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“The Greatest Path to Acceptance is to Know We Exist:” Capturing Narratives of Sexually Diverse Latinx in Nebraska

I hold multiple positionalities that inform my work with sexually and gender diverse Latinx. I am a licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT) and mental health practitioner (LMHP) working with Latinx and LGBTQ+ communities. My clinical lens is systemically based, meaning our identities, emotions, and behaviors are intrinsically intertwined and influenced by our personal relationships, family, communities, and societal messages. Thus, as a professor and scholar, I focus on systemic minority stress experiences of sexually and gender diverse Latinx communities. Personally, I am Dominican, lesbian, cisgender femme woman in an intercultural marriage and mom to a multiethnic daughter. My identities and experiences have motivated my work, frame my world, and are shaped by an intersectionality and systemic lens. Intersectionality is a term coined renown feminist and scholar [Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) to empower Black women’s voices within White, women discourse and emphasize identities that are mutually integrating and interlocked within larger systems of power. I share this information as I must recognize my position of power, privileges, and oppressions that create my narrative within multicultural competency and humility work.

Research has increased on sexual and gender diverse Latinx experiences involving stress, acceptance, support, and pride. However, when Dr. Cristián Doña-Reveco proposed this active project to increase allyship and understanding experiences of the community in Nebraska, I didn’t realize the power their excluded rich and isolated narratives held. This drove the importance of this project and its main result: [OLLAS Report #18, “The Greatest Path to Acceptance is to Know We Exist:” Capturing Narratives of Sexually Diverse Latinx in Nebraska](#). Specially, we worked to provide 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. OLLAS provided funding for this project and Daniel Nguyen, a student from University of Nebraska at Lincoln, participated on as a research assistant.

For this project we used an Intersectional Minority Stress framework (Figure 1) to guide our interviews exploring experiences of multiple identity navigation, minority stressors, community and safe spaces, and advocacy of sexually diverse Latinx. We conducted eight interviews virtually over Zoom and also included two additional interviews on this topic done by OLLAS research assistants in 2018. 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.

As this study worked to create space and ensure prioritization of meaning to our participants experiences, it was important to analyze the data using reflexive dialogue between Daniel and myself. As themes began to emerge, it was clear that the community was experiencing multiple, dyadic processes at once.

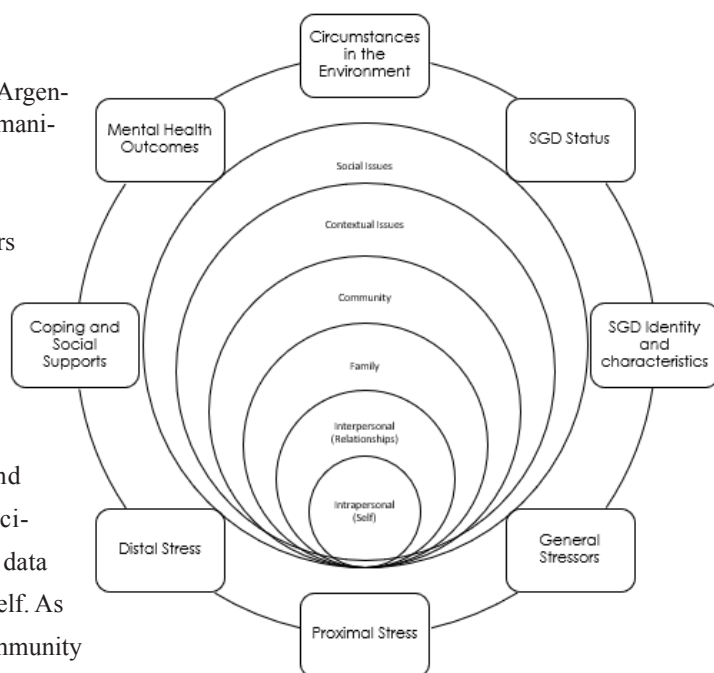


Figure 1. Intersectional Minority Stress Theory
Source: based on [Meyer, 1995](#)

Our analysis resulted in four themes: (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.

In an overview of findings, our study highlights three systems that sexually diverse Latinx navigate (society, community, and self). **Nebraska** was named as a **societal system**, we learned our participants held positive experiences and feeling welcomed in spaces, yet the overall lack of diversity inhibited identity growth and development. **Community systems** involved **Latinx familial and cultural narratives** where implicit and explicit rules of “*Latino reality*” impacted identity exploration and outness. Stories included internalized distress and fear of **losing their family** if they prioritized their sexual orientation. However, they also shared community **steps** to support and acceptance, such as pride flags being flown during the local Cinco de Mayo parades. **Systems of self**, involved issues with **unbalanced value to identities** and in few instances not feeling “Latinx enough”

At the same time, grappling with heightened awareness of colorism and sexualized discrimination. Within self also came **growth** as a majority of participants saw identity navigation as learning experiences, took opportunities to learn and network, and reclaim safety.

Minority stressors became abundantly clear as they shared **discriminatory** experiences (**distal stress**) of explicit stereotyping and **concealing** identities from their family (**proximal stress**). These narratives enhanced internalized distress, avoidance, and disconnection impacting mental health. Within proximal stress, specific Latinx values such as **religiosity** were named as contributing factors to internal and external conflict with sexuality and gender. However, participants were resilient being **prideful** of their various identities and giving to the LGBTQ+ community through advocacy, leadership, connection, and passion.

Participants shared a nuanced dynamic of community and safe spaces. They defined community as **physical and theoretical spaces** including local LGBTQ+ organizations, pride events, and the impact of people within those spaces. However, there was a clear lack of intersectional spaces in Nebraska as a majority shared a **complete disconnect** from any sexually diverse Latinx. Further, spaces that are seen as safe, have been **intruded** by heteronormativity, Whiteness, and further promoted lack of visibility to the sexually diverse Latinx community.

Lastly and critically, participants shared **specific advocacy steps** that Nebraska and the local community can take:

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.

In take away, our participants collectively shared a vigorous message. Multiple identity navigation, minority stress, safe spaces, and advocacy are not linear one-dimensional processes, but integrated multidimensional processes. Understanding this provides further imperative for the Nebraska community to shift an invisible narrative, to a visible one. As one of our participants said it best:

“The greatest path to acceptance is to know we exist”

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