ORIGINAL PAPER

Applying the Structure Versus Agency Discourse to the Challenges of Black Men Who Have Sex with Men

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Abstract

Studies on the experiences of Black men who have sex with men (BMSM) often focus on HIV-related topics rather than other dimensions of their lives such as how they endeavor to be agentic as they navigate systemic forces. The Structure versus Agency discourse is used here as a theoretical backdrop to examine the challenges and reflections of BMSM. Based on a mixed-methodological analyses and 168 BMSM who reside in the South of the United States, the study considers whether and how they identify and respond to problems and tensions. Results show that BMSM emphasize personal challenges linked to economics, bullying, stereotypes, and intra-group tensions, often under the specter of racism, that result in greater salience of their racial and/or sexual identities. Moreover, despite references to structural impediments, BMSM are more apt to offer agency-based strategies for redress. Findings inform existing literature to better understand both the nuanced lives and varied needs of this population.

Keywords Black men who have sex with men (BMSM) · Daily round · Structure versus agency

Introduction

Studies on the experiences of Black men who have sex with men (BMSM)[1] tend to focus on HIV-related topics at the exclusion of other dimensions of their lives (Arnold et al. 2014; Barnes 2012; Bennett 2013; Hawkins 2011;

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[1] The concept, "BMSM" is used as a broad, inclusive descriptive that focuses on behavior rather than sexual identity or orientation. Persons could self-identify during the program if they desired. The first "M" in "BMSM" reflects the sex assigned to individuals at birth *as each respondent self-disclosed*. How individuals detailed their identities is summarized in the "Data and Demographics" section and in Table 1. Central to the study is how persons make sense of their multiple identities. Also, pronouns are used when provided by individuals.

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Table 1 BMSM demographic information by education level

	High school	Community college or trade school	College and beyond	Total
Race[a]				
Black/African American	85 (97.7%)	15 (100%)	65 (98.5%)	165 (98.2%)
Latinx/Hispanic	7 (8%)	0 (0%)	4 (6%)	11 (6.5%)
Other (White, Native American, Asian)	14 (18.7%)	0 (0%)	5 (9.8%)	19 (13.7%)
Gender				
Male	78 (94%)	15 (100%)	66 (98.5)	159 (96.4%)
Transgender	4 (4.8)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (2.4%)
Other (female, nonbinary)	1 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.5%)	2 (1.2%)
Total (N)	83	15	67	165
Sexual orientation				
Heterosexual	26 (38.8%)	0 (0%)	14 (26.9%)	40 (29.9%)
Gay/Lesbian	25 (37.3%)	12 (80%)	30 (57.7%)	67 (50%)
Unsure	5 (7.5%)	1 (6.7%)	1 (1.9%)	7 (5.2%)
Total (N)	67	15	52	134
Age				
18–21	54 (62.8%)	3 (20%)	29 (43.3%)	86 (51.2%)
22 and older	32 (37.2%)	12 (80%)	38 (56.7%)	82 (48.8%)
Total (N)	86	15	67	168
Employment				
Employed full-time	22 (25.6%)	11 (73.3%)	24 (35.8%)	57 (33.9%)
Employed part-time	18 (20.9%)	2 (13.3%)	12 (17.9%)	32 (19%)
Unemployed	46 (53.5%)	2 (13.3%)	31 (46.3%)	79 (47%)
Total (N)	86	15	67	168
Relationship status				
Never married (single)	58 (67.4%)	9 (60%)	47 (70.1%)	114 (67.9%)
Other	28 (32.6%)	6 (40%)	20 (29.9%)	54 (32.1%)
Total (N)	86	15	67	168
Residence				
Home/Apartment	32 (37.2%)	6 (40%)	24 (36.9%)	62 (37.3%)
Other	54 (62.8%)	9 (60%)	41 (63.1%)	104 (62.7%)
Total	86	15	65	166

[a]Column percentages for each variable across education level are provided (totaling 100% except for the Race variable). For example, for Education Level and Gender, 83 persons note that high school completion is their highest educational level. And 78 persons who completed high school as their highest educational level also self-identify as male (94%), 4 persons who completed high school self-identify as transgender (4.8%), and 1 person who completed high school self-identifies as Other (1.2%). The three percentages total 100%. However, for Race, respondents who identified as biracial or multiracial could select multiple racial and/or ethnic options; so 20.2% of respondents self-identify as multiracial or multiethnic. Thus, column totals for the Race variable do not sum to 100%. The following variables had missing responses at the time of survey completion [Sexual orientation (n=34), Gender (n=3), and Residence (n=2)]. N=168

Hightow-Weidman et al. 2017; Millett et al. 2012). In response, the current analysis examines narratives about the challenges, past and present, of 168 BMSM who reside in a medium-sized city in the South. Based on their intersecting, often marginalized social identities linked to race, class, gender, and sexuality, this project assesses how they understand dynamics that both influence their daily lives in the South and potentially correlate to identity salience (Johnson 2011; Slatton and Spates 2016). The following queries are considered: What do BMSM need to make their lives better? What types of conflict/problems do they face? and What advice would they provide their peers? Moreover, I am interested in whether their narratives reflect similar sentiments, inform us about identity salience, and can be framed based on the Structure versus Agency discourse. In addition to possibly illuming themes often ascribed to non-BMSM, findings may be informative about ways to allay common negative experiences to enhance the quality of life of BMSM (Battle and Bennett 2005; Hunter et al. 2010). Informed by the Structure versus Agency framework and mixed-methodological analyses, this project has scholarly and practical implications for better understanding the nuanced lives of BMSM. Readers should note that the concept, "BMSM," is a broad classification common in literature and is not intended to misgender individuals here (discussed in Footnote 1 and the "Data and Demographics" section).

The Structure Versus Agency Discourse

Macro-level Issues and Individual Choices

This analysis is informed by the theoretical framework referred to as the Structure versus Agency discourse—a common rubric in the social sciences often used to identify and assess systemic forces and how they affect the lives of historically marginalized groups. It is applied here to a study of the experiences of BMSM. Structural forces (also referred to as "social forces") can be defined as macro-level organizations, institutions, and ideologies that influence individuals' daily lives. Examples include the economy, legal system, government, poverty, the media, religion, the educational system, and the ideologies of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Structural forces are historic, pervasive, and influence life chances and quality of life (Barnes 2013; Billingsley 1992; Blumer 1958; Bonilla-Silva 2017; Darity and Myers 1999; Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014; Pérez 2016; West 1993). Moreover, informed by research on intersectionality, the effects of intersecting dynamics linked to factors such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are multiplicative rather than additive (Collins 1990, 2005; Crenshaw 1991; Jones and Abes 2013). Awareness of this implication is crucial because "by understanding the construction of knowledge at the intersections of one's multiple identities and the systems of which one is a part…provides insight for one's holistic development while challenging notions of power and privilege (Tillapaugh 2013: p. 130).

Agency is defined as free-will, which is the ability to make choices. Although individuals are affected by structural forces, barring slavery, everyone has free-will. Yet one's ability to be agentic can be severely constrained by structural forces. For example, within the context of this analysis, structural forces such as homophobic beliefs and behavior that are part of the broader United States (U.S.) heteronormative culture (Carbado 1999), have, until recently, constrained the agency of sexual minorities by preventing them from legally marrying their partners (Corvino and Gallagher 2012; Pierceson 2013). Moreover, this same ideology continues to foster stereotypes about and stigma against BMSM (Battle and Bennett 2005; Carbado 1999; Choi et al. 2011). Also, choices made by some BMSM put them at increased risk for HIV (Arnold et al. 2014; Peterson and Jones 2009). Yet the impact of certain structural forces may not be specific to BMSM or affect them differently from their counterparts. According to this theoretical framing, social issues can be broadly examined and understood based on the interplay between macro-level dynamics (i.e., structural forces) and the individual choices (i.e., agency) persons make. Thus, examining the experiences of BMSM may provide solutions to help mediate the negative and often unique effects of certain structural dynamics on their lives (Barnes and Collins 2019; Battle and Bennett 2005; Hunter 2010, McQueen and Barnes 2017).

A Summary of the BMSM Experience

Research suggests that structural forces such as homophobia, racism, and healthcare inequities result in negative outcomes for many BMSM (Battle and Bennett 2005; Choi et al. 2011; Jones et al. 2010). Structural inequality linked to sexual identity has also been correlated to hate crimes, stereotypes, bullying, and stigma that are often exacerbated by racism (Arnold et al. 2014; Barnes 2012; Bennett 2013; Carbado 1999; Hunter et al. 2010; Meyer 2015; Pascoe 2007). However, recent structural changes linked to the government and legal system mean social policies and laws provide additional protections for sexual minorities (Bernstein and Naples 2015; Corvino and Gallagher 2012; Pierceson 2013) and resources to combat poverty and homelessness (Badgett 2001; Jones et al. 2010). Moreover, certain religious spaces are becoming more inclusive and supportive (Balaji et al. 2012; Barnes 2012; Means and Jaeger 2015). When agency is considered, BMSM and the LGBTQIA community in general are increasingly mobilizing around issues germane to them (Balaji et al. 2012); BMSM are also cultivating self-images and experiences that are liberating and affirming (Barnes and Collins 2019; Carbado 1999; Johnson 2011; McQueen and Barnes 2017).

Yet as compared to their peers, BMSM continue to disproportionately experience physical and emotional problems, internalize negative images, and attempt suicide. Moreover, they are more apt to abuse drugs, engage in risky behavior, and, in relation to HIV, avoid testing, seeking treatment, and/or disclosing their status (Arnold et al. 2014; Barnes and Hollingsworth 2020; Peterson and Jones 2009). The above summary is not meant to emphasize deficiencies, but rather the reality of some of

the tensions many BMSM encounter as they endeavor to navigate structural forces in agentic ways. The current analysis reflects a mixed-methodological examination of some of the daily experiences and reflections of a cadre of BMSM. Findings here may provide a template to improve our understanding of how BMSM themselves, allies, national and local organizations, as well as social policies can better respond to their needs to improve their daily lives as individuals and as a collective.

The Voices of BMSM

Data and Demographics

A group of BMSM shared their experiences after a series of two-day intensive prevention programs offered in a medium-sized metropolitan city in the South. The prevention was designed to cultivate healthier decision-making to combat HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C.[2] Recruitment occurred using snowball sampling via social media, word of mouth, fliers, and community allies. Participants met eligibility screening. The program also endeavored to foster healthier sexual, racial, and spiritual identities. The current project is based on two cross-sectional data sources, a survey completed 30 days after the prevention's end by one hundred and sixty-eight BMSM between 2016 and 2019 (the survey response rate was 47.3%), as well as twenty-five tape-recorded, in-depth, follow-up interviews with BMSM from this same group between 2018 and 2019.[3] As well as demographics, BMSM completed questions about masculinity, their daily lives, relationships, religion, sexuality, and self-care. The survey included closed- and open-ended questions completed via hardcopy or on-line; only open-ended questions were posed during the 45 minute to 1 hour in length interviews.

Based on the prevention requirements, participants represented the pre-determined eligibility criteria of race (Black or African American), age (18–24 years old), self-identified sexual identity (MSM), and self-identified negative HIV status. As provided in Table 1, most respondents are Black/African American (98.2%). However, 20.2% also self-identify as multiracial or multiethnic. As noted earlier, "BMSM" is a common descriptive used in literature; it focuses on an individual's sexual behavior (i.e., MSM) rather than sexual identity or orientation. The goal is not to misgender individuals. In the acronym, BMSM, the first M refers to the sex assigned at birth for individuals. Persons in this study could self-identify during the program if they desired. Most still self-identify as male and about 50.0% self-identify as gay. Almost 30.0% of respondents have had sex with other men, but self-identify as straight. A cadre of respondents (20.2%) do not reveal their sexual orientations during the survey and/or interview processes. Educational outcomes are as

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[2] BMSM receive $50 gift cards at program end and upon completion of surveys 30 days later.

[3] The grant goal is to interview all 168 past participants. This analysis includes follow-up interviews collected thus far from Jan.–June 2019 (75% face-to-face and 25% via telephone). BMSM participated based on their availability and received a $25 gift card.

Table 2 Frequency of most commonly mentioned challenges and strategies among BMSM

	A. Structural forces (macro-level)	Percent (n)	B. Agency (Individual)	Percent (n)	Total (N)
1. Challenges	a. Bullying	16% (3)	a. Bullying	84% (16)	100% (19)
	b. Homophobia	75% (3)	b. Homophobia	25% (1)	100% (4)
	c. Racism	100% (8)	c. Racism	0% (0)	100% (8)
	d. Economics	0% (0)	d. Economics	100% (62)	100% (62)
	e. Housing	50% (4)	e. Housing	50% (4)	100% (8)
	f. Education	25% (8)	f. Education	75% (24)	100% (32)
2. Strategies	a. Government	100% (1)	a. Government	0% (0)	100% (1)
	b. Black community	100% (7)	b. Black community	0% (0)	100% (7)
	c. Friends/Partner	0% (0)	c. Friends/Partner	100% (22)	100% (22)
	d. Family	0% (0)	d. Family	100% (25)	100% (25)
	e. Self-help	5% (1)	e. Self-help	95% (20)	100% (21)

N = 168. Results represent row percents of the number of times the concept was mentioned rather than the number of people who mentioned the concept. Individuals could discuss all or none of the above concepts. Structural forces include group and society-level influences. Racism = racism, racial prejudice, discrimination, and biases. Economics = bills, finances, money, and credit. Family = parents, siblings, and other biological relatives such as aunts

follows: high school (51.2% or 86 BMSM); bachelor's degree and beyond (39.9% or 65); and, community college (8.9% or 15).[4] When employment is considered, about 33.9% of respondents work full-time and most are unmarried[5] (67.9%). Their average age is 22 years old.

This analysis is based on the following three questions asked on both the survey and during interviews: Think about your life today, what one thing do you need to make your life better? What thing(s) cause(s) you the most conflict/problems in your life? and, What one piece of good advice would you give someone like yourself? The questions are purposefully broad to elicit varied responses without leading participants; the Structure versus Agency discourse was not mentioned. Surveys and interviews were transcribed by a trained transcriber and reviewed by this author, the lead investigator, and the program evaluator. The goal is not generalizability to the BMSM populace, but to document the experiences, sentiments, and strategies of some BMSM in their own voices. Certain findings may be broadly applicable to other BMSM and inform academic and applied research.

Analytical Approach

Results are based on quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, Nvivo 12 Pro was used to identify word frequency used by BMSM. It was also insightful for identifying most commonly noted examples of challenges, structural forces (example, economics, healthcare, or racism), and/or examples of agency (example, personal decision-making) noted by BMSM (refer to Table 2). It was also during this initial

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[4] This category includes trade and technical schools.
[5] Whether married respondents are heterosexually married or not is unknown.

process that broad patterns emerged in terms of how BMSM grouped the challenges they faced and possible remedies. Although the third question posed (i.e., What one piece of good advice would you give someone like yourself?) might lend itself to personal strategies, a pattern of certain types of strategies also began to emerge. In addition to tabulating experiences and responses, I was interested in whether individuals associated such instances with personal (example, an individual experience) and/or larger societal dynamics (example, homophobia as a structural force). This first stage was also valuable in efficiently uncovering whether BMSM mentioned certain social identities such as their sexual orientation or race. These emergent concepts also became codes used during the next analysis phase.

Next, content analysis was used to identify emergent themes and patterns in responses (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Krippendorff 1980; Neuendorf 2002). During this phase, the data were systematically examined by hand using two primary processes: open-coding, in which broad concepts were categorized and labeled, and axial coding, in which possible links between these concepts and possible themes were determined and examined. Line-by-line coding was used to identify common verbiage among BMSM; this coding was also informed by the words most frequently uncovered during the Nvivo analysis. This process allowed me to identify frequently used phrases (for example, uncover specific ways BMSM describe the source(s) of challenges they experience) and whether they describe certain social identities. This step differs from the earlier stage in its focus on longer phrases, rather than individual concepts/words. This process was continued as a next stage of capturing and confirming the most common patterns used by BMSM to discuss these topics. Representative quotes were also identified during this phase. Validity and reliability aren't necessarily criteria for qualitative analyses; yet the multiple data analyses used here provide confidence in the regularly occurring concepts and themes. Results, including themes and representative quotes, are presented below. Pseudonyms are used; self-defined sexual identities are included when provided by respondents.

Findings

Frequency Summary: Structure Versus Agency

Table 2 includes a summary of the most commonly referenced concepts/words by BMSM and whether they were discussed within the context of structural forces or individual agency. For example, did BMSM specifically mention bullying? If so, did they associate this concept more broadly (i.e., bullying as a social problem) or as a personal/individual experience? Findings show that BMSM specifically mention bullying 19 times; 16 of them (84%) as personal experiences and the remainder as a broader social issue. These results allow for a comparison of how BMSM understand their experiences based on the two dimensions of this theoretical framework. Frequencies of BMSM challenges (Panels 1A and 1B) suggest that when specifically mentioned, "racism" is always positioned as a structural force. Also, a relatively greater percentage of concepts are discussed as personal experiences (for example,

economics 100% of the time and education 75% of the time). These patterns may be expected as individuals focus on issues and/or challenges associated with their own needs. When strategies are considered in Panels 2A and 2B, albeit only a few times, solutions to help BMSM that reference the government and the Black community are discussed as macro-level strategies (Panel 2A). In contrast, BMSM are more apt to provide agency-based strategies (refer to Panel 2B) linked to family, friendship, and partner ties and self-help. It will be important to consider whether narratives from BMSM correspond to these patterns.

Thematic Analyses

Qualitative results illustrate the adaptive, resilient nature of BMSM and certain common experiential outcomes, intra-group challenges, and salient social identities. The following two themes and corresponding sub-themes emerge from this experiential data: (1) Navigating Structural Forces: Agency Over Structure and (2) Tools for Transformation: Being Agentic that provide both descriptive and prescriptive information. Although BMSM offer diverse views about their daily lives, patterns are also apparent in terms of marginalizing experiences and responses for redress. In addition, certain events, frequently negative ones, result in increased salience for the related social identities (Hunter 2010; Johnson 2011). However, the two themes are not mutually exclusive, as certain experiences result in action-oriented decisions for BMSM. Yet the themes are unique in their *emphasis* on certain topics. "Navigating Structural Forces," documents varied challenges BMSM here have experienced and how they negotiate dynamics they link to negative forces such as racism, stigma, and stereotypes. In the second theme, "Tools for Transformation," BMSM provide varied ameliorative strategies. Overall, these findings are important because they document some of the short- and long-term issues in need of remedy for this populace. Moreover, these results may be informative for other BMSM, allies, and potential allies. Each theme is summarized below, including representative quotes.

Theme 1: Navigating Structural Forces: Agency Over Structure

This theme emphasizes agency over structure as BMSM describe attempts to navigate systemic challenges. Some of their experiences may broadly parallel those of non-BMSM their age. Yet their challenges are often compounded by the intersecting and multiply marginalizing dimensions of their social identities (Collins 1990, 2005; Crenshaw 1991; Jones and Abes 2013). Moreover, negative incidents appear to make certain identities more salient than they might be otherwise (Hunter 2010). Three sub-themes are apparent that emphasize navigating: economic problems; racism; and, intra-group challenges.

A. Agency and Adaptability: "I Need Money"

BMSM associated with this sub-theme emphasize individual financial challenges. They acknowledge concerns about economics, housing, and/or education that often result in anxiousness in their daily lives. Manny, a 20-year-old junior in college, rejects socially constructed labels associated with sexual identity, but appears to embrace societal expectations about self-sufficiency; "I need money. Because the way that life is here in America, you need money to do just about anything. I need money to attend school here, and I need money to get food so that I can eat. I need money to make sure I'm an upstanding part of society." In addition to listing basic necessities, Manny recognizes that economic wherewithal has both short-term, tangible (i.e., food and education) and longer-term, intangible (i.e., meet societal expectations) implications. Albeit challenging to juggle expenses, he believes the future benefits will outweigh present costs. Additionally, Manny alludes to the structural origins of economic needs and expectations as part of U.S. culture (i.e., "the way that life is") (Weber 1930, 1946) that he feels obligated to adopt. Next, Kent describes an employment history that he welcomed to assist his single mother as well as anxiousness about financial needs:

> This probably started in undergrad. I have to work. My mom couldn't afford to support me and herself with my extra needs. I didn't have to do, but I wanted to. So, I had to work and do what I needed to do to support myself. I've been supporting myself since I graduated high school, so I've really been trying to do what I need to do. At times, it's like, my net pay was less than the money that I owed as far as bills, rent, things like that. So, money became tight, and I feel like I need to work more, which took away from me studying and doing the best I could in undergrad. It's kind of like the same with me now in my Master's program. I'm trying not to let that happen, but I just feel like if I had more money, or if I didn't have to worry about financial things, then everything else in my life would be more. I guess it would fall into place better. (25-year-old, self-identifies as gay)

Now a graduate student, Kent worked his way through school. Yet limited income and job responsibilities have prevented him from maximizing his college experience, in general, as he strives to navigate economic instability due to the negative implications of the intersection of his socioeconomic, racial, and family statuses rather than his sexual identity. The above comment also reflects the tendency for BMSM to describe individual economic challenges (i.e., using terms like "tight") rather than systemic reasons for such hardship (i.e., lack of a minimum wage law or lack of gainful employment locally) (Darity and Myers 1999; Hassan 2020).

Some BMSM strive to be adaptive and agentic, yet their intersecting racial and sexual identities can intensify financial concerns. Jeremy, 27-year-old college graduate and healthcare employee self-identifies as queer. He describes the dangers of coming out for young BMSM who are family dependent:

> That is one of the bigger reasons why MSMs don't tell their family…Because if we felt like we were going to be loved either way, it would be easier and there are MSMs and gay men period who know they are going to be loved and aren't afraid to tell their parents. But, especially in the Black community,

there are those who we fear, and I feared the same thing. I feared being cut off, financially, emotionally…I used to say I'm going to wait until I get to the end of college before I tell my parents because they're going to cut me off. I think that's something we all have to deal with, and I don't think we should have to. It's very evil to hold that over your child's head.

Jeremy uses strong language (i.e., "evil") to describe a harrowing, yet financially expedient decision to hold off coming out to his family until post-graduation. Being raised in a staunchly religious family in the South compounded his challenges (Barnes 2012, Barnes and Collins 2019; Johnson 2011; McQueen and Barnes 2017). But there were economic and non-economic costs associated with compartmentalizing his identities and thus delaying disclosure (Tillapaugh 2013). Economic and emotional fears, undergirded by homophobia in the Black community (Barnes 2012; Lemelle and Battle 2004), resulted in depression. Once gainfully employed, Jeremy came out. His family ties have been strained since he disclosed his sexual identity, yet, for him, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. However, Jeremy realizes that other BMSM may not be economically able to navigate such financial constraints to integrate their multiple identities (Badgett 2001). And 27-year-old Drake, a community worker, describes a sobering situation that occurs all too often among BMSM in the absence of economic security:

Right now, for the last six years, I've been constantly…I wouldn't say homeless but houseless. Couch-surfing. I've always lived with a couple of friends. I lost my place back in 2016. I've just now been able to work on getting back to it. So, right now, I'm actually between [name of nearby larger city] and [name of the city] sometimes…When I got to [name of nearby larger city], I just got a job, I lived on the train. I did everything. It was crazy. But I found myself. I really saw my potential for what it is, not what it could be.

A drug addicted mother meant Drake was raised in foster care and is without a family support system to assist when they became unemployed. Drake, who self-defines as non-conforming and non-binary, has a friendship network that is expressively supportive, but includes BMSM who are similarly impoverished with limited social networks (Badgett 2001; Granovetter 1973). Their housing experience reflects both the low stock of affordable housing in urban spaces (Barnes and Jaret 2003) and the disproportionate percent of African Americans who experience homelessness (Shinn 2010). Yet it appears that their circumstances are compounded by factors linked to race, sexuality, education, class, *and* age. Although Drake remains optimistic about their present situation (i.e., self-defined as "houseless" rather than "homeless") and future as a community activist, they are less clear about their economic future.

According to the above four representative comments, some BMSM choose employment for self-sufficiency; others are forced to do so. Others have been displaced due to financial challenges. And still others experience internal tensions as they compartmentalize key aspects of their identities for economic reasons and weigh the risks versus rewards of vital, personal decisions (Jones and Abes 2013; Tillapaugh 2013). Moreover, they suggest that their economic problems are exacerbated by the nexus of their multiple identities. These remarks also illustrate how

immediate economic concerns may overshadow recognizing structural links to financial challenges (Darity and Myers 1999; Hassan 2020).

B. Navigating the Nexus Between Structure and Agency: "Always Starting in the Back"

A group of BMSM describe both the sources of individual and systemic challenges that they associate with racism. For them, racial discrimination often leads to disparities and police brutality for Black men, in general, and micro-aggressions for them personally such as stereotypes based on the intersection of race and gender. Such episodes mean racial identity becomes relatively more salient because it comes to the fore more frequently. Yet for several BMSM, their sexuality as gay men compounds this negativity in ways unique to them as compared to their peers who are Black and straight or non-Black and gay or straight. This second sub-theme differs from other sections given its focus on tensions between micro- and macro-level experiences.

Navigating racial issues might be an expected challenge for BMSM here due to the history of racial inequities in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014). Narratives tend to support the large body of scholarship about the embeddedness of this structural force at individual, group, and societal levels rather than use of words such as racism, prejudice, and biases (which helps explain the lower relative frequency of the concept "racism" in Table 2). BMSM describe the systemic nature of this force and its effects on their daily lives. According to 24-year-old Marlon, a social work major who identifies as gay, many Blacks have embraced notions of the Protestant work ethic and the American Dream that were not created for them and that many will not likely realize (Barnes and Jaret 2003):

> I feel like, as Black people, we're always starting in the back…the whole argument of equality versus equity. We were never given a fair advance out the gate. So, it's like, you work your ass—I'm sorry. You work your tail off and then you get to a certain point where you realize, hey, even though I'm working that hard, I'm still not where I could be or where others are. So, it's a constant reminder that you're fighting against the odds…Society built a system that has taught us that equality is what works as opposed to equity…other obstacles… increasing homelessness…Black people can't have the same opportunities as other people…At the same time, the manager who's going to hire me, I can't help his prejudice and his implicit bias. He may not want to hire me for this job that can pay my bills. So, I have to take what I can get, which may not be enough. Like I said, it's not as easy for me as a Black man. Who feels sorry for a Black man? You're supposed to be a man. So I can't get assistance and help that I need from people that I need sometimes, which makes my journey through life a little harder. I think of all those different disparities. It all boils down to disparities that get in the way.

Marlon's somber comment above positions racism systemically as a correlate to discrimination, prejudice, implicit bias, and disparities (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin

2008; Omi and Winant 2014; Pérez 2016; West 1993). Although Black men are expected to fulfill heteronormative roles like other men, he posits that society does not recognize and/or acknowledge how racism can undermine such outcomes. Furthermore, Marlon alludes to the probability that most Blacks will never experience *equity* based on their history of marginalization (i.e., "always starting in the back" and "fighting against the odds"); yet they have been socialized to focus on *equality* or fair treatment. He distinguishes between the two outcomes and the centrality of the former over the latter if Blacks are to make significant strides (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin 2008). For him and other Black men, these structural impediments translate into low-wage occupations, homelessness, and non-empathetic spaces. BMSM associated with this sub-theme use words like "hard" and "tough" to summarize the negative effects of racism on the lives of Black men. Similarly, 25-year-old Kent, illustrates the effects of structure over agency for Black men:

> As a Black man, I feel like I'm always targeted…I went to a PWI (Predominately White Institution). I was the only Black guy. I would say when it comes to my education, being in that environment, I felt like people would intentionally not listen to what I had to say in class, out in public, or out on campus. I felt very shunned, but you could tell that everyone was acting like that towards me. I just never understood why, because I'm a very friendly, open person. It's kind of like an entertaining thing, you know. As long as I'm doing something that they like or enjoy, it was fine. But if I'm trying to put some input into something or giving my educational thought, it's like, 'What do you know? Why are you talking?' It's really how it still feels…Discouraging. Not good at all. It kind of makes me think that I am not as smart or as capable as others.

The public nature in which BMSM often act out their racial identities results in its increased salience (Hunter 2010). However, they may compartmentalize aspects of their lives as they negotiate spaces such as college settings (Tillapaugh 2013). For example, in addition to feelings of isolation, Kent suggests that the reality of racism means navigating dismissive Whites in predominately White spaces where Black men are only rewarded for engaging in palatable behavior (i.e., "entertaining" Whites); otherwise, they are ignored or possibly targeted. Post-college, feelings of disillusionment and being devalued have resulted in a familiar, deleterious outcome of racism, as Kent questions his own competencies rather than the source of the social problem (Omi and Winant 2014).

For other BMSM, racist experiences are further complicated by their sexual identities. For example, Cameron, an 18-year-old college student, details experiences that reflect structural forces due to racism as well as personal experiences surviving bullying:

> Being Black means it will be hard for you in society, police brutality, but I'm happy to be Black and to be on earth…I'm real proud of who I am today… I'm proud because I accept that I'm gay and I'm out. I used to have low self-esteem in middle school. I used to get bullied, so I'm real proud of myself… [But] I don't believe in actually coming out because straight people don't have to come out, so why should I have to come out? It's nothing different…You're

not hiding yourself, you just don't have to make a big announcement, because straight people don't do that.

Cameron's comment above focuses on challenges Blacks face in society in general, his racial pride and relative happiness to be alive in the face of current police brutality (Crichlow and Fulcher 2017; Scott et al. 2017), and a past of bullying that affected him psychologically (Arnold et al. 2014; Carbado 1999; Meyer 2015; Pascoe 2007). Moreover, these tensions between structure (life is "hard" for Blacks in society) and agency (his attempts to be "happy" nonetheless) seem uniquely apparent for BMSM. Yet the latter outcomes stem from Cameron's positivity as he refuses to compartmentalize his identities, but rather embraces self-acceptance (Jones and Abes 2013). Based on such challenges, he affirms his intestinal fortitude for acknowledging his sexual identity, but also questions the need for differential declarations for straight and gay persons. Like Marlon and Cameron, 18-year-old student Brad, who identifies as gay, uses terminology like "tough", "a lot" and "obstacles" to emphasize compounded internal and external racial challenges that disproportionately impact Black men:

> On top of being a protector and not having an outlet to express emotions, they also have to deal with the violence. It's like, I guess, with other men, they don't deal with their emotions so they have to deal with everything and not think about it, just brush it off instead of sitting in it, thinking about it, seeing how they can get through it, and dealing with their emotions. It's kind of tough… there's a lot more. A lot…Lately, there have been a lot of shootings between police officers and Black people in general, and the majority are Black men. Their obstacle would have to be racial profiling or whatever, due to the fact that they are Black and they are a man. They are threatening, in a sense, to the police officers and White people in general because it's like, 'Ooh, there's a Black man. We have to worry about him. We have to worry if he's going to be loud or too aggressive or anything like that.' It's kind of like we have to deal with racial profiling as well.

In this comment, Brad associates Black masculinity and masculinity in general with a protector motif and describes race-based stereotypes and stigma. In addition to tensions between external (i.e., being a protector) and internal (i.e., not being able to express emotions) expectations around masculinity, Brad details problems based on racial profiling and unsubstantiated fears that further complicate the lives of Black men (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin 2008; Pérez 2016).

Narratives of the individuals in this second sub-theme illustrate frequent challenges and frustrations navigating social forces that can manifest in tangible ways such as bullying based on sexuality (Meyer 2015; Pascoe 2007) and bullying (i.e., police brutality) based on race and gender (Crichlow and Fulcher 2017; Scott et al. 2017) as well as in other subtler yet equally dangerous ways in the form of homophobia and stereotypes based on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (Battle and Bennett 2005; Choi et al. 2011; Jones et al. 2010). Regardless of the outcomes for BMSM here, "starting in the back" and working to advance mean both race and sexuality are privileged in their lives, as the specter of racism looms large

over many of their experiences (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014; Pérez 2016; West 1993).

C.   Navigating Intra-group Dynamics: "Hurt People Hurt People"

Just as racism is tied to individual experiences of BMSM, Black men, and Blacks in general in the prior section, other dynamics can lend themselves to conflict. This third sub-theme focuses on platonic and intimate encounters as well as both intra-group and intra-racial challenges BMSM posit influence their lives and undermine healthy relationships and self-care. For example, Prince, a 20-year-old psychology college student, is gender fluid. For them, internalized trauma prevents directly addressing personal finances and work-life imbalance:

> I'm sort of known for being the one who keeps everybody calm and always reassuring them and saying, 'It's okay, you don't have to worry.' Being the advice giver. When it comes to myself, I think I bury a lot of my anxiety, and I don't deal with it the way that I need to, because I would rather prioritize helping someone else…instead of turning that into myself sometimes…Well, I'm going to slow down. I worry about a whole laundry list of things…Finances, what I'm going to do once I sort of get off this rat race, because I kept myself busy for so long…The visual that I have for it, because I can't really find the words, is like I'm a waiter trying to carry two trays full of dishes and I'm on roller skates. So, I can kind of do that for so long, and that's what I worry about: what's going to happen when I crash?

Prince alludes to the effects of the structural force called capitalism (i.e., "rat race") on their health and self-care. Despite the ability to dole out advice and present the illusion of self-sufficiency to friends and peers, Prince's analogy depicts an individual on the brink of collapse. For them and other BMSM, tensions between structural issues, in their case, finances, and personal psychological/emotional issues often mean forgoing the latter needs for the former (Balaji et al. 2012; Battle and Bennett 2005). Per Prince, these intra-group tensions also result from an imbalance between friendship expectations and mindfulness about their own needs (McQueen and Barnes 2017).

Prince's narrative above may parallel the experiences of some young non-BMSM who are attempting to juggle personal needs and friendship ties. Yet for BMSM, certain tensions can be exacerbated by their intersecting identities and undermine developing potentially supportive relationships. Demetrius, a 28-year-old doctoral student who self-defines as queer, describes stigma among BMSM that he associates with societal expectations about masculinity that result in gender coding as well as inter- and intra-group policing (Choi et al. 2011; Slatton and Spates 2016; Tillapaugh 2013). He posits that unintentional trauma is transferred among BMSM if they embrace hegemonic roles and performative masculinity that undermine healthy relationships:

> Hurt people hurt people…So there are things that are very rampant in the MSM community. There's a term called 'no fats, no fems.' Essentially, that is

associated with desirability. Especially when you're in a lot of MSM spaces, whether it's online or if it's in person, there's always an underlying standard of how you should present yourself. Sometimes, it's like you have to be toned. You're not supposed to have a particular BMI index. Of course, I think a lot of people don't tend to fit in that box. And those people who don't fit in that box are always either ridiculed heavily or…some people won't even develop a friendship with you because you're not desirable in their eyes. It's a lot of missed connections that happen because of that. We have been socialized because this is a standard of how you should be. I think that's fat-phobia. With the femme-phobia…you're supposed to act like a 'cis woman' in a heteronormative relationship. Of course, the top, the insertive partner, he's supposed to be hyper-masculine…It's weird…So, it's like those dynamics that are involved in this as well, collectively. Then you have people who have intersecting identities. It's just even worse.

For Demetrius, the definition of masculinity is open to interpretation. He challenges socially constructed, heteronormative expectations about Black masculinity where desirability is based on societal standards (i.e., physic and body-size) created outside the BMSM community that many of his peers still embrace (Bennett 2013; Hunter 2010; Johnson 2011; Tillapaugh 2013). For him, these expectations have resulted in discord and intra-group discrimination in an already vulnerable community (i.e., "hurt people hurt people"). And such binaries prevent BMSM from embracing nuanced identities, foster objectification, and mean that certain BMSM willingly accept divisive body politics (Collins 2005; Crenshaw 1991). Equally troubling, idealized images of masculinity can stymie the intimate ties so many BMSM desire and cause those who do not "fit" such profiles to engage in risky behavior for acceptance (Barnes and Hollingsworth 2020; Millett et al. 2012; Reback and Larkins 2010).

Like Demetrius, 18-year-old college student Blane questions certain practices and beliefs he believes are unhealthy. He embraces an holistic sense of self and humanness as an overarching identity:

I feel like everybody should be compassionate, they should be sympathetic or empathetic in their own way. They should be strong in their own different way, where they're strong emotionally, they're strong physically…the person who keeps your friend group together. I feel like it should not depend on their gender or their sex…I don't really know what it's like to be a man. I only know what it's like to be human and just how to interact with other humans.

Blane embraces an androgynous view of sexuality. In contrast to a trope that links masculinity to physical strength, he espouses a nuanced understanding of this trait that males as well as females can embody—and that includes friendship cultivation. He contends that healthy platonic ties evidence healthy individuals. Yet Blane realizes that his different views have resulted in intra-racial mistreatment and microaggressions in predominately Black spaces:

There are people who have a problem with me when I didn't do anything to you. And that goes back to me being gay and me being on an HBCU [Histori-

cally Black College and University] campus. So I can't really be discriminated against because I'm Black, so that minority [identity] is out of the way. So now I'm just a gay man. Being a man, you can't really discriminate against me because of that [as a resident in an all-male dorm], so that's out the window. So now I'm just gay. Now it's the fact of having to live in an all-male dorm with majority heterosexual men…I'm just here, I'm just going to class, I'm just minding my business, but now you want to cause problems with me for what? So now being gay would be the main thing that causes conflict in my life right now. So far it's only been, like, minor incidents…it's not like a physical altercation where we have to go to campus security. Nothing like that. Still, just the fact of like, we have conflict because you're just being stupid and you just don't want to be mature.

Blane is incredulous that he would experience ill treatment at an institution reputed for inclusivity. By the process of elimination, he suggests that his sexuality must be the reason for such marginalization (Meyer 2015). Although incidents have been "minor," he alludes to frustration and concern that these micro-aggressions may escalate. In the absence of a safe space to live, his quality of student life has been diminished (Battle and Bennett 2005). Blane's remark is also important because it illustrates some of the challenges BMSM who embrace non-heteronormative identities can experience.

BMSM associated with this third sub-theme describe macro- (i.e., culture, heteronormativity, racism, schools, and the Black community) and micro-level (i.e., personal relationships, friendships) sources of challenges and personal trauma. In addition, their meaning-making processes help recognize implications of these negative effects that result in intra-group ill treatment, increased salience of their racial and/or sexual identities, questions about normative definitions about identities, and impediments to friend and/or intimate relationships. Yet the intrinsic effects on quality of life are often difficult to fully capture, but likely influence their ability to integrate their various identities (Collins 1990, 2005; Jones and Abes 2013; Reback and Larkins 2010). Given the above noted challenges BMSM associate with their own lives, those of other Black men, and, in many instances, the Black community, what remedies do they suggest? And are these remedies likely to combat structural problems or focus on agency?

Theme 2: Tools for Transformation: Being Agentic

This theme includes suggestions and strategies BMSM espouse based on personal experiences, and for some, the school of hard knocks. It differs from the earlier themes in its emphasis on approaches they believe will help each other better navigate societal, group, and individual challenges (Tillapaugh 2013). In this way, individuals move beyond descriptions to prescriptions for redress. However, although BMSM recognize the existence, prevalence, and power of structural forces, they tend to provide individual-level strategies for empowerment.

A. Agency Over Structure: "Hold Your Head Up"

In this first of two sub-themes, BMSM focus on strategies to bolster themselves and each other emotionally and psychologically. For example, 25-year-old Kenny, who self-identifies as gay, notes how embracing his truth has helped him move past the desire to conform to societal dictates as well as overcome being bullied and ostracized:

> First, I would say hold your head up…When I would pass people, I would always put my head down…And the second thing I would say… Don't try to change yourself for people. At the end of the day, you are who you are. If I was more confident with myself then as I am now, I think my whole life would be different… I'd probably be somewhere else if I had more self-assurance in who I was, in who I am, what I am, and what I want in life.

Although Kenny considers himself wiser for his developmental journey, he regrets both wasting time not being himself and proactively following his aspirations. For him, increased self-confidence and affirmation would have been precipitated by embracing his sexual identity sooner (Battle and Bennett 2005). This theme is important as BMSM like Kenny provide insights as they reconcile past trials and describe present triumphs. Moreover, personal empowerment and transformation often mean identities such as race, sexuality, and their intersections become more salient, but in positive ways (Hunter 2010; Johnson 2011; Slatton and Spates 2016).

In addition to encouraging other BMSM to live authentic lives, 18-year-old Brad, reminds them of the power of grit:

> Some advice I would give my eighth-grade self would be stop trying to fit in. You already notice that you're different. You're already searching it up on Google and everything, so you have this knowledge. You just don't want to apply it to yourself. Just stop trying to fit in and stop trying to please everyone else. That would be a good start for you becoming who you are now. Another thing I would say would be, the bullying, it'll all stop soon. They can't bully you forever. Eventually, you'll have to pull away from these people. So, I would say that don't worry about what they have to say. Them picking on you, all of their opinions? It really doesn't matter. Eventually, they're going to have to stop. Just focus on you and what you can do and try to figure yourself out before trying to worry about what they have to say and if they can figure you out before you can.

According to Brad, intestinal fortitude enabled him to withstand bullying as a child. Although social media answered many questions about his burgeoning sexual desires, other questions about the relentless bullying he endured went unanswered (Meyer 2015; Pascoe 2007). The suggestions offered by BMSM in this theme tend to be informed by past, often painful reflections, from which they have learned. Like Marlon and Kent, Brad's advice is agency-centered and focuses on self-reflection, self-definition, and self-determination rather than group-acceptance or systemic change (Collins 2005; Johnson 2011). Leva, a queer, transgendered 23-year-old philosophy student, offers a creative exercise that, over time, has enabled her to overcome years of self-doubt and travail:

I just look at myself in the mirror, and I look at myself in the mirror like I'm a work of art. I think that's one of the things I like to do. I have a mirror in my room. It's like [motions to illustrate its height] this big. Sometimes I'll sit on my bed, because my bed ends smack in the middle of it, and I'll sit and look at myself. I start to look at how the light is hitting my face. Even in the bathroom, looking at where my cheeks are, trying to find the edges of my cheekbones, trying to find how my nose is shaped. I think it's something that I'm doing that's really powerful and really relieving for me to do… I used to think about how bad I looked, but I don't think about that much anymore because I look at myself in a different light.

Leva details a technique to re-socialize herself and combat the negative effects of systemic beliefs about desirability and acceptability that other people used in attempts to control her self-definition (Collins 1990, 2005; Crenshaw 1991). In addition to pushing back against socially constructed binaries about sexuality, traditional gender roles, and periods of depression, her continual meaning-making process has resulted in personal empowerment and self-affirmation (Hunter 2010; Johnson 2011).

Although studies illustrate the pervasiveness of structural forces over individual agency (Billingsley 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2017; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014), the above BMSM focus on the opposite relationship likely based on slow systemic responses to their needs (Battle and Bennett 2005; Choi et al. 2011; Lemelle and Battle 2004) and the desire to be agentic (Barnes 2013; McQueen and Barnes 2017). Their decisions suggest that if BMSM don't take the helm for their own lives, no one else will. Their strategies also encourage BMSM to be more transparent and self-affirming as well as more intentional and proactive during the process. Moreover, their suggestions for self-improvement are positioned as the initial step in a longer process of collective empowerment and holistic self-development (Collins 1990, 2005; Jones and Abes 2013). Yet other individuals suggest broader-based strategies.

B.   Wielding Multi-faceted Tools: "We Need to Help Each Other"

Certain BMSM suggest the need for a multi-pronged approach to meet the diverse needs of this community that emphasizes structure *and* agency. In this second sub-theme, Blane describes both individual and group-level remedies to uplift Blacks and BMSM. First, he suggests the importance of group solidarity to combat structural forces he believes are designed to undermine the Black community. His suggestion ties the outcomes and successes of BMSM to those of Blacks in general:

This government and everything is systematically set up to oppress and hold Black people down in general…So I would say the benefits are that there's such a good support system [in the Black community] to try to build up Black people or, specifically, Black men because of the fact that there's so much going on against us that we need to help each other in our own community. (18-year-old college student)

For Blane, the government, as a structural force, has not historically responded to the problems and concerns of either Blacks (Darity and Myers 1999; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014; West 1993) or BMSM (Bernstein and Naples 2015; Pierceson 2013). In response, he believes that support mechanisms are beginning to emerge in the Black community; yet it should do more (Barnes 2012; Collins 1990, 2005). As well as intra-group support, Blane continues by suggesting agency-based efforts to foster self-love:

> I'm not going to stay inside and live in fear because of what the world sees me as…All those years of me trying to understand my identity and to accept my identity I've created self-love for myself. I walk with confidence. People look at me and say I'm confident. And for so long, that's definitely not something people would say about me. I gained something I wasn't fully looking for, but it is a characteristic that I have now from overcoming…And that's just from me being myself. Like, like you're with yourself every single day of every single second. You can't escape yourself. So, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. So, you might as well break it down in your head, figure out what's going on, figure out some solutions. Just create some love for yourself. 'Cause once you do that, no one can take it away from you. You're so much more… You're much more powerful when you have self-love. Because there's very few things people can say to bring you down. I feel like self-love means not overthinking everything and just try to be in the moment, try to be present, try to be happy, because you're alive. You're living. There are people who aren't living and there are people who are in way worse situations than you. So, just try to be grateful for what you have. Try to truly be grateful for what you have, even though there are still bad things in life.

A process of meaning-making and self-evaluation enabled Blane to overcome self-doubt and shame about his sexual identity as a Black gay man. He details a journey of self-discovery from which certainty about his intrinsic value and confidence emerged (Tillapaugh 2013). Moreover, Blane makes relative comparisons to the hardships others experience, the reality of continued struggles, and the requisite empathy he believes is necessary to successfully navigate society. I posit that Blane's comments are also important because they are based on multi-faceted observations about the relationship between structure and agency and the need to understand and employ both dynamics for improved quality of life (Hunter 2010; Omi and Winant 2014; West 1993).

Like Blane, who encourages self-affirmation and intra-racial activism, 27-year-old Jeremy, recommends another source of knowledge and support:

> Get to know yourself truly from your own perspective. Allow yourself to be free. Whatever happens, happens. It can be dealt with and you can come back to it. Take the lessons you've learned throughout life and apply them. I am someone who in the past had to learn the hard way. People would impart knowledge, and I still would kind of have to learn the hard way. When you have mentors or older people who are positive influences who have gone through life and they are telling you something - listen. You don't necessarily

have to take everything they say to heart, but if they're saying it to you, they've gone through it and it's a possibility that you could go through it as well. If you listen and take the steps they took to avoid whatever it is, whether it be negative or if they're telling you to do something that could positively affect your life, you know, take it. Take it into consideration. Learn from what people are telling you. Learn from what you see in your everyday life. I think once I grasped that concept, it made me a better man and a better human being.

For Jeremy, transformation for BMSM will reflect liberation (i.e., being free) and self-reflection. However, this process is facilitated by mentors and Black community elders who can impart experience and expertise. He posits that such persons may be able to provide instructional advice to help BMSM both avoid negative experiences and pursue positive ones. This advice has enhanced both his identity as a human and a man (Carbado 1999; Hunter 2010).

Lastly, 29-year-old Jansen presents a process of self-actualization and a litany of needs in the BMSM community. He rejects labels and believes people should be able to choose whom they love, but he recognizes that society has a different set of heteronormative expectations for Black men that encourage them to compartmentalize their identities:

A lot of people have different labels and stuff. I mean, everybody identifies differently, so whatever their preferences are and whatever they like. You have lesbians, gay, bisexuals, trans, queer… I feel like we all shouldn't be confined to just one label. I think you should be able to love who you want to love, because I have no right to tell a person they shouldn't love a person based on how they feel or how they identify about their sexual orientation…but the standards are a little different when it comes to African Americans, particularly, men because they are looked upon in a negative connotation sometimes. For me, I try to avoid those stereotypes and go my own way as far as setting the tone for myself and what it truly means to be an African American male. I don't necessarily go with what society does. I try to go to the beat of my own drum. I try to do what's right and live my life accordingly. I can't speak for one entire race because I don't think that's fair. Because every race has their own opinions and they're different.

Jansen appears unfettered by societal dictates about sexuality. Yet he believes that Black men face stereotypes in ways that their White peers do not. Following his own drumbeat means comfortability distinguishing between his sexual identity (i.e., straight) and his behavior (i.e., MSM), recognizing and rejecting inequality and heteronormativity, and avoiding societal standards that do not reflect his experiences. Like quite a few BMSM in this study, Blane, Jeremy, and Jensen's sentiments reflect "a temporal space where individuals begin to question external influences in their lives and being to rely on their own internal thoughts, feelings, and insights for meaning-making (Tillapaugh 2013: 141). Each details how they navigated negative dynamics such as stigma, gender coding, policing, and compartmentalization, as well as how self-reflection has enabled them to become adaptive and resilient. Jansen continues by describing a list of needed services and support for BMSM:

> The resources need to be there. I think there needs to be other avenues for HIV and AIDS testing, besides [names two local private agencies] and the Health Department. I think there should be other organizations that do testing. I think that all colleges should have – not STD clinics – but safe places where they can go to get tested… Transportation is important, housing is important here in [name of the city] because apartments run you $1200 for a one-bedroom or more, depending on where you live. I think affordable housing should be in place for young African American men so they could thrive and they could be better. It is hard. I know a lot of young Black gay men here in the city, trying to make it, and they're stacked up with two other people in a place or a house. Some of them are working two to three jobs. Some of them are relying on other streams of income, just so they can put food on the table.

Jansen mentions BMSM who couch surf, hold multiple low-wage jobs, and, for some, likely engage in risky ways to earn money such as prostitution (which he refers to as "other streams of income") (Hassan 2020; Millett et al. 2012; Peterson and Jones 2009). Addressing most of his list of needs requires systemic changes (i.e., affordable housing, transportation) (Barnes and Jaret 2003; Shinn 2010) and/or expanding existing local resources (i.e., testing) (Arnold et al. 2014).

Like Blane, Jeremy, and Jansen, individuals here provide tools for personal and collective empowerment for BMSM. Their conversations focus on expressive and instrumental support that can improve their daily lives and affirm their intersecting identities (Hunter 2010; Johnson 2011; Tillapaugh 2013). Yet these narratives emphasize micro-level remedies and illustrate some of the tensions BMSM experience making such strategies a reality.

Discussion and Conclusion

Informed by the Structure versus Agency discourse, the current study examines narratives about the daily experiences of a group of BMSM who reside in the South. Several results are noteworthy. Although diverse views are apparent, remarks emphasize personal and systemic problems that undermine their ability to complete the daily round. Even as certain BMSM question socially constructed identities, negative experiences often result in increased salience of their racial and/or sexual identities (Battle and Bennett 2005; Bennett 2013; Hunter 2010; Jones et al. 2010). Moreover, many BMSM do not specifically reference concepts such as racism, prejudice, and biases. Yet they describe the embeddedness of these structural forces in society—especially racism that takes the form of discrimination, police brutality, and constrained opportunities—and how they often overshadow their daily lives and those of Blacks in general (Blumer 1958; Bonilla-Silva 2017; Darity and Myers 1999; Dovidio and Gaertner 1986; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014; West 1993). Moreover, individuals did not specifically reference life in the South as a point of contention. Lifelong residency in this locale for most of them may make recognizing and relativizing regional differences difficult. Yet their experiences and observations about police surveillance, stigma, and poverty are noted in studies about

the Bible-belt and challenges for BMSM (Balaji et al. 2012; Barnes 2012; Johnson 2011). Thus, it will be important to examine region as a specific structural force moving forward.

Although many BMSM tend to acknowledge and understand the existence of structural forces such as racism, homophobia, economic inequities, and housing challenges, their strategies and remedies tend to be individualistic in nature. This means that, despite being aware of the existence of macro-level forces, suggestions for redress tend to be micro-level. Such strategies may provide a short-term respite, but are unlikely to move the needle significantly in terms of meeting the broader needs of BMSM as a collective (Choi et al. 2011; Millett et al. 2012). Yet most BMSM here are not thinking systemically, but rather individually, I contend, largely due to the desire to be agentic. Yet individuals who don't realize how systemic forces influence their daily lives will likely have difficulty identifying and navigating them or mobilizing other people to combat them. Equally important, a focus on agency-based remedies directly and indirectly exonerate society from a history of marginalizing groups like sexual minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Darity and Myers 1999; Feagin 2008; Omi and Winant 2014; West 1993).

What do individuals in this study need? Some of the needs of BMSM likely parallel those of similarly aged peers beginning their adult journeys—stable employment, affordable housing, and supportive families, friends, and partners. However, they contend that their needs are nuanced (and negative experiences compounded) based on social constraints associated with their often marginalized, intersecting social identities, particularly race and sexuality. Self-help initiatives inform attempts to navigate society; self-actualization, self-love, self-definitions and self-affirmation are complimentary personal ideologies evident in their meaning-making processes (Balaji et al. 2012; Barnes and Collins 2019; 2020; Battle and Bennett 2005; Johnson 2011; McQueen and Barnes 2017). Economic-related challenges were often noted (Badgett 2001; Jones et al. 2010); yet comments rarely associated economic problems with broader structural controls (Darity and Myers 1999; Hassan 2020). Some BMSM also recognize past and current challenges linked to family dynamics, education, and internal struggles that result in depression and self-doubt that they have or are currently working to overcome. Such comments illustrate the need for economic (i.e., gainful employment, education, and low-cost housing) and non-economic (i.e., counseling facilities and other social support) remedies.

These findings reflect the experiences of a relatively large group of BMSM from the South. Yet they may not do justice to their experiences or illumine this topic for their counterparts in other regions. Additional studies are needed to address these limitations. These results also suggest the need for research focused on class-based experiences, financial travail, and poverty among BMSM (Badgett 2001; Battle and Barnes 2009). Moreover, narratives here suggest connections across multiple challenges for BMSM, Black men, in general, and the Black community. Thus, applied studies on best practices to foster such solidarity would be beneficial. Lastly, it might appear short-sighted that BMSM emphasize agency-based remedies over societal-level change. The latter forms of redress are clearly needed, warranted, and would result in long-term benefits. However, deeper considerations suggest that perhaps their suggestions and strategies are prudent (at least short-term) given that society

has a history of being sluggish and/or unresponsive to the needs of marginalized groups like BMSM. In light of this sobering pattern, BMSM may believe that being agentic represents the most expedient way to address their immediate needs and concerns.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent It was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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