"The Greatest Path to Acceptance is to Know We Exist:"
Capturing Narratives of Sexually Diverse Latinx in Nebraska
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Dumayi Gutierrez[1]
University of Nebraska at Omaha and Alliant International University, San Diego & Online

Daniel Nguyen[2]
University of Nebraska at Lincoln

Introduction

Latinx in the Midwest have a spectrum of experiences from lack of economic resources, distress in anti-Latinx rhetoric, and language barriers to strong community connections, cultural pride, and intrapersonal resiliency. However, literature often pigeonholes Latinx experiences into linear migratory experiences and excludes diverse narratives; particularly of sexually diverse (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual, etc.) Latinx communities. This leaves a significant gap, as 19% of sexually and gender diverse individuals identify as Latinx in Nebraska (UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, 2019). Research has highlighted a Midwestern rhetoric of conservatism and rejection of sexually diverse communities (Fredman et al., 2015). Yet regarding Nebraska, Kazyak and Stange (2018) found that over 70% of Nebraskans favored laws protecting sexually diverse individuals and 60% support legal relationship recognition for gays and lesbians. This rhetoric seems promising, however, Latinx culture encompasses a variety of constructs such as religiosity, acculturation, and gender schemas that create conflict for acceptance and support of sexually diverse Latinx (Ryan et al., 2010). The community faces challenges including dual racism and sexism, lack of sexual and cultural community, prejudice, and fear of rejection (Asencio, 2009; Frost & Meyer, 2015; Gutierrez, 2019). However, Latinx communities are also rich in supportive relationships, familial emotional support, intergenerational care, development and maintenance of cultural identities, and shared opportunities (Acosta, 2010; Villatoro et al., 2014). Which sexually diverse Latinx have translated into safe spaces and chosen families.

Safe spaces within the community provide inclusivity, network and social support, identity development growth, embracement, and resiliency (Fetner et al., 2012; Molina et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2020). However, certain spaces may not feel safe within or from outsiders for sexually diverse Latinx. A well-known example is one of the largest massacres to occur on U.S. soil:

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1. Adjunct Professor, Office of Latino/Latin American Studies, University of Nebraska at Omaha and Assistant Professor, Alliant International University, San Diego & Online
2. Graduate Student, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Pulse Nightclub. Not only were most of the victims sexually diverse Latinx but media coverage continuously excluded this fact, contributing to an invisible narrative of the community (Cisneros & Brancho, 2019). As sexually diverse Latinx have multidimensional experiences within identity navigation, community, and safe spaces; it is imperative for us to shift away from linear narratives and discriminatory patterns to empower and understand how we can, as a community overall, serve them.

In this report, we present several solutions to (a) help fill the gap of intersectional cultural competency work; (b) develop a better understanding of sexually diverse Latinx experiences; and (c) contribute to research/community allyship and visibility on the intersections of sexuality, ethnicity, and gender identities in Nebraska. In particular we addressed the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of sexually diverse Latinx individuals in Nebraska?

- What are safe space experiences of sexually diverse Latinx individuals in Nebraska?

- In what ways can the Nebraska Latinx community increase support and allyship to sexually diverse Latinx community?

Methods and Analysis

In this study we utilized an Intersectional Minority Stress framework to interpret data. Intersectionality (rooted in Black feminist movement), highlights issues of oppression and privilege and examines the integration of marginalized identities such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Crenshaw, 1993). Minority Stress Theory aims to center sexually diverse individuals' realities within social environments (i.e., dominant messages of sexuality, gender, and societal expectations) (Meyer, 1995).[3] Sexually diverse Latinx communities face intersectional minority stressors including cultural expectations, rigid traditional value and gender schemas, internalized heterosexism, and family conflict related to their ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender expression (Gutierrez, 2019). Using an intersectional minority stress theory lens, allow us to inform nuances and integration of sexually diverse Latinx identities rooted in Nebraska's social environment of integrated identities, chosen relationships, family values, Latinx culture, community, and society.

In this report we utilized a qualitative methodology approach to capture sexually diverse Latinx narratives. We used a virtual convenience and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants for the study. We shared study recruitment materials with various Latinx, LGBTQ+ centers, university

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3. "Minority stressors include distal stress (objective stress that is influenced by social relationships such as discrimination and prejudice), proximal stress (subjective intrapersonal stress such as internalized heterosexism, expectations of rejection, and concealment), ameliorating factors (coping resources and social support), and mental health outcomes" (Meyer, 2003as cited in Gutierrez, 2019).

departments, and social media groups. In total, we conducted 8 interviews via Zoom, all of them in English. We also included two interviews that were collected by student researchers in 2018. Participants completed a brief screener demographic survey and scheduled individual interviews with myself (Dumayi) and Daniel. Participants age ranged from 19-56, had either been born in or moved to Nebraska, and portrayed a diverse range of Latinx, sexual, and gender identities:

- 5 identified as Mexican while others as Argentinian, Puerto Rican, Guatemalan. Panamanian, & Multiracial

- 6 identified as gay, 3 as lesbian, and others as asexual, pansexual, and queer.

- 5 identified as cismale, 3 as cisfemale, 1 as transwoman, and 1 was unknown.

Interviews included 22 open-ended questions exploring identity navigation, familial and community relationships, safe spaces, and advocacy ideas. Examples of questions included:

- "What is your relationship with your family like if you have come out?"

- "Do you have a community of LBGTQIA+ Latinx people in Nebraska?"

- "Have you felt accepted by other people in the Latinx community in Nebraska? In other places?"

- "In what ways could the Latinx community in Nebraska empower and support the LGBTQIA+ Latinx community"

All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim via Otter.ai transcription services. We followed the Braun and Clarke (2006) guide to thematic analysis with a narrative inquiry to analyze this data, which involved:

1. Thoroughly reading and re-reading interview transcripts.

2. Initial and inductive coding where researchers devised a list of codes based on recurring ideas mentioned by participants. These codes were given short descriptions and were then applied to the interview transcriptions by both authors.

3. Through a narrative lens, latent themes were developed and subthemes categorized within a coding tree method.

4. Themes and subthemes were defined and discussed between the researchers to ensure reliability.

As we both identify as sexually and culturally diverse, we held reflective dialogues with one another and our participants. I (Dumayi), identifies as AfroLatinx, lesbian, and cisgender female, and Daniel identifies as Asian, gay, and cisgender male. In acknowledging our identities, we worked to promote safety within our interviews and analysis, as well as privileges and potential bias in conducting the work.

Overview of Findings

Four themes emerged from our analysis using an intersectional minority stress framework and thematic narrative approach: (a) intersectional identity navigation within systems; (b) intersectional minority stressors and ameliorative factors; (c) connection and disconnection within community and chosen families; and (d) invisibility to visibility. Subthemes are shared below:

First, our analysis reveals narratives of intrapersonal and interpersonal navigation of the self, community, and societal systems. Within these systems, our participants experienced balancing sexual and Latinx culture, exclusion of identities, and daily navigation of a predominately White, heterosexual state.

- *Societal system: Nebraska demographic narratives.*

    o All participants shared intersectional identity navigation (i.e., Latinx, sexuality, gender), was a process in Nebraska regardless of their family, location, or age.

    o A few shared positive experiences within Nebraska and feeling safe in spaces such as the LGBTQ community and being welcomed.

    o An overall lack of diversity limited intersectional identity growth (i.e., growth and development of their ethnicity, sexuality, and gender expression).

- *Community system: Latinx familial and cultural narratives.*

    o Our participants shared experiences related to an unspoken cultural theme of "*Latinos have their own reality.*"

    o All participants shared rigid constructs of Latinx culture (i.e., machismo, traditional value, expectations of attraction and romantic relationships, gender expression) impacted their identity exploration and navigation, past and present. Thus, sexuality and gender expression outside of heteronormativity and cisgender was, "not accepted."

    o Within traditional values, a few participants noted family being extremely important and unique to the Latinx community.

    o Participants shared internalized distress of prioritizing family connection and potential loss of their family and culture.

- Steps have been taken by the Latinx community that show "open-mindedness," such as involving sexually and gender diverse Latinx and allies to show pride flags during the local Cinco de Mayo parade.

- *Intrapersonal system: Experiences of identity prominence.*

  - Identity issues included placing value on their sexual orientation, while their Latinx identity felt out of place or "not enough."

  - A few participants described a constant acknowledgment of colorism within the local community and the Latinx community.

  - Limitations of living in Nebraska included ethnic discrimination of language, color of skin, and sexualization.

- *Intrapersonal system: Growth through learning.*

  - A majority of participants noted that balancing and navigating diverse identities within a White, heterosexual, cisgender culture is a learning experience.

  - A few experienced intersectional identity development through education and networking of the LGBTQ+ community.

  - Individuals shared thoughts on learned awareness and expression of identity prominence. They shared descriptions of "not being taken seriously" in the LGBTQ community heightened awareness of physical safety in certain spaces.

Second, participants shared experiences that fall within an intersectional minority stress model including discrimination (distal stress), concealment (proximal stress), and intrapersonal resiliency (ameliorative factors):

- *Distal stress: Local discrimination.*

  - A few participants shared direct experiences of distal stressors, particularly in towns with rural communities, such as name calling, questions about their bodies, and close physical altercations.

- *Proximal stress: Hiding within family.*

  - Almost all participants shared their experiences of needing to conceal their identities within their families and internalized struggles of hiding.

  - A few participants reported support for their identities from their families, but a majority of responses surrounded avoidance and disconnection: Demonstrating repeated patterns of invisibility.

- o Issues of mental health were connected to their hiding identity experiences and used terms such as, "self-loathing, anxiety, and distress."

- o All participants shared growing up in a religious home which emphasized internal and external conflict with their sexual identities. These results suggest that religiosity still plays a significant role in acceptance, understanding, and support.

- *Ameliorative factors: Pride and giving back.*

  - o Participants shared strength through maintaining joy and dignity in their identities. Many hold motivational factors of confidence, esteem, passion, and advocacy.

  - o Several contributed to the LGBTQ+ community through leadership, activism, peer-support, and supporting queer-run businesses in Nebraska.

  - o A few participants also engaged in activism through their families, being role models of identity and sexuality discussions.

Third, participants reported "community" and "safe spaces" as physical and theoretical places of knowledge, awareness, appreciation, and connection of sexual, cultural, and gender identities:

- *Meaning of community.*

  - o Participants defined community as physical and theoretical spaces including local LGBTQ+ organizations, pride events, and the impact of the people within the spaces which contributed to feelings of acceptance and "freedom."

- *Chosen spaces and families.*

  - o All participants shared chosen, meaningful relationships as created safe spaces in their lives.

  - o All participants shared particular family members, friendships, mentorships, and "the community" as their supportive social networks and chosen families.

- *Lack of intersectional spaces.*

  - o Participants reported their shared struggles of finding connection and intersectional spaces for their multiple integrated identities.

  - o A majority of participants reported a complete lack of connection to the sexually diverse Latinx community in Nebraska. A few of them shared the interviewee was the first sexually diverse Latinx they have interacted with in Nebraska.

o Several shared obstacles of heteronormative intrusion into safe spaces, lack of visibility within the LGBTQ+ community, and hypersexualization of Latinx culture.

Lastly, participants had vast ideas and directions for increasing visibility, advocacy, and support for sexually diverse Latinx community in Nebraska. From the voices of our participants, 6 specific action steps for the Nebraska community included:

1. Increase education for the LGBTQ+ community and identity for Latinx community.

2. Increase visibility and promotion of safe spaces for local business and organizations.

3. Provide a physical area and resources for LGBTQ Latinx connection, such as a community center.

4. Connect and educate parents and families on acceptance, identity development, and promotion of discussion around sexuality.

5. Provide resources for local queer organizations, movements, and individuals.

6. Increase platforms and representation of LGBTQ+ Latinx leadership and role models.

Conclusion:

Our study used a unique approach to shift stereotypical one-dimensional messages, to uplift and empower sexually diverse Latinx voices. Although research has increased in sexually diverse Latinx experience; these experiences within Nebraska are scarce. Our work highlighted a systemic approach to integrate familial, communal, and relational understanding within a diverse community. Sexually diverse Latinx consistently navigate oppression, marginalization, and resiliency interconnected with minority stressors. It further promotes the need to explore tight reigns of religiosity, potential flexibility with traditional culture, and impact on mental health. Lastly, the need to increase education, awareness, and intersectional safe spaces in Nebraska is imperative. Advocacy, promoted visibility, connection, and action for this incredibly resilient community is critical.

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