Experiences and Perceptions about Social Support among Black Men who have Sex with Men in Tennessee

Chelsea McQueen
Vanderbilt University

Sandra L. Barnes
Vanderbilt University

Introduction

Research suggests that Black men who have sex with men (BMSM) often experience challenges due to their race, sexual orientation, and HIV/AIDS exposure (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016; Peterson and Jones, 2009). Other studies illustrate how BMSM are adaptive and resilient (Barnes, 2012; Battle et al, 2002; Choi et al, 2011). This analysis focuses on the experiences and suggestions of a cadre of BMSM as they navigate a metropolitan city in Tennessee. What social support do they have and need? This project illumines less studied aspects of their lives.

Studying the Multi-faceted Lives and Social Support of BMSM

Research often focuses on HIV/AIDS among BMSM (CDC, 2015, 2016; Hall, 2008; Millett et al., 2006), including geographic disparities in the South (CDC, 2016). Fewer studies examine more nuanced dimensions of their lives; this study responds to this paucity. Germaine here is the possible beneficence of social support and active allies (Barnes, 2012; Jones et al., 2010) to: combat stigma from family, religious, and community settings (Balaji et al., 2012; Peterson and Jones, 2009); increase resiliency; and provide coping mechanisms against racism and homophobia (Barnes, 2012; Battle et al., 2002). Central to our study is to identify people and groups that have and/or can provide BMSM with social, economic, and practical support and resources.

Capturing the Voices and Views of BMSM

This analysis is based on a 90-minute focus group held during spring 2016 at a community-based center located in a metropolitan city in Tennessee. Eight self-identified BMSM between the ages 18 and 28 years old participated (median age of 24 years old). Six men were attending college to pursue Bachelors (n=5) or Masters (n=1) degrees. The majority relocated and have lived in this city an average of 3 years (refer to Table 1). Snowball sampling was used via fliers, word of mouth, and local allies of the researchers. Interested BMSM were screened for eligibility. Incentives included one meal and a $20 gift card. The focus group data were collected by a community member matched by race and trained to facilitate focus groups. The authors developed a semi-structured interview guide (provided upon request) focused on racial and sexual identity, personal problems and strengths, and overall experiences. The focus group was audio-recorded, transcribed by a trained transcriber, and reviewed by the authors. Pseudonyms are used. The small sample

precludes generalizability to all BMSMs. However, the objective here is to consider views and suggestions around social support used by participants to navigate possibly unwelcoming spaces in positive ways. Content analysis was used to uncover emergent themes and patterns (Krippendorf, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002). Responses were systematically examined using both open-coding, in which broad concepts during the dialogue are categorized, as well as axial coding in which connections between these concepts and themes are analyzed (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Table 1: Thumbnail Descriptions of Focus Group Participants

Name	Thumbnail Profile
Dominique	**23 years old from Memphis, TN** Has lived in the city 3 years Undergraduate student (English and Philosophy major)
Peter	**25 years old from Tacoma, WA** Graduated from a local college (completing M.A.) Has lived in the city 6 years
Kenneth	**23 years old who currently works full-time** Starting school for nursing
Samuel	**25 years old from the People's Republic of Congo** Has lived in the city 7 years
George	**28 years old** Current college student who works full time in hospitality Has lived in the city 2 years
Jawan	**24 years old (no other information provided)**
Terry	**22 years old from Dover, DE**
Larry	**From Atlanta, GA (age not provided)** Has lived in the city 3 months

 N=8. Data collected spring 2016. Pseudonyms are used. Locale is a city in Tennessee.

Findings

Two themes emerged that describe existing and needed social support: *We Can Build a Community:* Traditional and Non-Traditional Social Support and *It Still Takes a Village*: A Call for Community Support. A thematic analysis and representative quotes are provided next.

We Can Build a Community: Traditional and Non-Traditional Social Support

In the initial theme, BMSM describe their most beneficial social relationships. Participants report positive family relationships as an important source of social support, which is counter to some research findings (Blalaji et al., 2012). For example, 23-year-old student Kenneth summarizes his closest ties: "Mom, my mom and my family." His comment is echoed by many respondents who describe supportive ties with biological kin despite the lack of acceptance from other family members. Others note familial support provided by certain siblings and cousins, particularly persons younger in age. Their remarks parallel research on the enduring relationships common in some Black families (Billingsley, 1992).

Several participants describe positive alternative familial bonds;

> I was a part of the gay family… [they] follow the same lines of a traditional family. The way it started off for me was, which is common now, someone wanted me to be their child…I didn't necessarily know when I first got involved into it, I didn't necessarily know what a family was or what it does…but it's a group of gay men, they all get together. They have a mother, father... But most of the people there, part of the family, lack support from their real families and that's how it starts sometimes. [He, the father figure] was attracted to me and it led inward that way… But it's not necessarily that we were having sex or anything, but their attraction to me made them want to have me as a child.

As quoted above, Dominique, a 23-year-old college student, describes a prior group of BMSM that created a long-term non-traditional family to meet emotional, economic, and social needs. An absence of biological bonds did not undermine the creation of an adaptive, supportive, and functional family. Equally important for Dominique, sexual behavior was not a requisite for membership. Dominique's fictive kin sustained him during a difficult period in his life and provided an example of an innovative family (Balaji et al., 2012; Battle et al., 2002). Next, Dominique challenges BMSM to invoke their own agency;

> Peer support… We can build a community to help each other. And that connects back to community. When we're all together as one…and striving as well.

The above remark hearkens back to *and* extends historic studies about positive outcomes when Black people, families, and communities harness their resources (Barnes, 2012). Dominique believes that BMSM have these same, often untapped, abilities (Jones et al., 2010). Yet Peter, a 25-year-old graduate student, describes challenges BMSM might face to accomplish this goal;

> A lot of people don't even want to meet new friends. I've interacted with quite a few MSM here in [name of city] and a lot of them are just, 'This is my clique. This is my crew. This is my squad. No new friends.'

Peter's comment is supported by other respondents who describe existing cliques in the city that can undermine social support (Choi et al., 2002; Peterson and Jones, 2009). But George, a 28-year-old college student and hospitality employee, explains other benefits;

> Peer support groups for different things. Social support on problems that deal with that all kind of [challenges BMSM face], just discuss what's going on in your life and how to deal with it - have someone else to help get through it.

George remains confident that BMSM are capable of helping each other meet their varied social, economic, and emotional needs. The common thematic thread is the importance of biological and fictive kin to help BMSM as well as the need for BMSM to feel empowered to help themselves (Balaji et al., 2012; Battle et al., 2002; Billingsley, 1992).

It Still Takes a Village: A Call for Community Support

The second theme suggests the need for broader community support for BMSM. Although they currently live in a city known for its economic stability and growth, respondents believe that isolation, stigma, and limited information among their peers prevent them from maximizing their individual and collective potential (Barnes, 2012; Balaji et al., 2012). To them, family support only goes so far; society must be intricately involved in empowering all of its members. For example, 24-year-old Jawan notes;

> Community support… Community to actually get to where they have to go. Even having a job... Different groups or organizations that help with STDs and things of that nature… Or even find housing if they need it.

According to the above view, initiatives that assist with employment, healthcare, and housing are needed to improve the life chances and quality of life of BMSM (Barnes, 2012; Jones et al., 2010). And 25-year-old Samuel posits, "housing and even places MSM can go to be comfortable and not feel neglected or feel like they're being pushed away because of how they identify." Samuel's remark is supported by the entire group; housing and social outlets are crucial safe spaces to combat stressors (Choi et al., 2011).

For Kenneth, efforts are needed to better equip young BMSM to reach their dreams;

> Government support… For instance you may have…kids or people that may go to college but, and they have assistance but it's not enough…I know a lot of people that went to college…but halfway in they didn't have enough money to even finish… programs to help people go to college.

The above view is a reminder that the lives and possible challenges of many BMSM parallel those of their non-gay peers (Means and Jaeger, 2015). However, when you layer the intersections of race and sexual orientation into achieving these dreams, it becomes more difficult with each marginalized identity a person embodies (Collins, 2000). Similarly, Peter provides a reminder of commonalities regardless of one's sexual orientation (Jones et al., 2011);

> We also need, we all come, MSM, we all come to safe spaces, these places, with our guards up. We actually need some type of way to know… [that] it's okay to be out, to be ourselves…to know it's okay to let our hair down, to be accepting, to build the trust. Make a friend or to meet new friends.

According to Peter, social support can take many forms for BMSM, but it should include welcoming, accepting places where "it's okay to be out". For Peter and his peers, supportive spaces will ultimately shape how adaptive and resilient BMSM can be.

Conclusion: Next Steps for BMSM

BMSM in this study tell us specifically about their past and present forms of social support. They are also aware of their varied needs (Choi et al., 2011). Most of the participants are college students or graduates striving to achieve their dreams. They have experienced various sources of social support; they suggest that peer support is apparent, but could be stronger. Moreover, additional economic and social resources from local groups and active allies could support individual and communal successes (Balaji et al., 2012). Equally, many of the participants' aspirations and needs parallel those of people in general and suggest the need for a comparative study on BMSM and non-BMSM experiences as well as research on socioeconomic experiences among BMSM (Barnes, 2012; Billingsley, 1992). Ultimately, BMSM experiences and suggestions illustrate the importance of holistic programs and practices to better enhance the existing strengths as well as meet the diverse needs of BMSM.

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