavior.

Linked to the timing of ESM identity formation is the lack of disclosure about sexuality among bisexually-behaving African-American men. Research has shown that Black MSM are less likely to disclose their sexual behaviors compared to MSM of other racial/ethnic groups (Kennamer et al., 2000; Myrick, 1999; Peterson et al., 1995; Stokes et al., 1996, 1997). In one study specifically examining young ethnic minority MSM, fewer than half of the African-American gay and bisexual youths reported disclosure to family members (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999). This is notable because many traditional

developmental models of sexual identity formation describe the process as culminating with the individual’s public disclosure of his sexual orientation in multiple social contexts, most importantly the family (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Minton & McDonald, 1984). Qualitative studies have shown that many African-American MSM report feeling loyalty primarily to the African-American community, and not to the LBG community, and that these feelings persist throughout the course of their sexual identity development (Hawkeswood, 1996; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1994; Stokes & Peterson, 1998). This loyalty may supersede the desire bisexually-behaving African-American men may have to “go public” with their sexual desires and behaviors or may make behavioral bisexuality with the public perception of heterosexuality a more feasible option.

Bisexual Behavior as a Function of Dynamic Interactions

Research has demonstrated that identity formation occurs through dynamic processes. As bisexually-behaving African-American men form ESM identities, they not only change and grow personally, but also traverse different contexts that exert differential influences on their identity and behavior. As such, the trajectories through which they form ESM identities, and the decisions they make regarding sexual behavior, differ as a function of the social contexts they enter (Swanson, Spencer, Dell’Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). African-American MSM come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The social contexts in which these men form their identities may range from ethnically homogenous to heterogeneous (Hawkeswood, 1996; Jackson et al., 1997; Wilson, Yoshikawa, & Peterson, 2002), and may differ with regard to context-based demands placed their ESM identities.

Some African-American men may have spent the majority of their childhood and adolescent development in ethnically homogenous settings (e.g., were raised in predominantly African-American or White neighborhoods, had a predominantly African-American or White peer group, etc.), others were raised in ethnically diverse settings, and finally, some of these men experienced a variety of social contexts across their childhood and adolescent development. These social contexts exert a differential impact on the formation and conflict of ESM identities. Likewise, these contexts influence bisexual behavior, as they limit (and expand) men’s options for what may be considered acceptable sexual behavior. African-American men who were reared outside of the Black community may not face the same homophobic belief system that men growing up within the community face. Dalton (1989) noted that the Black community tends to be more open in its denunciation of homosexuality than other groups. Verbal attacks (especially those found in some rap lyrics, comedy routines, and other media) against LGB persons are commonplace in the Black community. Thus, African-American MSM with no or

limited exposure to such a social context will differ from those with repeated or continual exposure with regard to how their identities may conflict. Specifically, men in the former group may not experience conflicting identities and thus self-label based on sexual attraction and behavior (i.e., identify as gay or bisexual). However, based on the extant research examined in this article, it could be speculated that men in the latter group are more likely to experience conflicting identities and may resolve that conflict through engaging in bisexual behavior while self-labeling as heterosexual.

ESM identities among bisexually-behaving African-American men are not only affected by ecological factors, they are also influenced by dynamic interactions between themselves and their social contexts. The concept of developmental plasticity may be useful in understanding how this may come about. As D’Augelli (1994) noted, “[developmental] plasticity suggests that human functioning is highly responsive to environmental circumstances...[it] may change over chronological time: at different ages, certain components of human behavioral functioning are resistant to or responsive to differing circumstances” (p. 320). D’Augelli’s work suggests that one’s ethnic, sexual, or masculine identity may be fluid at certain times in the life span, and more stable at others. Sociological and psychological theories propose that individuals may choose to invest in certain identities as a function of setting demands (Côté, 1996b). Thus, as bisexually-behaving African-American men enter and leave different social contexts, they are likely to experience fluctuations in their ESM identities. In this way, these men may attempt to achieve a “goodness-of-fit” between their identity and the social contexts in which they enter and exit. Achieving this “fit” may involve actively suppressing a gay or bisexual identity and publicly promoting a heterosexual identity, all the while engaging in bisexual behavior as a way keep up appearances while fulfilling sexual desires.

The “goodness of fit” notion is not new to developmental research. Lerner (1983) noted that, in achieving fit with their developmental context, people are likely to experience three types of context demands: attitudes, values or stereotypes held by others in the context regarding the individual’s attributes; the attributes of others in the context; and the physical characteristics of a setting. Bisexually-behaving African-American men encounter varying attitudes (e.g., racist, homophobic, or sexist attitudes; pro-Black, pro-gay/bisexual attitudes), persons (e.g., non-Black, non-gay/bisexual men and women; Black gay/bisexual men and women), and images (e.g., a Black power symbol in a friend’s home; a pride flag hanging in front of a gay bar; symbols of masculinity throughout society)—all of which may place demands on their ESM identities. Moreover, these demands, as features of social contexts, change over time. This suggests that developmental change impacts ESM identities among bisexually-behaving African-American men such that levels of these identities will fluctuate

over time and progress in a non-linear fashion. As these men mature, the ways in which they identify themselves, the settings in which they define themselves, and the kinds of interactions between identities and settings simultaneously change. Bisexually-behaving African-American men, while normatively defining themselves in terms of their ethnic and masculine identities, may encounter settings whose demands prevent or promote self-labeling regarding their sexual identities. As Ford and Lerner (1992) suggested, “the environment in which a person is behaving supports and facilitates some possibilities and constrains others” (p. 162). Though this may not exemplify the experiences of all bisexually-behaving African-American men—some may have resolved their identities in such a way that they normatively define themselves by their ESM identities *across* settings and time periods—it has implications for how we conceptualize identity formation and conflict, as well as behavioral bisexuality, among many of African-American men.

Conclusion

This article has examined ESM identity formation and conflict among bisexually-behaving African-American men, and presented explanations for bisexual behavior in this population. A dynamic-ecological model was put forth as the optimal way through which researchers can understand the processes involved in forming ESM identities for African-American men. The manner in which bisexually-behaving African-American men may experience the conflicting value-orientations of their ESM identities can be characterized as a dynamic process that is shaped by ecological factors. Likewise, the conflict that ensues as a result of ecological factors may be useful in explaining behavioral bisexuality among African-American men who have a primary sexual attraction toward men.

Researchers can glean several implications for interventions for African-American men who engage in bisexual behavior based on the observations made here. First, interventions designed for behaviorally-bisexual African-American men, whether they focus on HIV risk reduction, mental health, or community building and mobilization, must acknowledge the diversity in ESM identities among these men. The dynamic nature of identity construction, combined with the different settings in which African-American men form ESM identities, implies that men will have varied and diverse configurations with regard to these identities. Likewise, bisexually-behaving African-American men may define themselves differently according to their social context. As such, interventions must acknowledge that these men constitute a diverse population, and that many men, at some point in their psychological and sexual development, may experience conflicting identities. Community-level and structural-level interventions should

also attempt to target the contexts in which African-American men who engage in bisexual behavior form ESM identities. These contexts, which include families, peer groups, African-American and LGB communities, and the sociocultural milieu, not only exert strong influences on the formation of ESM identities among bisexually-behaving African-American men, but may also influence their health-seeking and risk-taking behaviors.

Lastly, the content of interventions must also be refined to account for the unique cultural experiences of bisexually-behaving African-American men. Interventions that are built around mainstream LGB community values may not be applicable to or contribute to the well-being of behaviorally bisexual men who identify as heterosexual. While notions of “coming out,” becoming involved in the gay community, and defining one’s self through the LGB community may be factors involved in the improved psychosocial adjustment of some gay and bisexual men, bisexually-behaving African-American men may not embrace these actions as aligned with their personal values and cultural norms. Interventions may be more effective by promoting adaptive ways in which bisexually-behaving African-American men may resolve the conflict experienced among ESM identities. Fostering network-building among bisexually-behaving African-American men living and functioning in social contexts that disparage same-sex behavior may allow men to encounter others like them. Creating and promoting groups, activities and social venues that support African-American men who engage in bisexual behavior may allow men greater opportunities to seek these settings. And finally, interventions aimed at encouraging these men to become agents of change may give them a greater capacity to change the social contexts in which their identities form and possibly conflict.

Acknowledgements The author gratefully acknowledges Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Ph.D., John L. Peterson, Ph.D., Kathleen Sikkema, Ph.D., and Jeannette Ickovics, Ph.D. for their comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. The author also wishes to express his sincere thanks to the editors of the special issue, Theo Sandfort, Ph.D. and Brian Dodge, Ph.D., and the journal editor, Ken Zucker, Ph.D., for their insightful and constructive comments on this article.

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