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Voices from the Borderlands: The Experiences of Latina Women Who Have Sex With Women (WSW)

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

VOICES FROM THE BORDERLANDS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINA WSW

By

Zamira Castro

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

August 2019

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

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VOICES FROM THE BORDERLANDS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINA WSW

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This study sought to contribute to psychological understandings of Latina women who have sex with women (WSW) via a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry. Grounded in a feminist, intersectional framework, this study followed Smith and Osborn's (2015) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a Latina WSW and how this experience is influenced by multiple stressors related to racial, ethnic, and sexual identity. Interviews were conducted with 13 participants and subsequently analyzed using Smith and Osborn's (2015) guidelines for interpretation, thematic labeling, and narrative synthesis. Emergent themes characterizing participants' experiences as Latina WSW were listed and described in detail, along with participant statements and researcher analytic commentary, to provide a detailed account of what this phenomenon entails, as perceived by participants and as understood by this researcher. In doing so, this study aspires to add to the literature a more nuanced understanding of Latina WSW experiences in the hopes that such knowledge will inform future research on Latina sexuality, clinical practice with Latina WSW, and policy measures aimed at promoting psychological health and optimal well-being.

Dedication page

This is for *las nenas atrevidas, las mujeres poderosas, las que nunca se dan por vencidas*. This is for my Bronx girls especially – we are tender-hearted and hard-headed, determined. This is for the goddesses in all of us. This is for you, queer brown girl. You may never read these lines, but I see you. I love you. This is for every set of arms that ever embraced me when I was free-falling. This is for you, Alma, Jacinta, Julieta, Franny, Idalia, Yahaira, Cristina, Layla, Noelia, Victoria, Julieta, Monserrat, Selena, thank you for your stories.

Acknowledgement page

Special shout-out to my village, and they are: Mami, for raising me to be the *fosforito* I am today; *la suegra mas bella de esta bolita del universo*, for loving me as if you'd birthed me; *mi querido suegro*, for showing me it is never too late to learn a father's love; *нено*, for showing me it is never too late to learn a brother's love. And *mi media guayaba*, I pray this lifetime is enough to return even an ounce of the peace you've given this heart. Thank you for giving new meaning to the words, "I got you."

Special shout-out to my chosen family, my village is vast and to God(dess) I give all the thanks: Stephanie, a.k.a pepany, a.k.a. *mi hermana*, thank you for being my day 1, for never letting me forget the magic in me; Nic, for hypin' me since 2008 and loving me through it all; Heidi, thank you for being the kind of friend every person should have, you've been my rock when I most needed grounding; Maxie, thank you for all the love, and for the space you cultivate for tears, laughter, and visions of the good life we deserve; Monique, thank you for embracing and celebrating me, I am so lucky to have grown closer to you; Kiet and Samantha, you guys have been the best cheerleaders a girl could ask for, and who could forget a bond forged through none other than quails?!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (LBQ) women of color are said to embody a *triple jeopardy*. A term coined by Greene (1994) and largely borne out of prior Black feminist scholarship on intersectionality and identity politics (Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991), triple jeopardy refers specifically to the experiences of sexual minority women of color as they simultaneously inhabit permutations of sexual, gender, and racial categories that have been traditionally marginalized and oppressed. As a result of this social positioning, sexual minority women of color are uniquely impacted by racism, sexism, homophobia, and their correlates (e.g., microaggressions) (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, Walters, 2011; Bowleg, 2012). Consistent with calls that have been made for the application of intersectional frameworks to research in psychology (Cole, 2009), and for a prioritization of the subjective experiences of LGBT people of color (Moradi et al., 2010), this study focuses on Latina women who have sex with women (WSW).

LBQ women of color have been found to contend with a host of unique stressors empirically linked to diminished health outcomes and indicators of poorer quality health care overall. Specifically, studies examining the relationship among sexual minority status, race, and various components of mental health have found sexual minority women of color report greater levels of mood and anxiety disorders, compared to White sexual minority women (Bostwick et al., 2010), in addition to having lower rates of health insurance coverage and treatment usage (Jeong, Veldhuis, Aranda, Hughes, 2016). Even so, empirical literature has traditionally only focused on single aspects of identity, studying these in isolation and not examining the collective impact of belonging to multiple oppressed groups (Cole, 2009; Moradi, DeBlaere, Huang, 2010; Velez, Moradi,

DeBlaere, 2015; Sarno, Mohr, Jackson, Fassinger, 2015). As Cole (2009) has noted, psychological research that proceeds without an intersectional framework renders our current understandings of discrete identity categories and their relationships to health outcomes “incomplete and biased,” (p. 173). We know, for example, that how sexuality and gender are experienced varies by race and that any attempt to cleave these apart takes away from the nuance and complexity found at the intersection of identities (Cole, 2009; Bowleg, 2012). For example, LGBTQ people of color experience racism in queer communities (Moradi et al., 2010; Balsam et al., 2011), and women have a social position much defined by patriarchal visions of womanhood and femininity, as well as race (Cole, 2009).

The literature currently available on Latina WSW describes the unique challenges faced by this group, namely, how these women struggle with a host of stressors related to their multiple oppressed identities, and, in turn, how these stressors collectively function to influence their psychological health in a number of ways (Velez, Moradi, DeBlaere, 2015; Acosta, 2010). Acosta (2010) discusses, for example, the different ways lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas negotiate disclosures of their sexual identities within their families of origin and how their decisions are influenced by other components (i.e., age, migration status, generation in the U.S., socioeconomic status, etc.) of their identity statuses. As Acosta (2010) notes, most sexual identity formation models proposed in the literature rely on a developmental arc that invariably ends with a coming-out story, culminating in either family acceptance or rejection of the individual. For Latina WSW, however, coming out is a complex, cyclical process influenced by myriad factors related to cultural values, family cohesion, and other contextual variables. As such, the “coming

out” experiences of Latina WSW are misunderstood, if not altogether erased, when held to the standard put forward by mainstream sexual identity formation models (Acosta, 2010).

Thus, calls for the examination of multiple identity statuses and their cumulative impact on mental health within the field of psychology have been made with the recognition that nuance is lost when we fail to consider the unique contributions of each (Cole, 2009). What follows is an overview of the stressors LBQ women of color, and specifically Latina WSW, contend with at the intersection of multiple minority statuses. More specifically, attention is paid to how mental health is affected by race, sexual orientation, and gender, as well as by the intersectionality of these three identities.

Race, Racism, and Mental Health

Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams (1999) were among the first to offer a systematic review of the psychological literature on racism and its impact on the psychological well-being of African Americans in particular. They declared that, despite reported improvements in intergroup ethnic attitudes over time, racism continued to impinge on the psychological well-being of African Americans in this country. As a result, Clark et al. (1999) proposed a biopsychosocial model for conceptualizing the psychological impact of racism, race-related health disparities, and possible interventions that could be developed to alleviate its’ impact.

Modeled in part after a general stress-coping model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Clark et al. (1999) conceptualized the psychological sequelae of racism as one emerging out of an interaction of (1) the stress-inducing effects of racist experiences, (2) the biopsychosocial impact of these and (3) differential exposure to

racism and resultant coping resources among African Americans. As such, Clark et al.'s (1999) biopsychosocial model was offered as a framework that could help explicate the mechanisms by which racism, as a stressor, leads to the observed variety of within-group health outcomes and how these are determined by experiences with racism. Clark et al.'s (1999) seminal work in this area paved the way for subsequent research in psychology that conceptualized racism as a stressor unique to people of color in the United States, such that we now have a greater appreciation for the psychological consequences attributable to racism and its impact on other indicators of health for people of color.

Since Clark et al.'s (1999) work, the deleterious effects of racism have been well-documented, evidenced by higher levels of chronic stress and life-diminishing health conditions (i.e., differential access to resources) related to racism for people of color (Clark et al., 1999; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2004/2005; Brondolo et al., 2009; Pascoe & Richman, 2009), which are in turn associated with a host of adverse health outcomes such as cardiac disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes, amongst others (Brondolo et al., 2009; Lukachko, Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, 2014). Conceptual and quantitative (i.e., meta-analytic) reviews of the literature have also found evidence for the link between perceived discrimination, racism, and poorer quality mental and physical health (Williams, Neighbors, Jackson, 2003; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, Garcia, 2014; Paradies, Ben, Denson, Elias, Priest, Pieterse, 2015; Kaholokula, 2016). Specifically, perceived discrimination and racism have been found to be associated with greater expression of depression, psychological distress, and anxiety (Williams et al., 2003; Paradies et al., 2015), with poorer psychological well-being

(Schmitt et al., 2014), as well as hypertension, diabetes, and health-risks such as increased rates of substance use (Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Kaholokula, 2016).

Given the evidence available, it is now established that the psychological well-being of people of color in this country is greatly complicated by their unique experiences with racism and related stressors (e.g., discrimination). For example, Araujo and Borrell (2006) noted that literature on the relationship between perceived discrimination and health outcomes among African Americans has paved the way towards understanding its impact on other communities of color. Grounded in this body of literature, Araujo and Borrell (2006) conducted a systematic review and found that discrimination has been consistently associated with diminished life chances (e.g. lower levels of educational attainment) and poorer quality mental health (e.g. greater psychological distress) among Latinos. A similar review also revealed a link between perceived discrimination and greater psychological distress and lower self-esteem among Latinos (Moradi & Risco, 2006).

A more recent meta-analysis conducted by Lee and Ahn (2012) similarly found discrimination to be significantly associated with greater expression of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress amongst Latino/as. Importantly, Lee and Ahn (2012) also found that Latino/as possess a variety of individual-level resources to cope with and counter the negative impact of discrimination, including positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a reliance on family for support. Indeed, their meta-analysis revealed that Latino/as possessing more negative constructs about themselves and others and less robust support networks were more likely to experience the negative effects of discrimination as their ability to adaptively cope was diminished (Lee & Ahn, 2012).

As women of color, Latina WSW must therefore contend with racism, in addition to other psychosocial stressors, as they navigate and negotiate their multiple minority identities. As I will attempt to illustrate, experiences with racism are subsequently influenced by Latina WSW's status as sexual minorities. Together, these sources of stress likely contribute to the unique challenges faced by this group of women as they grow and develop in a society that, despite changing social attitudes, continues to be inhospitable to expressions of difference.

Sexual Orientation and Mental Health: Minority Stress Model

Meyer (2003) was the first to articulate a model of minority stress for understanding the experiences of LGB individuals. Up until this model was proposed, the higher prevalence of psychopathology among LGB individuals most often attributed this disparity to deficits inherent to LGB people (Meyer, 2003). As such, the literature had often failed to adequately account for exactly why or how LGB individuals experienced higher levels of mental disorders and suicidality when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Meyer, 2003).

In an effort to address this gap, Meyer (2003) proposed a model of minority stress for understanding the risks stigmatized individuals such as LGB people face, along with the factors that can potentially ameliorate said stress and contribute to mental health. Meyer (2003) defined minority stress as the “excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position” (p. 675). Meyer (2003) distinguished between three processes of minority stress pertinent to understanding LGB individuals' mental health. Existing on a continuum from distal to proximal in nature, Meyer (2003) outlined the following components of minority

stress processes for LGB individuals: a) external, stressful social conditions; b) expectations of these stressful events and hypervigilance and awareness as a result; & c) the internalization of stress-inducing social attitudes (e.g., homophobia) (p. 675). Thus, Meyer (2003) posited that sexual minority stigma and discrimination experiences are ultimately the cause of the higher incidences of mental health distress for LGB people.

Hatzenbuehler (2009) updated Meyer's (2003) minority stress model by adding to the understanding of factors that mediate the relation between stress and psychopathology for LGB people. Specifically, Hatzenbuehler (2009) proposed that LGB individuals (a) experience disproportionate amounts of stigma-related stress, (b) which result in elevations in general psychological processes (i.e., emotion dysregulation) that confer risk for psychopathology, and (c) that these processes in turn mediate the relationship between minority stress and psychopathology (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). In other words, Hatzenbuehler's (2009) framework melds minority-stress (Meyer, 2003) and general psychopathology risk literature (i.e., Savin-Williams, 2001) to provide a model that can be used to further delineate the mechanisms by which LGB individuals, as the literature has shown, experience greater degrees of psychological distress and well-being.

Thus far, research by Meyer (1995; 2003), Mays and Cochran (2001), Newcomb and Mustanski (2010), and others have found sexual minority stressors (e.g. internalized homophobia, stigma, discrimination) to be associated with a host of psychosocial sequelae. Meyer (1995; 2003) has shown internalized homophobia, along with other minority stressors, is linked to diminished self-esteem, greater psychological distress, and suicidal ideation among LGB individuals. Mays and Cochran (2001) have also documented greater levels of perceived discrimination, overall psychological distress,

and psychiatric morbidity among LGB persons. In a meta-analytic review of the literature, Newcomb and Mustanski (2010) also reported a higher prevalence of internalizing mental disorders (i.e., depression and anxiety) associated with internalized homophobia among LGB individuals.

Subsequent studies that have applied Meyer's (2003) minority stress model to the study of LGB mental health have also found that experiences of victimization and internalized homophobia are strongly associated with greater levels of substance use among sexual minority women (Lehavot & Simoni, 2011) and also predictive of poorer physical health (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2015). Similarly, research by Blosnich, Farmer, Lee, Silenzio, and Bowen (2010) has revealed LGB individuals are more likely to engage in health risk behaviors (i.e., smoking) and have lower odds of seeking routine health care. Specifically, lesbian women were found to be less likely than heterosexual women to have had a routine annual physical exam and bisexual women were 2.5 times less likely to have refrained from seeking medical care due to cost (Blosnich et al., 2010). This pattern of findings suggests that, when considering the mental health of LGB individuals, a consideration for the interplay of sexual orientation and gender is necessary. Therefore, in highlighting the particular factors relevant to understanding the experiences of Latina WSW, a consideration of gender is warranted, in addition to factors related to their status as racial and sexual minorities.

Gender and Feminism in Psychology

Like other academic disciplines, psychology was in many ways changed by the feminist movements of the 1960's and 1970's which demanded public recognition of the role that sexism played in the societal denigration and mistreatment of women (Walker,

1989; Eagly, Rose, Riger, & McHugh, 2012). For example, as feminist activism and scholarship reframed discussions on violence towards women as an issue of male abuse of power, psychological scholarship on the topic was similarly revolutionized (Walker, 1989). Likewise, feminist critiques of social science research also catalyzed a re-examination of assumptions and biases that had historically functioned to both exclude women from research and, in doing so, grossly misrepresent these as well (Eagly et al., 2012).

Within the field of psychology, the ideological reach of sexism had resulted in perceptions of women as childlike, dependent, innately docile, and principally interested in marriage (to men, of course) (Eagly et al., 2012). Other sexist assumptions promulgated by psychology involved the idea of innate maternal instincts as superseding desires for professional development and intellectual inferiority to men (Eagly et al., 2012). As noted by Eagly et al. (2012), feminist critiques of the 1960's and 1970's thus served to fuel within psychology an earnest interest in understanding the lives of women through feminist analysis, generating a dramatic shift in the amount and quality of scholarship dedicated to the psychological lives of women.

For instance, research grounded in feminist ideology, such as the work of Glick and Fiske (2001; 2011), has greatly contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the role of sexism in the perpetuation of gender inequality. Glick and Fiske (2001) were the first to characterize sexism as ambivalent in nature, comprising two sub-types they termed *hostile* and *benevolent sexism*. Hostile sexism, as the name implies, represents a stance that views women as adversaries who seek to control men through feminist ideology (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Its counterpart, benevolent sexism, refers to the

seemingly benign perspective that women are pure creatures in need of protection and adoration from men (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Glick and Fiske (2001; 2011) have argued these sub-types are ideological complements forming an ambivalent attitude towards women that is ubiquitous in society, simultaneously situating women as enemies not to be trusted and as weaker creatures inferior to men in strength and intellect. Furthermore, as research has shown, these manifestations of sexism have important implications for the well-being of women (Glick & Fiske, 2001, 2011; Calogero & Jost, 2010; Hideg & Ferris, 2016).

Research by Calogero and Jost (2010) has shown that exposure to sexist ideology, such as benevolent sexist attitudes, encourages women to acutely engage in more self-surveillance and endorse greater degrees of body shame. Relatedly, Hideg and Ferris (2016) examined the impact of benevolent sexism on gender inequality and found that while individuals endorsing benevolent sexist attitudes were more likely to support a gender-based employment equity (EE) policy, this support only extended to positions that were traditionally feminine in nature. As a result, this support subtly undermined gender equality in the workplace by contributing to gender-based occupational segregation and precluding efforts to hire and promote women for traditionally masculine positions in which they are underrepresented (Hideg & Ferris, 2016).

That said, naming the role of gender and sexism and their relationship to psychological well-being is a fundamental, albeit limited, point of departure (Lorde, 1982; Comas-Diaz, 1991). While feminist analysis traditionally places sexism as the core component of its criticisms, what defines the roles of women, and in particular women of color, goes beyond the influence of gender and sexism (hooks, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991;

Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994). Thus, traditional feminist rhetoric has been criticized for its limited analysis of gender to the exclusion of race and class and how these uniquely shape the experiences of women (hooks, 1981; Crenshaw, 1991; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994).

This criticism was articulated early on in the writings of women of color who often challenged the narrow assumptions of well-meaning feminist theories which, by virtue of having origins in the struggles of middle-class white women, were inadequate for describing the realities of women of color (hooks, 1981). These analyses were most fervently carried out by critical race theorists and writers, such as bell hooks (1981), Gloria Anzaldua (1987), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), amongst others. Within psychology, Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) have contributed to psychological theory and practice by applying these sensibilities to our understandings of the mental health needs of women of color.

Indeed, this current study follows in this tradition of theorizing from the vantage point of feminists of color and attempts to delineate the many factors that come to bear in the experiences of Latina WSW. As racial, gender, and sexual minorities, the lives of Latina WSW are influenced by forces attributable to their triple jeopardy status. It is for this reason that an examination of concomitant factors related to their multiply-determined minority status is necessary if an honest exploration of the lives of Latina WSW is to take place.

Intersectionality and The Borderlands: Conceptualizing multiple oppressions

Referring to experiences of racism and sexism for women of color, Crenshaw (1991) describes intersectionality as a process whereby “what was formerly perceived as

isolated and individual” is now recognized as “social and dynamic” (p. 1241).

Intersectionality recognizes that subjective experiences of discrimination or prejudice are not inconsequential, infrequent events but are pervasive and systemic, thereby affecting and characterizing not only individual experiences, but the experiences of minority groups as a whole. Bowleg (2008) additionally notes that intersectionality refers to the fact that multiply oppressed individuals should be understood not as a sum of disparate parts but rather as a meaningful whole where their identity is intersectional and at once constitutive of all those group memberships an individual carries.

Crenshaw (1991) states that such a process of recognizing the “individual” factors of self as “social and dynamic” has come to characterize the identity politics of people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and people who simultaneously identify with both, as these groups have come to find strength and community in those spaces where their identities and experiences overlap. As Crenshaw (1991) notes, identity politics, as this phenomenon is often referred to, is significant because it is a fundamental component of the individual and group identity development of multiply oppressed peoples. The entire scope of a woman’s multiple and intersecting identities, for example, cannot be dissected and interpreted in isolation, for each identity contributes to shaping cohesive concepts about the self, others, and life overall (Crenshaw, 1991).

Within psychology, Cole (2009) has made a similar push for the use of intersectional frameworks in researching multiply oppressed populations. Cole (2009) states that while critical race and feminist theorists have traditionally espoused an intersectional sensibility in their analyses of human experience, psychology has yet to meaningfully confer a similar focus on the interplay and mutuality of multiple identity

categories and their relationship to mental health outcomes. The aspirational goal of utilizing an intersectional framework in psychological research, Cole (2009) argues, is to combat the erasure of people of color's experiences within the literature and, in this way, develop theories and interventions reflective of the unique psychosocial realities of people of color and other oppressed peoples. To be sure, the lack of psychological research simultaneously examining multiple identity constructs has led many in the field to make global assumptions about LGBT mental health and well-being from very limited (often white and middle class) vantage points (Cole, 2009), resulting in a gross misunderstanding of the subjective experiences of multiply oppressed individuals and their subsequent mental health needs.

While differences certainly exist amongst Latina WSW, these women all share the experience of being positioned as racialized and sexualized objects in the greater social order (Acosta, 2010). This experience, though nearly absent in empirical literature, has been creatively and eloquently described by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua (1987), and her writings in *Borderlands* provide a theoretical framework for understanding the multiple oppressions sexual minority women of color contend with as they navigate their developing racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. In Anzaldua's (1987) writings, she situates the borderlands as a physical metaphor for the psychological borderlands endured when individuals embody multiple, and sometimes opposing, aspects of identity that cast them as deviant or inferior in the greater social order. In other words, the borderlands is the repository of oppressed identities and voices, and its' inhabitants are often racial, sexual, and gender minorities (Anzaldua, 1987).

The borderlands experience is one of psychic confusion, and in their efforts to reconcile the “forbidden” parts of their identity (i.e., queerness) with their native cultures, women of color may sometimes opt to avoid rejection by shoving those “forbidden” parts of themselves in the shadows. In doing so, these women are existing in a space demarcated by unnatural boundaries, and their efforts for survival and self-preservation often leave them isolated. Existing in the borderlands, fragmented in their efforts to pledge allegiance to their native culture while grappling with desires inconsistent with heteronormative scripts, these women struggle with a “despot duality” that implies an unnatural singularity: they can be either/or, but never both/and (Anzaldúa, p.19, 1987). For Latina WSW, this despot duality has the potential to not only demarcate unnatural boundaries that alienate them from potential sources of strength (i.e., friends, family), but also from their own ability to arrive at healthy self-concepts inclusive of their multiple identities.

The Psychology of Multiple Oppressions

Research on the mental health of LGBT people of color has consistently revealed the relationship between multiple minority stressors and poorer quality psychological health. For example, heterosexism, homophobia, and racism have been found to be collective determinants of adverse health outcomes in Asian and Latino LGBT adults (Cochran, Mays, Alegria, Ortega & Takeuchi, 2007) and LGBT Latinas specifically (Velez, Moradi & DeBlaere, 2015). In a study examining mental health and substance use disorders among Latino and Asian American lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults, Cochran et al. (2007) found an elevated risk in suicidality and depression amongst LGB people of color when compared to their heterosexual, White counterparts. Relevant to this current

proposal, lesbian and bisexual women in the Cochran et al. (2007) study were more likely than heterosexual women to report longer lifetime histories of depressive disorders.

In his discussion of minority stressors, Meyer (2003) noted concealment of one's sexual identity has also been discussed in the literature as constituting a significant stress process for LGB individuals. Interestingly, studies exploring the association of concealment to psychological health have found differences among LGB individuals that fall along racial lines. For example, in a study comparing perceptions of heterosexist stigma, internalized homophobia, and outness between LGB of color and White individuals, Moradi et al. (2010) found that role-flexing – the differential concealment of one's sexual identity depending on the environment – occurred more in the LGB of color group than it did in the White LGB group, suggesting that LGB people of color may contend with unique stressors related to their belonging to multiple minority groups and that this in turn influences their experiences of sexual identity concealment. Findings such as that of Moradi et al. (2010) further substantiate the claim that for LGB people of color the interplay of racial and sexual identity-related stressors give way to unique experiences that often manifest in greater psychological distress when compared to their White counterparts. With this understanding in mind, adopting a framework that is cognizant of the multiple minority stressors Latina WSW contend with is necessary if we aim to truly understand the contours that shape their subjective experiences and, in turn, their mental health.

In an effort to investigate the additive and interactive relationship that race and sexual-identity related stressors (e.g. discrimination, homophobia) have to psychological distress, Velez et al. (2015) found that racist discrimination, heterosexist discrimination,

and internalized heterosexism yielded unique positive relations with psychological distress in a sample of sexual minority Latino/as, providing partial support for the purported cumulative impact of multiple minority stressors on mental health. Similarly, Szymanski & Sung (2010) also found the interaction of minority stressors such as internalized homophobia, internalized heterosexism, and experience of racist events were positively related to psychological distress amongst Asian American sexual minority women. In a more recent study examining the relationship between discrimination and mental health disparities among Black sexual minority women, Calabrese, Meyer, Overstreet, Haile, and Hansen (2015) concluded that a minority stress framework inclusive of race, gender, and sexuality-related stressors best accounted for the disparate patterns of discrimination and poorer psychological well-being that characterized this group compared to White sexual minority women and Black sexual minority men. In comparing Black sexual minority women with White sexual minority women and Black sexual minority men, Calabrese et al. (2015) found that, overall, Black sexual minority women reported greater degrees of discrimination and poorer psychological and social well-being than White sexual minority women and Black sexual minority men.

Collectively, these and other studies like them bring attention to the multiply-determined nature of mental health for LBQ women of color. They provide empirical support for the value of triple-jeopardy (Greene, 1994; Bowleg, 2012), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2008) and borderland (Anzaldúa, 1987) concepts in articulating the unique experiences sexual minority women of color have with minority stressors and how these interact in idiosyncratic ways to influence their developing selves. Altogether, research on LGB people of color has thus far conceptualized

disparities in health outcomes for this population to be partly explained by experiences of chronic stress characterized by factors such as racism, discrimination, homophobia, and sexism. What continues to be lacking in the literature concerning LGB people of color, however, are the specific patterns of minority stress-health links to be found among sub-groups such as Latinos and, furthermore, among Latinos of varying ethnicities.

The Triple Jeopardy of Latina WSW

As racial, gender, and sexual minorities, Latina WSW are socially positioned to contend with many of the minority stressors aforementioned, including but not limited to homophobia and racism. Among sexual minority Latinos, stressors such as discrimination, homophobia, and racism have been found to collectively debilitate mental health and overall life satisfaction (Velez et al., 2015). Relatedly, Balsam, Blayney, Molina, Dillworth, Zimmerman, and Kaysen (2015) investigated the ethnic/racial differences in identity and mental health outcomes among White, Black, Latina, and Asian sexual minority women, finding that Black and Latina women were consistently more likely to be less out, live with family, and have more limited access to health insurance.

In a similar vein, Aranda et al. (2015) reported that in their study of Black, White, and Latina lesbians, Latinas were consistently more likely to report depression and least likely to disclose their sexual minority status to family. This reporting changed, however, amongst Latinas reporting greater amounts of disclosure to non-family individuals, which was related to lower levels of depression overall (Aranda et al., 2015). Acosta (2013) reported a similar trend in her qualitative study of lesbian, bisexual and queer Latinas and their management of sexual identity in the context of family. Specifically, Acosta (2013)

described how LBQ Latinas negotiate unique cultural pressures that often complicate their efforts at coming out in the context of family; invariably, these efforts are at once influenced by the need to balance desires for authenticity on one hand with desires to maintain family cohesion on the other. Altogether, these studies are illustrative of the unique experiences Latina WSW have as sexual minority women of color, experiences that are characterized by their triple jeopardy position and the multiple stressors that come with an intersectional identity.

In exploring the experiences of Latina WSW, it is also important to consider the vast ethnic diversity that characterizes this group of women. For instance, while similarities do exist amongst Latinos given their shared history of Spanish colonization and *mestizaje* (racial/ethnic blending of indigenous, Spanish, and African ancestry), many scholars would argue far more differences exist beneath these pan-ethnic points of convergence (Falicov, 2013). Latinos differ, for example, in the relative saliency of *la familia* or familismo, a cultural value emphasizing loyalty and interdependence with family. Typically attributed to Latinos broadly, Latinos' adherence to familismo as a cultural value can vary depending upon their generational status in the U.S., socioeconomic background, and experiences with racism, all of which can function to foster or preclude a reliance on the family (Acosta, 2010).

Along a similar vein, despite the racial homogeneity the pan-ethnic Latino label conveys, Latinos vary in their phenotype and levels of racial consciousness, with certain groups being more visibly non-White and therefore at greater risk for experiencing racial discrimination and related stressors (Adames et al, 2016). Araujo and Borrell (2006) examined the literature on perceived discrimination and links to mental health outcomes

amongst Latinos and noted that most of the research done up until that point focused almost exclusively on Mexicans, leaving out entire groups of Latinos (such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans) who, as a result of their greater degrees of African ancestry, are typically darker-skinned. This is important, as evidence exists to suggest that darker phenotypes amongst Latinos are associated with greater exposure to discrimination and racism (Araujo & Borrell, 2006). Given these considerations, this study seeks to elucidate the diversity of experiences among Latina WSW of varying ethnicities. To achieve this, this study will attempt to recruit participants from as many ethnic backgrounds as possible to offer a more faithful portrayal of the Latina WSW experience.

Purpose of this Study

At the intersection of multiple minority statuses, Latina WSW are influenced at once by their membership to racial, ethnic, and sexual identity categories that collectively function to influence their developing identities and psychological health. Therefore, if we are to better understand the experiences of Latina WSW and how these relate to their mental health, the discourse must be broadened.

The purpose of this study is to better understand what it means to be a Latina WSW, how these women navigate their borderland existence, and the implications their intersectional identities have for their mental health and well-being. The impetus for this inquiry comes from the recognized absence of Latina WSW narratives in the psychological literature and, furthermore, the repercussions this has for the theories we develop and rely on when treating the mental health concerns of these women. Such an examination can greatly inform further lines of research and is consistent with recommendations made by Knight, Roosa, and Umaña-Taylor (2009) that qualitative

research on racial and ethnic minorities be used towards the refinement of scientific theory on these populations. The results of this study can also be applied to clinical practice with Latina WSW with the ultimate goal of improving response to treatment and enhancing well-being.

A Note on Terminology Related to the Target Population

In pursuing a study into the lived experiences of any group of individuals, the risk of collapsing unique narratives and obfuscating important differences is always present. Nigerian best-selling author and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) calls this risk a danger, where the danger lies in telling a single story that, by omitting others, contributes to an erasure of idiosyncratic experiences within a group. In embarking on an exploration of a Latina WSW subjectivity, clarifying what is meant by the terms Latina and WSW is warranted. Precisely because the purpose of this inquiry is to make visible the experiences these women have as they navigate and reconcile often opposing cultural forces – Latino cultural values on one hand and their nonheteronormative sexual desires and practices on the other – it becomes necessary to define the terminology used herein to demarcate this group of women. In doing so, it is my hope to broaden the inclusionary scope of this study to the extent that this will allow for maximum variation among participants while preserving the ways in which their experiences converge.

For the purposes of this study, I use Latina specifically referring to women born either abroad or in the United States with cultural, linguistic, and hereditary ties to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin America (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2008). This includes women who are themselves or are descendants of families originating from countries in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic),

Central America, and South America, with the exception of countries such as Guyana and Belize, which are linguistically, culturally, and historically distinct from countries once colonized by Spain or Portugal (in the case of Brazil).

Relatedly, because Latina WSW may often refrain from adopting a lesbian or bisexual label to describe their sexual identities (Acosta, 2013), finding terminology that adequately captures the non-heteronormative desires and practices of these women can be challenging. With this in mind, I've chosen to use the terms Women who have Sex with Women (WSW) as an alternative descriptor. In doing so, it is my hope to be able to recruit more participants, in particular those women whose amorous and sexual desires and practices are more consistent with lesbian, bisexual, or queer experiences but not labeled as such. Importantly, the term WSW also presents a limitation as it has the potential to reduce the experiences Latinas have to the realm of sex, foregoing an acknowledgement of the many components of amorous and other relationship practices that exist beyond sex. In stating this it is my intention to explicitly instill in the reader an appreciation for the nuances of identity labels and the inherent limitations in choosing terminology to capture human experience. While the label WSW centers sex as the core feature of non-heteronormative Latina lives, Latina WSW have a range of experiences, including but not limited to their negotiations of identity and outness within families of origin, constructing chosen families, child rearing, and care taking, amongst others.

Conceptual Framework

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through sexual behavior. (Anzaldúa, p. 19, 1987).

...Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (Hill Collins, 2008, p. 257).

For LBQ women of color, their multiple identities are not mutually exclusive. If we endeavor to understand the experience of femininity for women of color, for example, such a task cannot be done without framing this with a nuanced understanding of the racial context that shapes expressions and perceptions of femininity for women of color. The importance of this sociological fact is one that cannot be understated, particularly because these intersections of identity categories carry practical significance beyond their abstract conjectures and have real-life implications for the health and well-being of women of color (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2012; Velez et al., 2015). It is for these reasons that I find it necessary to approach the study of Latina WSW with an intersectional, feminist framework that is cognizant of the sociocultural factors that shape the experiences of these women and how these come to influence their mental health in myriad ways.

Following Acosta (2013), I apply the Anzalduan concept of the borderlands to frame the experiences of Latina WSW because it is illustrative of the spaces (physical and psychological) these women find themselves in as they reconcile their ethnic identities with their emerging sexual identities. I argue that in the process of developing their consciousness as racial, ethnic, and sexual subjects, Latina WSW undergo experiences that uniquely impact their developing selves. In the borderlands, or at the intersection of their multiple identities, these women's experiences emerge under pressures to conform to Latino cultural scripts on one hand while exploring their unsanctioned sexuality on the other. Ultimately, it is from these multiply-determined

experiences that Latina WSW arrive at identities inclusive of their ethnic and sexual selves – a sort of home in a (borderland) space once thought uninhabitable.

Relatedly, the aspirations of this current study are also feminist in nature. While the ultimate goal of this study is to add to our knowledge base concerning the minority stress experiences of Latina WSW and how these are related to their mental health, I have chosen to do so via an exploration of these narratives as told by Latinas themselves. This practice of centering the voices of traditionally marginalized women (Harding, 2004) and specifically women of color (Hill Collins, 1990; 2000) in social science research is referred to as standpoint theory. Consistent with the social movements of the 1970's and 1980's, standpoint theory emerged as a feminist critical theory regarding the relationship between knowledge production and power. As Harding (2004) explains, standpoint theory challenged the traditional assumption that politics and subjective sensibilities precluded quality scientific research, and it was offered as a distinct philosophy, methodology, and epistemology. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Hill Collins (1990; 2000) discusses lived experience as a “criterion of meaning,” that has been too often ignored and undervalued in traditional social science research, resulting in knowledge that is often not reflective of the social realities of women of color. Particularly absent from scholarly discourse, Hill Collins (1990; 2000) argues, is the wisdom and nuance that is gained through lived experiences with racism and sexism, both of which can only be accessed when we privilege the voices of those most marginalized.

Following in this tradition of feminist epistemology, this current study aims to center the narratives of Latina WSW by engaging in interviews that will attempt to elicit lifelong experiences Latina WSW have had with their ethnic and sexual identities.

Feminist Standpoint Theory as articulated by Harding (2004) and Hill Collins (1990; 2000) embodies the ultimate motivation for this study, that is, to amplify the voices of those whose lived experience can best guide our understandings of what it means to live at the intersections of multiple minority statuses and the implications this social positioning has for mental health and well-being.

Phenomenology

My desires to center the voices of Latina WSW and to better understand a shared experience among these women led me to consider phenomenology as the most suitable approach for this study. Phenomenology's basic commitments can be found most simply expressed in its name as it is concerned with describing the essence of a *phenomenon* experienced by a group of people (Creswell, 2007). Unlike grounded theory or other qualitative methods that seek to describe human experience, phenomenology does not use the data obtained to generate theory but rather seeks to distill the views obtained to produce a description of the phenomenon as it is commonly experienced (Creswell, 2007; Smith & Osborn). Phenomenologists proceed with identification of a phenomenon and then collection of perspectives from participants who have experienced the phenomenon, which is then used to generate super-ordinate themes and descriptions of the experience itself (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The philosophical assumptions underlying phenomenology hold that lived experience serves as a valid source of knowledge production. As such, our aim should be to describe it as it is, not to generate explanations or theories that reduce the experiences to abstractions (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

This study proceeded with Smith & Osborn's (2015) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a psychological experiential research methodology

developed approximately 20 years ago. IPA is part of a larger family of research methods informed by phenomenological philosophy and involves a detailed examination of participant's lived experiences wherein their perspectives are used to generate understandings of the phenomenon under study. IPA also requires the researcher to account for their own biases and previous life experiences to achieve a novel perspective of the phenomenon under study. This is often achieved via the use of bracketing, or the disclosure of a researcher's experiences with the phenomenon before proceeding with the exploration of others' experiences, also referred to as "bracketing out" (Creswell, 2007, p. 254). Afterwards, participants with experience of the phenomenon are selected for the study, and while Smith and Osborn (2015) do not prescribe a sample size, others have recommended 11-15 participants be included to generate a sufficiently detailed description of experiences (Creswell, 1997). Participants are asked open-ended questions, with more specific prompting as needed, to elicit perspectives and ideas regarding their lived experiences. Data analysis begins with highlighting significant statements that provide a general understanding of the phenomenon. Next, statements are classified under broad themes which are then confirmed via another closer look at responses and identification of specific experiences that reflect those themes. These steps all culminate in a final description of the major themes characterizing the experience under study, using participants' quotes to more fully illustrate these (Creswell, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Given that the purpose of this current study is to explore the experiences of Latina WSW with open curiosity, the philosophical commitments of Smith & Osborn's (1994) IPA made it an appropriate research method. I have chosen to approach this study in the

absence of a priori assumptions because I am genuinely interested in highlighting the experiences of Latina WSW, recognizing that at the intersections of their varied identities, Latina WSW share many points of convergence and departure with one another. It is those stories I am most eager to explore and share.

Consistent with the scholarly interest for more inquiry into the unique experiences and needs of LGB women of color (Bowleg, 2008; Greene, 1994; Moradi et al., 2010) and for the application of intersectional analyses within the social sciences (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2012), specifically within the province of counseling psychology (Cole, 2009), this current study sought to advance intersectional dialogue concerning the experiences of Latina WSW. In addition, this study sought to contribute to sexuality research on people of color by highlighting Latina WSW experiences, an area that several scholars have noted warrants greater attention.

With open curiosity, the overarching research question for this study is: What are the identity-based experiences of Latina WSW? Further, this study seeks to explore:

- (a) What does it mean to be a Latina WSW?
- (b) How do Latina WSW perceive and describe their experiences as racial, sexual, and gender minorities?
- (c) How do the experiences Latina WSW have with their varied identities impact their mental health?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As stated previously, Latina WSW are socially positioned to contend with racism, sexism, and homophobia/heterosexism. This social location characterizes the experiences Latina WSW have in society and has important implications for their psychological health and well-being. At the same time, Latina WSW constitute a diverse group of women whose experiences differ along ethnic, migratory, class, and other lines.

This chapter will provide a more detailed overview of the stressors and factors that are specific to the psychosocial realities of Latina WSW and how these may vary among them. First, relevant research on lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas will be summarized. Next, research on the role of discrimination and acculturative stress among Latinos will be reviewed to illustrate the ways in which Latina WSW experiences in this study may reflect those discussed in the literature on Latino mental health. Lastly, attention will be paid to research on the impact of homophobia and heterosexism on LGB individuals overall. This tripartite review seeks to provide a summary of stressors that can impact the intersectional experiences of Latina WSW while accounting for factors that may influence their mental health overall.

Latina WSW – What do we know?

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through sexual behavior. (Anzaldúa, p. 19, 1987).

...the dilemma for Latina lesbians is how to integrate who they are culturally, racially, and religiously, with their identity as lesbians and women. The identity of each Latina lesbian develops through conscious and unconscious choices that allot

relative importance to the different components of the self and thus of her identity as woman, lesbian, and Latina. (Espin, 1987, p. 35; 1997, p. 97).

Espin (1984; 1987; 1997), Anzaldúa (1987), Vasquez (1994), Comas-Díaz (2006), Arredondo, Gallardo-Cooper, Delgado-Romero, Zapata (2014), and others have discussed at length the traditional gender roles firmly established within Latino culture and the grip these have over Latinas. Despite the diverse range of ethnicities, social classes, and traditions subsumed under the Latino label, a range of cultural values dictating gender roles and appropriate sexual behaviors exists for Latinas (Espin, 1984; Anzaldúa, 1987; Marin & Marin, 1991). Among these, the cultural value of *marianismo* holds that Latina women be self-sacrificing, placing the needs of others before their own, and above all, remain sexually modest (Arredondo et al., 2014). Given Latinas' shared ancestry of Spanish colonization and Catholic indoctrination, this value is closely linked to the image of the Virgin Mary (Espin, 1984; Arredondo et al., 2014). The image of the Virgin Mary serves as a metaphor as it is representative of the virginal ideals Latinas are socialized under and expected to uphold. For example, femininity and sexual modesty represent ideals that Latinas are inculcated with from an early age and, while their adherence to these cultural scripts may vary depending on social class and level of acculturation (Espin, 1984; Faulkner, 2003; Arredondo et al., 2014), Latinas nonetheless receive powerful messages about what is expected of them regarding their sexual behavior.

Importantly, these messages also communicate that Latina women retain their “honor” by remaining virginal, an honor only to be bestowed upon Latino men, and certainly only when married (Espin, 1984; Anzaldúa, 1987). In other words, Latinas are

largely socialized to “save themselves” for their future husbands lest they lose their honor, thereby bringing shame to themselves and the family (Espin, 1984; Anzaldúa, 1987). Socialized in this way, Latinas are thus taught their sexuality necessarily revolves around male approval and pleasure (Anzaldúa, 1987; Fine, Roberts, Weis, 2001). As a result, traditional expectations of Latina sexuality leave little room for Latinas to make agentic decisions about their personal desires, such as engaging in pre-marital sex, experimentation, or adopting sexual identities that do not involve men (Anzaldúa, 1987; Espin, 1987; 1997). In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa (1987) notes:

If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala* [bad woman]. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains *virgen* [virgin] until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: To the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. (p. 17).

Given these expectations, Espin (1987; 1997) and Anzaldúa (1987) have argued that for Latinas, identifying as lesbian constitutes a sort of rebellion. Under the cultural script of *marianismo* and associated expectations of sexual subservience to males, the act of defining oneself as lesbian forces a culture that traditionally denies female sexuality to acknowledge it (Espin, 1987; 1997, Anzaldúa, 1987). Such an identification is traditionally met with varying degrees of rejection within Latino families as this blatant act of Latinas' self-definition can be viewed as selfish (Anzaldúa, 1987), as something

“caught” or learned from American women (Espin, 2012) and, in some cases, as a betrayal (Acosta, 2010).

Espin (1984; 2012) has been credited with being among the first, and to her knowledge the first in the realm of psychology, to write about the experiences of Latina lesbians. Reporting on over twenty years of anecdotal, psychotherapeutic, and scholarly work on Latina lesbians, Espin (2012) notes that a consistent theme throughout her experience and scholarship has been the recognition that a Latina lesbian identity is an inherently plural one. If asked to determine which identity prevails over the others (woman, lesbian, Latina), for Latinas the question is futile and the choice is impossible. Rather, Espin (2012) notes Latina lesbians are constantly making decisions regarding sexual disclosure and affiliations to family of choice or of origin that are less costly to them. Given the realities of heterosexism and racism, Latina lesbians function in physical and psychological spaces where their identities are in flux and their choices to navigate them complicated by their belonging to multiple groups at once (Espin, 2012). Notably, one of the respondents in a survey conducted by Espin (2012) stated the following:

. . . I cannot section out which one is more important. They intersect and conflict and out of the tension I try to make some semblance of stability . . . My sexuality is very important for me but so is my culture. If truly faced with this [choice], it would simply be depressing and impossible. I would choose a third way. (p. 48).

Evident in this statement is a subjective experience that in many ways embodies the concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), triple jeopardy (Greene, 1994; 1997), and Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands. For Latinas, adopting an identity outside of heterosexuality is at once an affront to both a heterosexist mainstream culture and to their

native cultures. In both realms, Latinas are expected to adhere to heteronormative scripts of sexual desire and to live by the edicts of traditional Latino gender roles where the Latino man and family come before her own desire for self-definition (Anzaldúa, 1987, Espin, 1987; 1997; 2012).

Acosta (2010; 2013) has written extensively about the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) Latinas in the context of family. In an article titled *How could you do this to me? How lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas negotiate family*, Acosta (2010) reports on the results of 40 in-depth interviews and 14 months of participant observation that explored how LBQ Latinas negotiate their multiple identities in the context of family. In this study, Acosta (2010) describes the intricacies of how LBQ Latinas engage in strategies to minimize the risk of familial rejection while preserving familial bonds. In attempting to reconcile their multiple identities, Acosta (2010) argues LBQ Latinas' relationships to family cannot be neatly categorized into categories of acceptance or rejection, a conclusion commonly found in sexual disclosure literature. Rather, LBQ Latinas and their families operate under cultural values such as *familismo*, which emphasizes loyalty and interdependence with family (Arredondo et al., 2014). In turn, the cultural saliency of family cohesion often influences the decisions these women make to disclose, conceal, or minimize discussion of their sexual identities with family (Acosta, 2010).

With the notable exception of Espin's (1987; 1997; 2012) work on the psychology of Latina lesbians, Asencio's (2009) research on Puerto Rican migrant lesbians, and early work by Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Christensen (1976) on Puerto Rican lesbians, most research on Latina sexuality has focused on heterosexual relationships (Acosta, 2010).

Beyond this scholarly canon, what has been written on Latina lesbians comes mostly from literary disciplines, as can be appreciated, for example, in the work of Chicana feminists Anzaldua (1997) and Moraga (1983), an anthology on Latina lesbian writings edited by Torres and Pertusa (2003) and essays on queer Latinidad by women and gender studies scholar Rodriguez (2003; 2014). While these contributions have provided rich fodder for theorizing on the experiences of Latina WSW, these discussions have not led to any meaningful increase in social science research on Latina WSW (Asencio, 2009).

For Latina WSW, their deviation from traditional scripts for gender-specific behavior has the potential to cause conflict within their families of origin, thereby creating significant sources of stress (Espin, 1987; Acosta, 2010). Such an eventuality is important to consider when discussing the psychological well-being of Latina WSW as social support has been described as a key source of resiliency for Latino lesbians and gay men (Zea, Reisen, Poppen, 1999). Importantly, family rejection has been posited as predictive of poor health outcomes in Latino lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Amongst Latinos, high levels of enculturation, or socialization and identification with ethnic heritages, and positive relations with family, have been described as important protective factors for Latinos (Comas-Diaz, 2006, Araujo Dawson, 2009). Recent meta-analyses examining the relationship between ethnic identity, enculturation, and mental health among people of color have found enculturation to be related to positive indicators of mental health, including self-esteem, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Smith & Silva, 2011; Yoon, Chang, Kim, Clawson, Cleary, et al. 2013). Specifically among Latino/as, Lee & Ahn (2012) have reported that

individuals with greater support networks are better able to cope with discrimination, which has implications for their overall well-being.

Beyond the potential disturbance of familial ties and loss of key protective factors, Latina WSW have also been described as being uniquely positioned to confront a variety of stressors, including sexism, racism, and homophobia, amongst others (Velez, Moradi & DeBlaere, 2015; Cerezo, 2016). In turn, these stressors have been linked to elevated levels of depression and anxiety (Cochran, 2001; Cochran et al., 2007; Aranda, Matthews, Hughes, Muramatsu, Wilsnack, 2015) and trauma (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005) among sexual minority women. Perhaps even more poignantly, several researchers have positioned sexual-minority status as a potential risk factor for the development of clinically-significant syndromes for women specifically (Balsam et al., 2005; Aranda et al., 2015). In a recent study examining the role of discrimination in mental health symptomatology among sexual minority immigrant Latinas, Cerezo (2016) reported that, consistent with findings from prior studies on sexual minority people of color, discrimination was associated with greater expression of depression, posttraumatic stress, and substance abuse.

With the exception of Cerezo's (2016) recent study, much of what we empirically understand about the experiences of Latina WSW and their relationship to psychological health is derived from research that has relied on overwhelmingly White samples and insufficient numbers of participants of color to permit comparison across groups (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, 2004; Moradi et al., 2010). Of studies that do include participants of color, these are oftentimes lumped together under the category of racial/ethnic minority (Rosario et al., 2004; Moradi et al., 2010; also see Velez, Watson,

Cox, & Flores, 2017), rendering broad, sweeping comparisons that preclude the examination of ethnic-specific variations in the experiences of sexual minorities and their mental health outcomes. Of studies that have examined mental health symptomatology among sexual minority Latinos, these have focused on both men and women, often aggregating and reporting results across these groups (i.e., Velez et al., 2015). As noted by Cerezo (2016), while research has been done on the links between minority stress and indicators of mental health for sub-groups of LGB people of color (i.e., Bowleg et al., 2003; Calabrese et al., 2015), much remains unknown about Latina sexual minority women. Asencio (2009) has made a similar observation, noting social science research has paid scant attention to the experiences of Latina lesbians, let alone variations of these subjectivities along migratory, class, or ethnic lines.

Traditionally in psychological research, identity categories (like most variables) are studied independently so that their unique associations with outcomes can be credibly examined (Cole, 2009). While this practice may more faithfully serve the purposes of quantitative research, criticisms of its' simplistic and reductive impact on social science research with racial and ethnic minorities have led some to argue for more comprehensive approaches to the study of people of color and their patterns of mental health outcomes (Knight, Roosa, Umaña-Taylor, 2009). In this spirit, this study seeks to add to scholarly understandings of Latina WSW experiences by exploring, from their perspectives, their unique challenges and the relationship these may have to their overall well-being. In an effort to more fully illustrate the compendium of stressors relevant to the psychological well-being of Latina WSW, an overview of literature on Latino mental

health will be presented followed by literature on sexual minority status and its relationship to mental health.

Latino Mental Health: The role of discrimination and acculturative stress

Discrimination and Latino Mental Health. Currently, there are an estimated 56.5 million Latinos in the United States, making up roughly 17.6% of the overall U.S. population; By 2050, projections estimate the Latino population will nearly double in size to 106 million (Pew Research Center, 2014; 2015). Despite their increased presence in the United States, however, Latinos consistently report discrimination experiences. Prevalence of perceived discrimination among Latinos has been reported at 30% (Perez, Fortuna, & Alegria, 2008), and recent data from a Pew Research Center (2016) survey shows about half (52%) of Latinos in the United States report being treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity. Thus far, research has consistently linked discrimination to poorer life chances and health outcomes among Latinos (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Moradi & Risco, 2006, Organista, 2007). For example, some have suggested discrimination plays a significant role in discriminatory hiring practices that disadvantage Latinos (Organista, 2007), in relatively lower income and educational attainment (Araujo & Borrell, 2006), that it contributes to elevated psychological distress (Moradi & Risco, 2006), and to perceived unhelpfulness of mental health services among Latinos (Mays, Jones, Delany-Brumsey, Coles, & Cochran, 2017).

In a comprehensive review of the literature examining the relationship between discrimination and mental health among Latinos, Araujo & Borrell (2006) reported that available research up until then consistently linked discrimination to higher stress levels and greater expression of depressive symptomatology among Latinos. Along a similar

vein, Pascoe and Richman (2009) and Berry (2006) have proposed discrimination negatively impacts mental health by heightening overall stress responses, thereby exacerbating the experience of other psychosocial stressors. For example, discrimination can exacerbate the experience of acculturative stress, or reactions to the cultural adaptation process in the United States for Latino immigrants (Berry, 2006; Torres, Driscoll, & Voell, 2012). In epidemiological studies, discrimination has been further discussed as a factor that partially accounts for Latino mental health disparities given persistent patterns in elevated risk for psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Alegria, Canino, Shrout, Woo, Duan, Vila...Meng, 2008; Alegria, Molina, Chen, 2014).

While research has thus far demonstrated a consistent association between discrimination and poorer quality psychological health among Latinos, understanding this phenomenon is challenging given the heterogeneity of their racial and ethnic makeup (Araujo & Borrell, 2006). For instance, Latinos may be vulnerable to experiencing discrimination due to their racial status and phenotypic differences (i.e., skin-color), because of their ethnicity (i.e., language use, accent, ethnic background), or both (Araujo & Borrell, 2006). Others have argued that Latinos migrating to the United States differ in the reception they receive from the host country, with lighter-skinned Latinos (i.e., such as an individual from Argentina) said to be less impacted by overt discrimination and race-related stress than darker-skinned Latinos (i.e., such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans) (Comas-Diaz, 2006; Araujo Dawson, 2009; Araujo Dawson & Panchanadeswaran, 2010). For example, there is evidence to suggest that darker-skinned Latinos experience more employment discrimination (Allen et al., 2000; Gomez, 2000),

and greater psychological distress associated with increased exposure to discrimination (Araujo Dawson, 2009; Araujo Dawson & Panchanadeswaran, 2010).

Although discussions of discrimination are usually framed in the literature as acts of prejudice originating in the dominant culture, Latinos are also susceptible to within-group discrimination based on skin color (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014). Complicating the picture even further is the fact that Latinos adhere to a racial classification system that differs greatly from the dichotomous, White vs. Black paradigm that prevails in the United States (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). This poses two relevant implications for the current discussion: 1) because Latinos' possess notions of race beyond the White/Black paradigm, these may not readily identify as non-White or Black and thus may not always report discrimination experiences, and 2) Latinos' historical internalization of racism results in patterns of within-group discrimination based on skin color (Araujo & Borrell, 2006, Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014).

Latinos' racial backgrounds consists of a *mestizaje*, or an amalgamation of races derived from their African, Indigenous, and Spanish roots (Comas-Diaz, 2006; Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Given this history, Latinos' present-day racial classification system extends beyond White/Black and encompasses racial designations tied to skin color gradations with historical roots in the social stratification system established by the Spanish crown during the colonial period (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). These may include labels such as *indio* (indigenous-looking), *negro* (Black), *moreno* (brown or darker-skinned), *blanco* (White), and so many others that vary according to ethnic group (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwalk, & Swanson, 2002). The complexity of Latino racial identification can be

appreciated in the U.S. Census' inability to racially classify Latinos, with 53% of Latinos identifying as White, 2.5% identifying as Black, and 36.7% identifying as "Some Other Race" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011).

Notably, the notion of *mestizaje*, or a mixed ancestry among Latinos, became an important tool during the post-colonial era where those in the ruling classes (typically of Spanish descent and with lighter skin complexions) wished to de-emphasize White privilege so as to covertly maintain status and power (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Darker complexioned afro and indigenous descendants consequently subscribed to the idea of *mestizaje* as well in an attempt to counter racist ideologies that rendered them inferior in post-colonial society (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). From this post-colonial period onward, efforts at achieving a racially homogenous society persisted through pernicious "whitening policies" throughout Latin America; Today, this history lives on in the subtle messages Latinos receive to "*mejorar la raza*" or "improve the race" by marrying lighter-complexioned, preferably White, persons (Chavez- Dueñas et al., 2014). While a thorough overview of this history is beyond the scope of this study, it remains important to underscore the fact that this legacy has directly contributed to present-day notions Latinos hold regarding racial classification, their perception of discrimination-related experiences, and their discriminatory attitudes towards other Latinos (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). For instance, a recent Pew Research Center (2016) survey found reported discrimination experiences varied greatly by race with 56% of nonwhite Latinos reporting discrimination experiences compared to 41% of White Latinos.

This historical backdrop also helps explain why Latinos have been discussed as engaging in their own form of colorism or within-group discrimination tied to skin color

(Uhlmann et al., 2002; Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Organista, 2009, Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Latinos have been described, for example, as demonstrating implicit preferences for lighter-skinned Latinos of their own and other ethnic groups (Uhlmann et al., 2002) and for perpetuating biased treatment of other Latinos based on an ingrained preference for Whiteness (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Furthermore, as several scholars (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Comas-Diaz, 2006) have suggested, Latinos who are lighter-skinned may consequently perceive and actually experience less discriminatory experiences compared to their darker-skinned counterparts. At the same time, darker-skinned Latinos are reasonably expected to be more susceptible to both out-group and within-group discrimination given society's unequal treatment of individuals on the basis of race and Latinos' internalization of historical and present-day racist ideologies (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Cuevas, Araujo Dawson, & Williams, 2016).

While research examining the interplay of race and skin-color and its role in Latino mental health is still in its infancy (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014), a recent review by Cuevas et al. (2016) identified 22 articles examining health disparities among Black Latinos. The literature currently available demonstrates darker-skinned Latinos, including self-identified Black Latinos, have consistently poorer mental and physical health outcomes compared to White Latinos (Cuevas et al., 2016). For example, Borrell (2009) utilized data from the National Health Interview Survey (1997-2005) and found that Black Latinos ($n = 944$) had a greater prevalence of self-reported hypertension than White Latinos ($n = 39,691$). Along a similar vein, a longitudinal study comparing non-Latino, Latino, and Black Latino adolescents revealed that Black female adolescents reported higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to males and other Latinas

(Ramos, Jaccard, & Guilamo-Ramos 2003). Similarly, the same study found Black Latino male adolescents had higher levels of negative affect compared to White Latino males (Ramos et al., 2003). Collectively, these studies empirically document the mental health correlates of discrimination's differential impact among Latinos and provide support for the expectation that, among Latinos, experiences with discrimination vary greatly.

Acculturation and Latino Mental Health. When it was first introduced, acculturation was conceptualized as a unidirectional process whereby individuals abandoned their native cultural preferences and values for those of the new, host culture (Gordon, 1964; Arredondo et al., 2014). Early models of acculturation suggested individuals proceeded from unassimilated states to full assimilation, gradually abandoning traditional views and customs that kept them marginal to mainstream culture and moving towards complete assimilation and adoption of exclusively mainstream culture and values (Falicov, 1998; M.Ramirez, 1998; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Since the early 1980's, however, acculturation scholarship has recognized that the process of acquiring the beliefs, values, and practices of the host culture does not necessarily require that the individual completely abandon the values, customs, and traditions of their country of origin (Schwartz et al., 2010).

An example of this development in models of acculturation can be found in the work of Berry (1980) who suggested that patterns of host culture acquisition and native culture retention produced four acculturation categories – *assimilation* (full adoption of host culture and discarding of native culture), *separation* (rejection of host culture and preservation of native culture), *integration* (adoption of host culture and retention of

native culture) and *marginalization* (rejection of both native and host cultures). Berry's (1980) acculturation model, however, has been criticized for its oversimplification of acculturation patterns among migrants (Schwartz et al., 2010). For example, empirical research has found the model to be unreliable in its classification of individuals and their acculturation patterns, with the category of marginalization being the most criticized and poorly represented in studies of acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2010). In addition, research has found Berry's (1980) assimilation, separation, and integration categories to be less clearly differentiated among immigrants (Schwartz et al., 2010). As a result, Schwartz et al. (2010) have suggested a contextual approach to understanding acculturation patterns among immigrants, specifically accounting for individual-level characteristics (e.g. host country language proficiency, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, etc.) and for social-level characteristics, such as the host country's attitudes and features (e.g. ethnic makeup) of the local communities where migrants settle.

As Schwartz et al. (2010) note, acculturation has become an important topic of study in large part because of the gap in cultural values that emerge between modern day migrants (1960's – present) and the regions of the world where these are settling. Broadly speaking, modern patterns of immigration have seen migrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East – regions typically collectivistic in nature – settle in North America and Europe, parts of the world where individualism is emphasized over the well-being of the collective (Schwartz et al., 2010). Considering Latinos are traditionally socialized under collectivistic rubrics that emphasize family interdependence and loyalty, this represents a major over-arching difference, and it has implications for

the difficulties these may experience as they adapt to life in the United States (Comas-Diaz, 2006; Arredondo et al., 2014).

As Schwartz et al. (2010) and Arredondo et al. (2014) note, acculturation is not an “all or nothing” outcome but rather an evolving, iterative phenomenon involving a host of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional challenges. For example, Latino families are often faced with challenges such as grief and loss associated with immigration, with balancing traditional and newer American values as they raise and parent children in the United States, and with evolving concepts regarding gender roles and romantic relationships (Arredondo et al., 2014). Certainly among more recently arrived Latinos, acculturation-related stressors can also involve learning a new language and, for darker-skinned Latinos, coping with racism and discrimination (Araujo Dawson & Panchanadeswaran, 2010).

To be sure, stress associated with the acculturation process has been discussed as a significant factor impacting the mental health of Latinos (Gil & Vega, 1996; Torres et al., 2012; Arredondo et al., 2014). Given the racial, ethnic, class, and migratory complexity that characterizes Latinos in the United States, understanding the role of acculturation in Latino mental health requires a special consideration for its manifestation across these categories, as well as differences that may emerge across generations in a given Latino family (Gil & Vega, 1996; Arredondo et al., 2014). For example, Gil and Vega (1996) noted important differences in the acculturation experiences for Cuban and Nicaraguan immigrants in Miami, Florida, differences which were defined by their socioeconomic status prior to entering the U.S., U.S. governmental support for their legal residence, and their relative ability to create and establish prosperous enclaves in the

South Florida region. Whereas Cuban immigration was historically characterized by preferential U.S. legislation supporting their entry and settlement in the United States and establishment of affluent businesses and sociopolitical organization in the South Florida area, Nicaraguans experienced a different fate (Gil & Vega, 1996). Unlike Cubans initially fleeing the Castro regime in the early 1960's and for decades after, Nicaraguans immigrating to the U.S. encountered less governmental support for their legal residence, especially after the fall of the Sandinista dictatorship that originally drove many Nicaraguans out of their home country and into the U.S throughout the 1970's and 1980's (Gil & Vega, 1996). For these and other reasons, Gil and Vega (1996) found acculturative stress related to adaptation to life in the U.S. was greater for Nicaraguans than for Cubans.

Relatedly, research on the acculturation gaps that commonly emerge within families has provided key insights into the different processes of adaptation that occur for family members of different generations. Acculturation involves cultural changes that come as a result of individuals, socialized in a different culture, coming into continuous contact with a new culture in their host country (Birman & Simon, 2014). This understanding of acculturation applies most readily to immigrant adults who, upon migrating to new countries, encounter new cultural demands (e.g., learning a new language, social norms, values, etc.) after being previously socialized in their culture of origin (Birman & Simon, 2014). Thus, acculturation occurs differently for immigrant adults, immigrant children, or children of immigrants born in the new country (Birman & Simon, 2014). Whereas immigrant adults acculturate after their formative years, immigrant children and children of immigrants born in the new country experience

acculturation alongside developmental processes and overall socialization; as a result, immigrant children and children of immigrants are deeply influenced by the new culture they become members of (Birman & Simon, 2014).

For children born to immigrant parents in particular, understanding the separate impact of either acculturation or socialization processes becomes practically impossible given that their contact with both their heritage and host culture begins at birth (Birman & Simon, 2014). Given these developmental differences between adults and children, their corresponding responses to the new culture typically results in acculturation gaps developing between parents and children in immigrant families (Birman & Simon, 2014). It is from these acculturation gaps that conflict and differences between immigrant parents and children may often arise. As an example, Gil and Vega (1996) noted important differences emerged in the adaptation process for both Cuban and Nicaraguan parents and their adolescent children, with adolescents reporting greater degrees of language conflict as these entered school environments, suggesting adolescents encounter developmentally-specific challenges in the acculturation process. At the same time, adolescents in Gil and Vega's (1996) largely acculturated faster than their immigrant parents, resulting in perceptible acculturation gaps between these.

While acculturation research is largely based on the adaptation process immigrants undergo when migrating and transitioning to life in a new host culture (Berry, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010), even Latinos born in the U.S. undergo their own acculturation process in varying degrees, an experience largely dependent upon their parents' generational status in the United States, their own levels of enculturation (selective identification with ethnic heritage and values), and other factors (Gil & Vega,

1996; Arredondo et al., 2014). For instance, Arredondo et al. (2014) provide as examples situations where U.S.-born Latino adults experience social class mobility by virtue of education, when relocating from mostly Latino neighborhoods to White-dominant enclaves, or when these are the first in their family to go to college. Across these examples, Latinos' attempts to transition and adapt to various life stages and opportunities may be complicated by the inherent challenge they face in bridging the cultures of their home life and those of the mainstream American culture. For example, in a study exploring the value conflict between home and school life among first-generation Latino college students, Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, and Burgos-Cienfuegos (2015) found that family obligations often clash with the individualistic emphasis of academic success prioritized at college, creating great amounts of stress for Latino students. Specifically, Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) found first-generation Latino college students face the challenge of balancing, on one hand, expectations such as attending family events, visiting parents, or allocating money for family needs, versus prioritizing academic work and money for educational expenses. The stress generated by these negotiations were perceived by Latino college students to negatively impact their academic achievement and overall sense of well-being (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015).

In another study examining intergenerational conflict among adult Latino children and their parents, Dennis, Basañez, and Farahmand (2010) found intergenerational value conflicts and parents' perceptions that their adult children were "too American" to be significant predictors of depression and lower self-esteem among adult Latino children, even after controlling for generational status. As these studies suggest, even U.S.-born Latinos are susceptible to experiencing acculturative stress as these learn to negotiate and

balance the values of their home or ethnic culture with those of the mainstream American culture. Therefore, when discussing acculturation among Latinos, Arredondo et al. (2014) argue for a flexible and critical application of the concept, noting that in addition to impacting Latino immigrants, acculturation can and often is experienced as well by their descendants in the United States.

To summarize, discrimination and acculturative stress play a significant role in the mental health of Latinos living in the United States. Both have been linked to poorer psychological outcomes, including heightened psychological distress, greater depressive symptomatology, and diminished self-esteem, as well as lower levels of educational attainment, greater employment discrimination, and barriers to academic achievement (Moradi & Risco, 2006; Araujo & Borrell, 2006, Alegria et al., 2008; 2014; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015; Dennis et al., 2010). Furthermore, because Latinos are a heterogeneous group with a diverse racial, ethnic, class, and generational makeup, their experiences with discrimination and acculturation-related stressors vary significantly. As such, understanding the mental health of Latinos requires a sensibility to the relative contribution of these multiple variables.

As reviewed previously, Latinos' experiences with discrimination vary, amongst other factors, according to their racial phenotype, with lighter skinned-Latinos said to experience less amounts of both within-group and out-group discrimination compared to their darker-skinned counterparts (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Araujo Dawson, 2009; Araujo Dawson & Panchandeswaran, 2010; Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Furthermore, while acculturative stress is often studied as a phenomenon most relevant to the experiences of immigrants, U.S.-born Latinos are also affected by the acculturation process. Latinos

born in the U.S. are often repeatedly faced with having to balance familial obligations and expectations on one hand with mainstream American values on the other, values which they may have begun to adopt in varying degrees as these pursue life opportunities and develop their self-concepts in the United states (Arredondo et al., 2014; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015; Dennis et al., 2010).

Relevant to the current study, Latina WSW can be reasonably expected to be impacted by discrimination and acculturative stress, as well as stressors related to their sexual identities. As such, an overview of sexual orientation and its association to mental health will be provided herein to bring to the reader's attention other challenges Latina WSW likely contend with as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Minority Stress

Homophobia was first coined by psychologist George Weinberg in the late 1960s (Herek, 2000), a concept he later developed more fully in his text *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* published in 1972. Weinberg (1972) originally conceptualized homophobia as heterosexuals' unreasonable fear of and intolerance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. A product of his time, Weinberg (1972) had been trained to view so-called "homosexuals"¹ as pathological, deviant, and in need of interventions to "correct" their "aberrant" sexualities. In response to these prevailing attitudes, Weinberg (1972) began to refer to colleagues and patients who espoused these ideas as "homophobes," thus coining and conceptualizing the term homophobia (Weinberg, 1972).

¹ Given its' history as a term utilized by psychiatry and other disciplines to pathologize gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and other queer people, "homosexual" is considered highly offensive and its' use has even been restricted by major media outlets. For more information, please visit <https://www.glaad.org/reference/offensive>

Since its introduction to the field of psychology and popular lexicon overall, homophobia and its impact on the mental health and well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals has been discussed theoretically and examined empirically at length. Homophobia, or sexual prejudice (Herek, 2000; 2004; 2015) has been described as constituting a significant impact on the mental health of LGB individuals, rendering them vulnerable to myriad psychological, and often physical, consequences (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1990). LGB individuals have historically faced not only the challenge of developing healthy self-concepts and relationships in a society that devalues and disparages them, but have also been victimized by various forms of interpersonal violence, such as verbal harassment and hate crimes (Garnets et al., 1990; Herek, 2000). The psychological correlates of these experiences have been described as involving diminished self-esteem, depressive symptoms, anxiety, posttraumatic distress, substance use, and suicide ideation, amongst others (Garnets et al., 1990; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Cochran, 2001).

For example, Meyer (1995, 2003) has described *internalized homophobia* as an individual-level psychological outcome associated with psychological distress among LGB individuals. Internalized homophobia refers to the internalization of societal negative attitudes regarding LGB persons and the subsequent application of these attitudes to the self (Meyer, 1995, 2003). In a meta-analysis exploring the link between internalized homophobia and mental health among LGB persons, Newcomb and Mustanski (2010) found higher levels of internalized homophobia were associated with a greater degree of internalizing mental health problems overall, with a stronger association being observed for depressive versus anxious symptomatology. In other reviews,

internalized homophobia has also been found to be associated with greater substance use (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008; Brubaker, Garrett, & Dew, 2009). Further research has pointed to the psychological impact of heterosexism and homophobia on LGBT individuals overall with higher rates of suicidality, substance use, depression, and anxiety being observed in this population (Cochran, 2001). Research thus far has also revealed that the consequences of internalized homophobia extend beyond the intrapsychic realm and are interpersonal in nature. Greater levels of internalized homophobia have been found to be associated with sub-optimal attachment styles (Sherry, 2007), and with a tendency for individuals to hide their sexual identity from others (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2015).

To be sure, while anti-LGB attitudes have existed for millennia across cultures, these sentiments have been reified and legitimized in the United States in large part due to its embodiment in our cultural and social institutions (Herek, 2000). If homophobia can be understood as an interpersonal (or intrapersonal, as is the case with internalized homophobia) phenomenon, then its manifestation on a sociocultural level is what is referred to as *heterosexism*. Defined by Herek (1990), heterosexism is:

...an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. It operates principally by rendering homosexuality invisible and, when this fails, by trivializing, repressing, or stigmatizing it. (p. 316.)

Perhaps the best and most immediately recognizable example of heterosexism in the field of psychology can be found in the history of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) published by the American Psychiatric Association. While

homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder was officially removed from the second edition of the DSM in 1973, its' legacy continued to permeate public and scientific discourse (Meyer, 2003). Similar in form and fashion to other oppressive ideologies such as racism and sexism (Herek, 1990), heterosexism legitimizes hostility, discrimination, verbal harassment and, in the worst of cases, even physical violence towards LGB persons.

Heterosexism also complicates two essential processes in the psychological development of LGB persons: 1) overcoming internalized homophobia and 2) coming out (Herek, 1990). Precisely because a heterosexist environment is both hostile and unsafe, LGB persons may elect to conceal their sexual identity from others for self-protective reasons, including a desire to avoid rejection, harm, or out of a sense of shame (DiPlacido, 1998; D'Augeli & Grossman, 2001). In doing so, LGB individuals contend not only with the intrapsychic burden of concealment as these engage in cognitive and behavioral efforts to avoid "outing" themselves but are also kept from the protective benefits of sharing community with LGB peers and allies (Meyer, 2003). While certainly self-protective in nature, concealment can also have harmful psychological sequelae. For example, findings from a recent study suggest that LGB individuals who conceal or minimize openness about their sexual orientation are more prone to experiencing internalized homophobia, a minority stressor that has been shown to negatively impact mental health and overall sexual identity development for LGB persons (Walch, Ngamake, Bovornusvakool, Walker, 2016).

Given the chronic and pervasive nature of the stressors LGB individuals face related to their sexuality, Meyer (1995) first conceptualized this stress experience as being directly derived from a sexual minority status, dubbing it *minority stress*. Meyer

(1995; 2003) defined minority stress as the excess, chronic stress to which LGB persons are subject to as a result of their stigmatized, minority identities. Early research by Meyer (1995) examining the association between minority stressors such as internalized homophobia, stigma, and discrimination found independent associations emerged between these and different indicators of psychological distress. Specifically, Meyer (1995) found internalized homophobia, stigma, and discrimination to be independently associated with feelings of demoralization, guilt, suicide potential, and sexual intimacy problems. Analyzing the combined effects of these stressors, Meyer (1995) also found a strong association between these and the indicators of psychological distress examined, suggesting minority stress as a whole exerts a significant effect on mental health.

Considering the widespread intolerance (at best) and violence towards LGB persons (at worst) evident in our culture, LGB persons have traditionally been assumed to demonstrate higher levels of psychopathology that necessarily results in impairment or maladaptive functioning (Garnets et al., 1990; Meyer 1995, 2003). However, research has revealed that such is not the case. For instance, while research has consistently documented that LGB individuals exhibit greater levels of psychological distress and psychopathology when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, this does not suggest outright dysfunction, impairment, or chronic maladjustment (Garnets et al., 1990; Meyer, 2003). Nor does this suggest that LGB persons are inherently predisposed to psychiatric morbidity. Garnets et al. (1990), Meyer (1995, 2003), and others have discussed the experiences LGB individuals face with homophobia and related stressors as ones that, albeit harmful, create opportunities for growth and resiliency as well. Rather than viewing LGB individuals as innately predisposed to psychological dysfunction by virtue

of their minority status in society, research has documented patterns of resiliency and healthy psychological adaptation that occurs for LGB persons. For example, research has shown that through coming out and asserting an LGB identity, LGB persons may learn to cope and effectively manage the deleterious impact of stressors related to this process (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001).

Meyer's (2003) work on minority stress also suggests a range of individual- and social-level factors interact to create conditions under which LGB persons may (or may not) experience varying degrees of distress and/or clinical syndromes. Specifically, Meyer (2003) extended his earlier work examining minority stress variables and their association to psychological distress by providing a conceptual framework that could account for the observed higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders among LGB persons. Drawing from prior literature on stress response models (e.g. Dohrenwend, 1998; 2000), Meyer (2003) outlined a minority stress model that positions a continuum of distal (e.g. negative social attitudes, prejudice events) and proximal (e.g. internalized homophobia) minority stress processes within a framework cognizant of various individual- and social-level factors. In this model, minority stress processes involve a) internalized homophobia, b) stigma (expectation of societal rejection), and c) discrimination experiences (Meyer, 2003). The degree to which these result in greater or lesser stress responses, thereby impacting mental health, relies on characteristics such as individual socioeconomic status, the extent to which an individual endorses an LGB identity, the valence of this endorsement, and nature of that individual's coping ability and social support (Meyer, 2003). Thus, while LGB individuals may exhibit greater levels of psychological distress or disorders, these should be understood as emerging from a complex interaction of

minority stress factors to which their heterosexual counterparts are (unfairly so) not subject to.

In sum, LGB individuals have historically contended with a variety of socially determined stressors related to their sexual identity that result in their collective mistreatment. These stressors include factors such as homophobia, which can in turn be internalized and directed at the self, as well as discrimination, stigma, and heterosexism (Garnets et al., 1990; Herek, 1990, 2000, 2004, 2015; Meyer, 1995; 2003).

Psychologically, the consequences of society's discriminatory attitudes and mistreatment of LGB-identified persons can result in greater risk for the development of psychological distress, diminished self-esteem, depressive and anxious symptomatology, and suicidal ideation, amongst others (Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 1995; 2003). However, this pattern of elevated psychological distress and psychopathology is attributable not to an innate predisposition to maladjustment but rather to an interplay of sexual minority stressors that impinge on the mental health of LGB persons specifically (Garnets et al., 1990; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003). Therefore, in understanding LGB mental health, it is important to recognize the contribution of minority stressors that result in patterns of elevated psychiatric risk and general psychological distress.

This last point is particularly salient when considering the lifelong experiences of LGB individuals and how these may differ along racial, ethnic, gender, and other lines of diversity. Pertinent to the current study on the experiences of Latina WSW, a sensibility to sexual minority-specific stressors must be supplemented with a recognition of other stressors related to race, ethnicity, and gender. As was reviewed previously, this involves a consideration for the collective interplay of sexism, racism, and heterosexism, all of

which help create the contours of a triple jeopardy experience (Greene, 1994). Certainly, for Latina WSW, an intersectional analysis involves as well the recognition that both pressures within Latino culture and mainstream American society jointly function to determine their varied experiences with sexism, racism, heterosexism, and how these in turn impact their overall well-being.

Chapter 3: Methods

Qualitative research involves the use of methods and study designs, such as interviews and thematic analyses, to arrive at meanings and themes derived from human experience; oftentimes, these are used to gain deeper understandings of an issue that can be used to develop theories, hypotheses for further testing, or interventions (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, Morales, 2007). According to Creswell et al. (2007) and Morrow (2007), counseling psychologists have used these approaches to advance the field's knowledge regarding areas such as individual identity development, counseling process mechanisms, and issues relevant to multiculturalism and diversity. Qualitative research has also been described as the most useful approach for understanding individuals and their meaning-making processes (Morrow, 2007). Furthermore, qualitative approaches all share an appreciation for the meanings of human experience, de-emphasizing abstractions and explanations of it and instead aiming to elucidate how individuals understand and construct concepts of themselves and the world writ-large (Moustakas, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Moustakas (1994) describes qualitative research as a methodological body that "regard[s] the data of human experience imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations," (p. 21).

As this study seeks to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of Latina WSW, phenomenology in particular provides methodologies that are primarily concerned with the detailed study of human phenomena and the meaning making processes that characterize them. In describing phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) traces the term's technical definition to Hegel, a German philosopher who described phenomenology as "knowledge as it appears to consciousness," (p. 26). At its core,

phenomenology refers to the production of knowledge derived from lived experience and it is concerned with describing the essence of human life as it is felt and thought of by subjects themselves. Or, as Smith and Osborn (2015) frame it, phenomena should be seen “as they present themselves in their own terms” (p. 25). The word phenomenon comes from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, which means to “flare up...to bring to light” that which is experienced by the self (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2015) – one of several methods within the family of phenomenological research – was chosen as the qualitative approach most suitable to this current study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was developed almost 20 years ago as a distinctly psychological approach to phenomenological research (Smith, 1996). Smith (2004) and Smith and Osborn (2015) have described IPA as phenomenological in that it involves a detailed and profound exploration of lived experience, prioritizing the individual’s perception of objects or events. In other words, IPA can be understood as being concerned with “how participants are making sense of their personal and social world...the meanings that particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants” (Smith and Osborn, 2015, p. 25). IPA is also idiographic in nature, emphasizing the detailed examination of individual cases until some level of understanding has been achieved before moving on to a detailed analysis of subsequent cases in the study (Smith, 2004; Smith and Osborn, 2015). IPA assumes, therefore, that general claims of a phenomenon cannot be achieved without an in-depth engagement with individual cases; it is only after this that the researcher can consider the degree of convergence or divergence of individual-level meanings across participants (Smith, 2004; Smith and Osborn, 2015). As such, IPA seeks to understand

the essence of a given human experience and it aims to do so via an exploration of individual-level meanings that are subsequently compared across cases and translated into a narrative account of participants' experiences (Smith, 2004; Smith and Osborn, 2015).

IPA is interpretative in that it acknowledges the researcher is part and parcel of the meaning-making process. In attempting to glean an understanding of participants' lived experiences, researchers carry with them their own subjectivities, and these come to bear as they utilize their inductive capacities to make sense of what is being shared, and the meanings held within participants' accounts (Smith, 2004; Smith and Osborn, 2015). Specifically, Smith and Osborn (2015) explain that such an interpretative process can be approached empathically and critically: a researcher is empathic as she aspires to understand what an experience was like for an individual while also approaching the data with a critical lens, asking questions of the texts from participants. For example, Smith and Osborn (2015) suggest researchers ask themselves, among other things: "Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants are less aware of?" (p. 26). For the purposes of this current study, this question is especially relevant as the lead researcher approaches the subject matter with training in psychological principles and phenomena that may not be accessible to participants themselves; Therefore, these may be less aware of possible psychosocial processes contributing to their experiences. Ultimately, Smith and Osborn (2015) emphasize that IPA's goal of understanding a person's lived experience involves both identifying and empathizing with, and trying to make sense of, that which is shared (p. 26).

Philosophically, IPA is also consistent with the intersectional and feminist aspirations of this study to privilege the voices of Latina WSW as avenues for arriving at a better understanding of their experiences. For example, IPA's idiographic emphasis on the detailed examination of first-person accounts dovetails nicely with standpoint theory as both share the belief that lived experience is the bedrock of knowing and a necessary precursor to empirical knowledge of any kind (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Harding, 2004). Methodologically speaking, standpoint theory as articulated by Harding (2004) has guided the selection of IPA as the method of inquiry for this study for a number of reasons. Principally, IPA allows for the centralization of Latina WSW perspectives by using their narratives as the primary source of data. According to standpoint theory, producing knowledge from the vantage point of women themselves and using their narratives as primary sources is a central organizing principle of a feminist epistemology such as standpoint theory (Harding, 2004).

Research conducted from a standpoint perspective aims to produce knowledge that originates in the experiences of women themselves, not in hypothetical, "objective" assumptions about phenomena and what they entail (Harding, 2004). Standpoint theory and its' proponents additionally hold that each standpoint is, by virtue of its specific cultural and sociohistorical location, unique and most informative of experiences under those conditions (Harding, 2004). Given these considerations, this study aspires to follow in this tradition of feminist inquiry and assumes that, in order to better understand the experiences of Latina WSW, a natural point of departure are their unique standpoints, as defined by the contours of our current sociohistorical period and their self-definitions.

While phenomenology in general and IPA in particular share philosophical foundations with other qualitative methods, it is distinguishable in its initial approach to the study matter, methods of data collection, and data analysis. Generally speaking, an IPA study can be understood as following an interpretative cycle: the researcher begins at one point of this cycle, reading about and conceptualizing the study at hand, then brackets their preconceived assumptions and knowledge when interviewing participants, becoming “a curious and attentive but naïve listener.” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.29). The cycle continues with the researcher moving back to one’s “home base” and attempting to make sense of what was shared by the participant, grounding the analysis in participants’ actual statements, while keeping in mind one’s own subjectivity and how this informs our interpretations and understandings (Smith and Osborn, 2015). What follows is an overview of Smith and Osborn’s (2015) practical, non-prescriptive guide to the methods of data collection, analysis, and final write up of results in an IPA study.

Stages of the Interpretative Phenomenological Research Process

Bracketing. Initiating a phenomenological inquiry requires the researcher to first set aside (or bracket out) assumptions and biases of the phenomenon being investigated so as to “launch” the study as far as possible from preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Bracketing encourages humility and flexibility on behalf of the researcher; on the one hand, it requires the ability to admit our knowledge is delimited by our perceptions, and on the other hand it requires the researcher to be flexible so that new understandings can emerge (Smith and Osborn, 2015). This initial approach to the study matter is unique to phenomenology, which holds that an understanding of a phenomenon cannot be fully had with assumptions or knowledge previously acquired. Instead,

bracketing requires the researcher to suspend prejudgments so that the meaning or essence of a phenomenon can emerge from an intentional engagement with the data.

As this study proceeded with a feminist approach to knowledge creation (Harding, 2004), bracketing also involved the recognition that a “freedom from suppositions” was necessary if the matter under study was to be approached with a perspective that divorced itself from traditionally male assumptions of women’s lives. In doing so, women’s voices and stories were privileged and drawn upon to gain awareness of what the Latina WSW experience entails. At the same time, a recognition of my own subjectivity as a queer, Dominican Latina and how this could have precluded my efforts to approach this study with “fresh eyes” was important to consider at the outset. To the extent that my identities could have biased or prevented me from approaching the data with a “freedom from suppositions,” as epoche requires, my reflections on this possibility will be more thoroughly discussed in a subsequent section where I expound upon my positionality throughout this study.

Multiple readings and note taking. After this initial stance was assumed, the phenomenological process led to the next stage, which involves closely reading transcripts multiple times and taking notes throughout. Here, the researcher makes a concerted effort to familiarize herself with the data through re-listening to audio recordings and re-reading participant transcripts to become fully immersed in the original interview (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The goal here is to repeatedly consider the phenomenon so as to arrive at a greater awareness of our experience of it beyond the superficial identification of qualities, giving us opportunities to revise or modify our perceptions of experience.

During this process of listening and relistening, notes are taken, ideally along the margin of the transcripts themselves, to capture researcher's assumptions, reflections, and initial understandings of participants' narratives. These notes are inclusive of observations regarding content (i.e., what participants verbalized), how participants discussed their experiences (i.e., language use, changes in level of emotionality, etc.), or interpretative comments that attempt to begin to make sense of the phenomenon under study (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Comments regarding reflexivity or researcher stance are also noted, particularly reflections on how the researcher's personal experiences or characteristics may be contributing to interpretations and observations being made (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Importantly, as this study is grounded in a feminist approach, notes that were taken alongside participants' transcripts also involved a careful consideration of the context(s) and sociopolitical forces that came to bear in participants' narratives. In doing so, the iterative process of multiple readings and note-taking produced interpretations and observations that accounted for the roles that sexism, racism, and heterosexism play in the lives of Latina WSW.

Transforming notes into emergent themes. Following multiple readings of transcripts and note-taking, annotated transcripts are again reviewed to document emergent themes in participants' narratives. Prior notes, including interpretations and observations, are utilized to formulate initial thematic codes, or sub-themes (Smith and Osborn, 2015). These sub-themes ideally represent a higher level of abstraction, and thus a conceptual distillation of participants' statements into meaning units (Smith & Osborn, 2015). These are then listed chronologically, as they emerged from the transcript itself, and reserved for the next stage of data analysis.

Thematic clustering. The next step involves looking for connections, or conceptual similarities, between sub-themes, organizing these by thematic clusters, and providing each cluster with a brief description (Smith and Osborn, 2015). Sub-themes that were previously listed are repeatedly considered alongside original transcripts and researcher notes to determine correspondence and fit with the emerging structure of larger-order, or super-ordinate, theme clusters (Smith and Osborn, 2015). These theme clusters are paired with corresponding statements from participants' interviews and reserved for the next step of data analysis.

Transforming themes to narrative accounts. At this final stage of the IPA process, a written account of the study is achieved using super-ordinate themes, theme descriptions, and their corresponding participant quotes (Smith and Osborn, 2015). Super-ordinate themes are described one by one, exemplified with corresponding extracts from the original participant interview, and further expounded upon with analytic comments from the researcher(s) (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Thus, analysis concludes with providing a narrative description that allows the reader access to participants' accounts of their experiences as well as the researcher's interpretative commentary (Smith and Osborn, 2015). Altogether, these inclusions allow for the reader to gain a greater appreciation for the phenomenon under study, both from the perspective of participants' themselves, as well as it was understood and articulated by the researcher(s).

Procedures

Upon receiving approval from University of Miami's Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were solicited via letters of invitation (Appendix A) distributed through email listservs and posted on closed Facebook groups. Interested participants

were instructed to contact the lead researcher and subsequently screened for eligibility. Individuals were deemed eligible for participation if they met the inclusion criteria, namely: 1) 18 years of age or older, 2) self-identified as Latina, Hispanic, or Latinx, 3) identified as women regardless of sex assigned at birth or gender expression, and 4) were currently or had previously been intimately/amorously involved with women. Informed consent (Appendix B), in addition to a short demographic form (Appendix C) were provided via email and reviewed with eligible participants in phone meetings scheduled at our convenience. As most participants resided outside of Miami or had schedules that didn't align with the lead researcher to allow for in-person meetings, all were handled in this way. Informed consent provided participants with an overview of the study, confidentiality, and additional information regarding potential risks to participating. Considering the nature of the study could have resulted in conversations that were emotionally provocative, information regarding mental health resources (Appendix D) was also provided. Participants were required to provide verbal and signed consent to participate in the study prior to continuation.

Interviews ranged from 45 mins to 1.5 hours in length and were conducted by the lead researcher in English, Spanish, or a combination of the two, depending upon the preference of individuals. An interview guide (Appendix E) was drafted in consultation with Dr. Debbiesiu Lee and Dr. Daniel Santisteban, both researchers with ample expertise on LGBTQ issues and Latino populations. While not prescriptive, the interview guide provided a semi-structured framework that facilitated fuller disclosures of participant experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Interviews were recorded by the lead researcher and manually transcribed using Microsoft Word shortly after data collection.

When transcribing interviews conducted in English and Spanish, the lead researcher translated Spanish portions to English and consulted with bilingual psychologists to confirm translations were sound and consistent with participant's statements in Spanish.

Audio recordings were uploaded and stored in Box, a secured University of Miami drive. These files were assigned an arbitrary pseudonym and stored separately from files (i.e., demographic questionnaire) containing participant information. Interview transcripts were fully de-identified and assigned a pseudonym that corresponded to its' respective audio file. After the study is complete, audio files will be deleted to further protect participants and ensure confidentiality.

Sampling

The sample in this study ultimately included 13 self-identified lesbian, bisexual, queer, and pansexual Latinas of varying ethnic and racial identifications. For this study, it was assumed that understanding the phenomenon of being a Latina WSW would be best achieved via a maximum variation within the sample along ethnic and sexual identity lines. As such, efforts were made to recruit Latina WSW from different regions of the United States consistent with the differential migration patterns and resultant Latino ethnic group concentrations across the country. For example, while Puerto Ricans have tended to live in the Northeast, as do Dominicans, many also reside in Chicago and now parts of central Florida (Capielo, C, Delgado-Romero, Stewart, 2015). In contrast, Cubans are traditionally the largest Latino group in South Florida, as are Mexicans in the southwestern parts of the country (Pew Research Center, 2015). The following table provides basic demographic information that characterizes the sample included in this study:

Table 1
Selected Participant Demographics

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Value</i>
Participants (n)	13
Sexual Identity	
Lesbian	8
Queer	3
Bisexual	1
Pansexual	1
Mean age (years)	34.5
Ethnic Identity	
Puerto Rican	2
Dominican	1
Salvadoran	1
AfroLatina	2
Chicana	1
Peruvian	1
Mexican	1
Mexican & Puerto Rican	1
Puerto Rican & Dominican	1
Cuban & Colombian	1
Boricua & Xicana	1
Educational level	
Some College	1
Bachelor's degree	2
Master's degree	9
Doctoral studies	1

Because Latinos are an inherently heterogeneous group, sampling for a variety of Latina ethnic backgrounds provided not only a richer understanding of idiosyncratic differences related to ethnic identity, but also a greater appreciation for the variation in religious, sociopolitical, and linguistic nuances that came to bear in the experiences shared by women in this study. Precisely because Latinas are a fundamentally heterogeneous group, sampling for a diverse set of women ultimately allowed for a more faithful exploration of their collective experiences. The inclusion criteria for this study were:

- Age 18 years and older
- Self-identify as Latina, Latinx, or specific Latino ethnicity, i.e., Dominican, Puerto Rican, Colombian, etc.
- Self-identify as a woman regardless of birth sex or gender expression
- Have or are currently sexually or otherwise intimately involved with a woman

A few necessary considerations for conducting research with Latina WSW were worth noting at the outset of this study. For example, Meyer, Wilson, and Mallinckrodt, (2009) have described some of the challenges in sampling and recruiting LGB populations. Given their history of marginalization and oppression as sexual minorities, LGB individuals may be “hidden” from the mainstream, thus making it more difficult for researchers to gain trust and establish rapport with potential participants and their respective social circles (Meyer et al., 2009). As a result, Meyer et al. (2009) recommend the use of a variety of sampling strategies, including purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling to maximize access and enhance recruitment efforts with LGB populations.

Because this study sought to elicit perspectives on the experiences of Latina WSW, purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of participants suitable to the subject matter under study (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2015). As the current study author had access to social networks online (listservs and closed Facebook groups) and offline (friendships and acquaintances) via which participants could be recruited, convenience sampling also helped in gaining access to a sample of Latina WSW. Following the recommendations made by Meyer et al. (2009), snowball sampling was yet

another approach that was utilized in this study. Following recommendations made by Creswell (2007), efforts were made to recruit 10-15 participants, and ultimately 13 were deemed eligible, provided consent, and participated in this study.

Because of the marginal status of Latina WSW, it was thought these would be best recruited via several avenues to enhance accessibility and trust. As such, recruitment took place via special-interest closed Facebook groups, professional list-serves, and finally through participants themselves. This allowed for both the recruitment of Latina WSW from multiple parts of the country and from different spaces, some more public and some more private. Because participation in cultural groups and spaces online and offline varies depending on factors such as personal choice, levels of outness, or perceived need to create community around shared identities, utilizing a variety of approaches maximized the diversity within this study's sample and allowed greater access to a population that, for reasons outlined previously, are often harder to find and recruit for a study. In the end, of the 13 women that participated in this study, 3 responded to the recruitment script posted on a closed Facebook group, 2 expressed interested in participating after the lead researcher verbally informed them of the study topic, and 8 contacted the lead researcher after learning of the study through friends familiar with the study.

Data Analysis

Bracketing. Data analysis proceeded with Smith and Osborn's (2015) outline of procedures for each transcribed interview. As phenomenological analysis of any kind requires the researcher to suspend preconceived judgements at the outset, the lead researcher made notes alongside each participant's transcript so as to keep a digital

record of this bracketing of assumptions. These notes included, among other things, commentary on content elements of participants' statements and any relevant process observations (i.e., when and how they were discussing certain topics and their relationship to questions asked or prior disclosures made in the interview). Along with these comments, notes were also made of the lead researcher's emotional reactions, thoughts, and any memories of past experiences evoked by participants' narratives. While not prescribed by Smith and Osborn's (2015) phenomenological approach, such a choice in analysis allowed for an explicit accounting of this attempt at bracketing, therefore contributing to a thorough audit trail which facilitated later stages of data analysis.

In addition to documenting an audit trail, bracketing also involved a series of exercises before, during, and after each participant interview that further helped in preparing the lead researcher to suspend judgements or assumptions throughout this study. For example, prior to each interview, time was allotted so that the lead researcher could review study materials as a way to "immerse" herself within the study and intentionally bracket out any assumptions that could interfere with data collection and analysis. This included re-reading the study topic and the interview guide to be used with each participant, as well as any notes made from previous conversations with the external auditor of considerations to be kept in mind for future interviews. During each interview, the lead researcher was also mindful of refraining from assuming a therapist role and, without sacrificing warmth and empathy, proceeding as a researcher/interviewer throughout the study. Lastly, after interviews were conducted, notes were made of questions to follow up on during data analysis and conversations with the external

auditor. At times when the interview process was particularly provocative, the lead researcher enlisted social supports (i.e. research advisor, colleagues, clinical supervisors) for consultation to help process any reactions elicited by participants' narratives. Altogether, these exercises helped the lead researcher remain grounded in the study material, attuned to participants' stories, and continuously mindful of suspending judgements arising that could unduly influence the research process and ultimately study findings.

Multiple readings and note taking. Once this bracketing had been achieved, data analysis proceeded to multiple readings and note taking of participant interviews. Here, the focus was on achieving an initial understanding of participants' experiences via an iterative engagement with the data (Smith, 2004; Smith and Osborn, 2015). In other words, the inductive process of continuously reading transcripts and documenting the researcher's emerging assumptions and interpretations allowed for an in-depth examination of individual cases that progressively led to an initial understanding of their experiences.

In this current study, each interview was initially transcribed, and all statements made by participants were listed in a separate document in chronological order. These statements were re-read both with and without its' accompanying audio file several times to enable a full immersion into the data (Smith & Osborn, 2015). At this stage, all statements were considered potential "horizons" of the phenomenon under study. Proceeding in this way allowed each statement to inform the researcher's initial understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Smith and Osborn, 2015). In other words, by engaging in the practice of transcribing and then separately listing all

participant statements so these could be re-read multiple times, I was continuously familiarizing myself with the data and reflecting on it more fully before moving on to the next step in data analysis.

The goal of data analysis at this first stage was to achieve a holistic and intuitive understanding of the phenomenon under study while continuing to bracket or suspend judgements about the data that may be based on prior knowledge or personal experience (Smith & Osborn, 2015). To this end, notes were again made alongside each statement to keep a record of assumptions that were arising at this stage of analysis. These personal notes and reflections on each participant interview were kept as part of a comprehensive audit trail. Such iterative note-taking has allowed me to systematically keep track of my reflections as they arise and permit a conscious effort to continuously bracket out my own experiences as a queer Latina so that these did not unduly influence my understanding of the phenomenon that was the topic of this study. At the same time, these notes often included commentary on initial meanings, or sub-themes, that seemed to emerge from the data. Altogether, these were preserved for the next step of data analysis.

Transforming notes into emergent themes. To hone in on conceptually rich segments of participants' narratives that could be translated to emergent themes, this initial engagement with the data was followed by *reduction and elimination* whereby each expression was tested for two requirements: a) Does the expression constitute a sufficient description of the phenomenon? and b) Can it be abstracted and labeled? (Moustakas, 1994). If so, these expressions were considered conceptually rich and reserved for the next step of data analysis. Expressions not meeting the above criteria, or expressions that were repetitive or vague, were excluded. For example, a statement from

one of the participants in this study was the following: “Well, I know you’re in Miami now, so you might understand this a little bit.” In using the criteria outlined by Moustakas (1994) I evaluated: (a) does this statement constitute a sufficient description of Latina WSW’s identity-based experiences? and (b) can it be abstracted and labeled? While this statement could be abstracted and possibly labeled as “assumptions of relatedness,” or something to that effect, it did not uniquely describe her identity-based experiences as a Latina WSW. On the other hand, a statement from this same participant that was retained because it met the requirements for relevance and coding was the following:

I, I think I was very late to becoming aware of my own sexual orientation. In H.S., my mom asked me if I was a lesbian, and I got really insulted. My parents and I never, we didn’t talk much about anything personal, partially I think because of the dynamic with my sister, they had to care for her much more, so I just went and did my own thing usually. But that question really did make me think, huh, I wonder if there’s something to that, or if they’re just stereotyping me because I’m in sports, you know?

With this statement, I came to the conclusion that the experience of wondering about her sexual identity, her awareness of her process in doing so, and her reaction to her mother’s direct asking of her sexual orientation pointed to features of her experience as a Latina lesbian related to sexual identity development, and I labeled the statement as such.

Statements not selected as exemplifiers of the phenomenon were kept in a separate document titled “Omissions” as part of an audit trail at this stage of data analysis. Smith and Osborn (2015) state that while it is not necessary to omit statements at this stage of data analysis, researchers are free to exercise discretion and apply techniques in an IPA

study so long as these are consonant with the ultimate goals of engaging in an idiographic, inductive, interpretative analysis of lived experience (Smith and Osborn, 2015). That said, omitting repetitive or vague statements at this stage of data analysis allowed the lead researcher to progressively distill individual perspectives towards an understanding of the meanings underlying their overall experiences as Latina WSW.

Once identified, exemplary statements from participants were highlighted and considered alongside this researcher's notes to produce emergent themes in the margin of participants' transcripts. Using the example listed above, the thematic code assigned to that statement became "awareness of sexual identity development," and this was recorded alongside the statement in the margin. Theme codes gathered at this stage were collected and listed in a separate document in chronological order, as these emerged in the interview.

Thematic clustering. The next step in data analysis involved interrogating the list of initial themes, or sub-themes, to look for connections, or conceptual similarities, between these. These were systematically considered, one by one, and organized by thematic clusters. For example, the sub-themes of "awareness of sexual identity development" and "attitudes towards sexuality" were clustered under the super-ordinate theme "sexual identity development." This process involved considering the sub-themes previously gathered from participant's statements and interrogating them alongside original transcripts and researcher notes to determine correspondence and fit with the emerging structure of larger-order, or super-ordinate, theme clusters (Smith and Osborn, 2015). This resulted in a table of super-ordinate themes within which sub-themes were

nested. In the same table, these super-ordinate themes were briefly described with corresponding participant quotes listed alongside each theme group.

Next, the lead researcher cross-checked the consistency and fidelity of these themes with each participant's transcription record and evaluated if themes were explicitly expressed or compatible with participants' statements. This involved word-searching as well as re-reading original interview transcripts to determine that derived themes indeed corresponded to the expressions of participants themselves.

Correspondence was determined if themes were either explicitly stated in interview transcripts or if themes were otherwise reflected in conceptually consistent expressions. As will be discussed in further detail below, an auditor was involved throughout the stages of data analysis and reviewed all records, as well as audit trails, to further ensure that derived themes were faithful to participants' statements.

To further determine the credibility of extrapolated themes and more fully carry out the feminist standpoint aspirations of this study, an effort was made to involve participant(s) at this stage of data analysis. Because participants were asked to provide consent to being contacted up to six months post-interview, the lead researcher emailed all participants a list of super-ordinate themes that emerged across all interviews, along with a brief description of each. Participants were asked to review these themes and their descriptions to identify whether they felt represented in the major theme pool provided or if these did not capture essential features of their experiences as Latina WSW. A record of emails sent and responses received has been kept as part of a comprehensive audit trail as well. In the current study, 3 out of 13 participants responded and all agreed the themes provided did indeed capture their experiences as Latina WSW.

At the outset of this study, it was determined that having an external auditor involved would greatly enhance both the quality of analyses and the credibility of results obtained. For the purposes of this current study, Dr. Debbiesiu Lee has served as an external auditor and reviewed all materials (i.e., de-identified transcripts, omissions, themes, audit records, etc.) to confirm analyses were sound and decisions made throughout were indeed appropriate. At times, Dr. Lee provided feedback and suggestions that helped further fine-tune thematic groupings. In doing so, the external auditor added another layer of data-checking and attempted to minimize the influence of researcher bias by making note of any important missing information. Such procedures allowed for further confirmation that themes were derived from participants' transcripts and accurately reflected what was expressed by participants in this study.

Assessing Themes for Richness, Depth, Variability, and Sample Diversity.

Data analysis also involved an on-going, iterative assessment of themes emerging from participant narratives as each interview was conducted, transcribed, and analyzed. While Creswell (1997) and others have recommended 11-15 participants be included in a phenomenological study sample, this range is not merely arbitrary. After years of phenomenological and other qualitative research, experience has demonstrated that such a sample size tends to yield a level of richness and depth that justify data collection end with a sample in the range of 11-15 participants. In this current study, data was collected and analyzed until the lead researcher and the external auditor agreed that the themes generated by the data were indeed being consistently represented and confirmed by subsequent participant interviews. Given the goals of this study were to obtain as diverse a representation as possible of Latina WSW experiences, this iterative assessment of

thematic diversity also took into consideration sample diversity as well, particularly regarding racial/ethnic background and region of the country. Once it was clear that subsequent interviews were producing confirmatory and corroborating data to what had been previously obtained, data collection ended at 13 participants, which in this study yielded themes that were sufficiently rich in the level of detail provided, but also diverse in the range of perspectives represented within each theme category.

Transforming themes to narrative accounts. The process of multiple readings and note taking, thematic labeling, and thematic clustering were repeated for all 13 cases in this study. After analysis was conducted on each participant interview, super-ordinate themes that emerged for each case were considered across cases and documented in a master table of themes for the group of participants. As was done previously, Dr. Debbiesiu Lee reviewed and audited this master table of themes to ensure these were indeed grounded in participants' statements and well-represented across cases. Following Smith and Osborn's (2015) guidelines, the master table of themes was transformed into a narrative account that produced descriptions of super-ordinate themes, researcher commentary further describing participants' experiences, and verbatim extracts from each participant supporting this narrative account. This narrative account constitutes the end result of this IPA study and will be reported in detail in the following chapter.

At this end stage the external auditor, Dr. Debbiesiu Lee, again reviewed all coding, note-taking, descriptions, and the audit trail kept throughout the study. In doing so, the auditor checked for missing information and evaluated the credibility of derived themes and descriptions produced by this researcher. Such data-checking from an external source represented an effort to enhance the trustworthiness of the analyses

conducted and the results such that the reader can judge the present study to be of quality and a faithful portrayal of the phenomenon it sought to explore.

Trustworthiness

A cornerstone of scientific research, analytic processes exist to ensure the rigor, quality, and overall trustworthiness of studies and the findings they produce. While the reader may be more familiar with the concept of validity and its' application in quantitative research evaluation (Smith & Glass, 1979), qualitative research relies on different evaluative strategies (Creswell, 2007; Shenton, 2004). In qualitative research, these strategies revolve around the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the extent to which the qualitative researcher can demonstrate that a faithful (credible) depiction of the phenomenon being studied is presented (Shenton, 2004). In other words, credibility refers to how trustworthy the presentation of the phenomenon is – can we reliably take the researcher's "word for it"? As Shenton (2004) notes, credibility is met when the phenomenon described is congruent with reality. To establish credibility, some strategies qualitative researchers can employ include the use of established research methods and practices that have become conventional in qualitative research, develop familiarity with the environment/culture to be studied prior to data collection, random sampling of participants to mitigate possible researcher biases, triangulation, or the use of multiple data collection methods/sources/sites, and tactics to ensure participants have honestly shared their information (Shenton, 2004). In addition, Shenton (2004) recommends researchers engage in other activities (e.g. iterative questioning, frequent debriefing with participants)

to further establish credibility. In this study, efforts to achieve credibility involved the use of established tenets of interpretative phenomenological analysis put forward by Smith and Osborn (2015). In particular, this has included (1) clearly delineating the research process, including sampling procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis; (2) thick descriptions of the sample in order to demonstrate the appropriateness of the individuals included in the study, and (3) the use of iterative questioning, in order to ensure that themes gleaned from interviews were consistent with participants' perceptions of their experiences.

Considering the feminist standpoint approach of this study, establishing credibility also greatly benefited from the involvement of participants themselves. Also known as member-checking, enlisting participants to check the credibility of data collected helps ensure that reported results are consistent with participants' actual perspectives (Creswell, 2007). To this last point, the lead researcher shared with participants a master list of themes and theme descriptions derived from their interviews in an effort to debrief and confirm the results obtained. The goal here was to determine whether these were accurately capturing the essence of a Latina WSW subjectivity as experienced by participants themselves and therefore a credible depiction of the phenomenon under study.

Transferability. Unlike generalizability, transferability does not refer to the ability of researchers to make plausible generalizations about broader populations theoretically similar to those included in an original study. Transferability instead refers to the extent that knowledge gleaned from qualitative inquiry can be judged by the reader to be transferred or applied to settings and environments similar to those included in the

study. To allow for this, qualitative researchers must provide detailed, “thick” descriptions of the context of their study so that the reader can make this determination for themselves (Shenton, 2004). For such a thick description, Shenton (2004) recommends researchers describe the “boundaries” of the environment the study was conducted in. This includes a description of such things like number of participating organizations, inclusion criteria of participants, methods employed, amount and length of data collection sessions, and the time period over which the process occurred (Shenton, 2004). To achieve the goal of transferability, thick descriptions of this study’s design, including sampling frame, recruitment strategies, and methods of data collection and analysis have been provided in detail. These should be taken into account when interpreting this study’s findings and the degree to which they apply to the general population of Latina WSW.

For instance, this current study was conducted over phone conversations with self-selected, self-identified Latina bisexual, queer, lesbian, and pansexual women ranging in age from 26 years to 57 years of age. Interviews were conducted over a 5-month period and ultimately involved a total of 13 women from various regions of the country, including the Northeastern, Southeastern, Midwestern, Southwestern, and Western United States. While some participants were in smaller cities at the time of interview, none were from exclusively rural areas. In addition, all but one of the women in this study were born and raised in the United States. As such, findings from this present study are most applicable to Latina WSW fitting these criteria. Caution should be taken in applying these findings to Latina WSW living in predominantly rural areas, those who

are emerging (ages 18-25) or older (ages 60+) adults, or those who were not born and raised in the U.S., as each of these sub-groups require special considerations.

Dependability. In qualitative research, dependability serves as an analog to the quantitative requirement of reliability for assessing research quality. Dependability attempts to reconcile the need to assure some form of “replicability” with the fundamental goals and values of qualitative research. In this study, dependability was demonstrated via the detailed description of the processes involved in the research, including the research design, how it was implemented, how the data was gathered, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the procedures employed (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability. Relatedly, confirmability requires the qualitative researcher to demonstrate that study findings actually arose from data collected as opposed to the researcher’s assumptions or uninformed conclusions. Here, the data obtained should confirm the results found, and vice versa. Because of its close relation to credibility, Shenton (2004) recognizes this can be achieved via the use of triangulation (multiple sources/methods/sites of data collection), and detailed descriptions of methods utilized. In this study, efforts to establish confirmability involved having a comprehensive audit trail of researcher notes, omissions, coding, and thematic clustering, as well as an external auditor that reviewed all steps of data collection, analysis, and final write-up to ensure the study findings presented herein are faithful to participants’ actual statements. In addition to a comprehensive audit trail and the involvement of an external auditor, member-checking of the data represented yet another attempt at ensuring that the findings reported indeed emerged from data collected in this study.

Reflexivity

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty-as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place. (Moraga, 1983, pg. 52-53).

Following in the tradition of Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga, and other feminists of color (i.e., Patricia Hill Collins), I approached this research with the perspective that “the personal is political”. In other words, I approached this study with an acknowledgement of the ways in which our membership to multiple identity categories confers (or withholds) varying degrees of power and privilege and how these relative benefits shape our experiences in the greater social order. And so, as I reflected on my position within this study, I found the best point of departure was an examination of my own personhood. How did I arrive at such a perspective? How did that process of consciousness raising, and politicization, occur so that I now identify as a queer Latina feminist, counseling psychologist in training? And more relevantly, how did these commitments influence me as a researcher, the questions I asked, whom I chose to ask, and how I interpreted results?

Guba and Lincoln (2005) describe reflexivity as a “process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher.” Reflexivity speaks to the self-reflective practice a researcher

undergoes as they acknowledge and consider their own biases, making these transparent to the reader, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. A similar concept can be found in bracketing, or the phenomenological practice of suspending pre-conceived notions of a phenomenon to achieve a novel perspective (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) also urges the researcher to be critical and self-reflective in the process of producing knowledge that breaks the confines of positivist paradigms and embraces a subjective, qualitative approach to knowledge creation. Altogether, reflexivity, phenomenology, and standpoint theory urged me to take pause and honestly consider, amongst other things, how my subjectivity as a human instrument could have affected my research. What follows herein is a foray into my musings as a qualitative researcher interested in studying the experiences Latina WSW have with reconciling their racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. Because no research is ever fully objective or value-free, an examination of this kind was crucial if I was to honestly grapple with my motivations for studying this phenomenon, how I chose to study it, and what meanings I extracted from my exploration.

My interest in studying the experiences of Latina WSW are, in many ways, deeply personal in nature. I grew up as a dutiful Dominican daughter to a single mother in South Bronx, New York City, and it was not until after I had left my home for college and later lived on my own that I dared fully explore my sexuality. Sometime in my early twenties, I began identifying as openly bisexual but soon adopted queer as an identity, which appealed to me because of its outright challenging of gender binaries and intentional ambiguity. I emerged from this with a (mostly) integrated sense of self as a queer Latina.

I say mostly because while I enjoyed greater levels of freedom, and greater amounts of psychological cohesion surrounding my identities, reconciling my queerness with my Latina culture has been fraught with challenges. To this day, I am not fully “out” to many of my extended relatives. Around family, I selectively down-play my queerness primarily to avoid the risk of conflict and losing connectedness. Further compounding and facilitating this decision around non-disclosure for me is the fact that I am currently in a committed relationship with a cisgender man. Because of this, I have often engaged in an internal debate about the relative costs and/or benefits to disclosing (or not) my sexual identity. Currently, most days, I’ve made the decision to refrain from disclosing my queer identity to family. While not a decision I make comfortably, it is one I have found necessary to preserve ties and protect myself from the varying types of reactions I expect to receive from family. Sociologist Katie Acosta (2010, 2013) has written extensively on the experiences lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas have with disclosure and the strategies they implement to navigate that process. She notes that while “coming-out” is an inevitability for some, many Latinas choose to conceal their same-sex attractions as a way to avoid family rejection and preserve psychological health. For the time being, I fall in this category.

On a related note, I am also a feminine-presenting woman, and am often assumed to be heterosexual. I mention this and other features of my queer Latina experience because they distinctly influence the amount of exposure I have to stressors (i.e., homophobia) that would impact a person’s identity formation process and their resultant self-concepts. In short, while I identify as a queer Latina, my gender presentation and relationship status inoculate me from stressors that shape the experiences many Latina

WSW may have with reconciling their multiple identities. Given this reality, I occupy an interesting position as a dual insider/outsider to the queer Latina experience. As Moraga (1983) states, oppressions cannot be directly compared for the purposes of ranking or understanding; Failing to acknowledge the specificity of oppression and its impact results in a limited understanding of the experience itself. And so, I find that acknowledging those areas where my experiences do and do not converge with those of other Latina WSW has been a necessary step in my research on the essence of a Latina WSW subjectivity. Because my experience is one that I have and often do draw from as “data” to help me speculate on psychological processes I’m studying, identifying those areas where my experiences afford me with greater or lesser “insider” status provided me with the opportunity to approach my research with humility. Where sometimes my status as an insider will afford me with greater understanding, my experience as an outsider in other areas has the potential to limit my capacity to fully “get it.” Having this awareness of both the commonalities and differences that exist between mine and other Latina WSW experiences afforded me with what I hope is a humble, receptive disposition, one that I tried to maintain throughout the course of this study. Particularly as a researcher, this awareness has also allowed me to be mindful of the inherent power differentials at play between myself and participants involved in my study. As I set out to study the experiences of Latina WSW through a feminist lens, this awareness represented a concerted effort to humbly allow myself to be truly informed by the experiences participants have shared with me.

My clinical experiences and training as a psychologist have contributed, also, to a re-examination of my multiple identities and how each impact me as a scientist-

practitioner. Personally, these reflections are also happening as I age and approach my third decade, which has led me to wonder how me and my queer/bisexual/lesbian amigas have managed to reconcile our multiple (and often seemingly conflictual) identities so far. We have varying degrees of closeness to our families of origin or of choice, we affirm our ethnic heritages and queerness in different ways, but common across our experiences is the intimate knowledge one can only gain from being socialized as racialized and sexualized objects in society. How we moved from objects to subjects, and how we've managed to reconcile our Latina-ness with our so-called non-normative sexual desires, has and continues to be of huge interest to me. On a related note, the literature on Latino sexualities abounds with deficit perspectives that disproportionately document experiences of chronic stress and health risk. While these are important discussions, missing from the discourse are perspectives that also explore and celebrate the resilience of sexual minority Latinos.

And so, I have approached my inquiry into the experiences Latina WSW have with reconciling their multiple identities with two distinct sets of motivations. One emanated from my lens as a counseling psychologist, as I was interested in the identity formation processes and coping repertoires that emerge for individuals who live at the intersection of multiple, traditionally marginalized, identities. As a queer Latina, I was and continue to be deeply curious about how we so skillfully reconcile our subjectivities and where some challenges to doing so reside. Together, these personal and professional motivations have inspired me to engage in an exploration that is at once celebratory and affirming in its attempt to amplify the voices of a group that is virtually non-existent in the literature.

Chapter 4: Results

Results of this study yielded a total of eight super-ordinate themes across all 13 Latina WSW who participated in this study. These themes are representative of the entire group with instances of individual-level differences being observed as certain areas of lived experience were more (or less) salient for some women than others. Overall, these themes were: 1) Sexual identity development, 2) Ethnic/racial identity development, 3) Experiences with ethnic, sexual, and gender-based discrimination, 4) Familial conflict, dynamics and expectations, 5) Importance of social supports, 6) Commitment to activism and human rights, 7) Importance of visibility and representation, and 8) Experiences of intersectionality and the borderlands. Each theme will be described below and supported with verbatim extracts from participants' interviews to further illustrate the range of experiences captured by these themes. Descriptions and case examples will be supplemented with analytic commentary throughout to elucidate those areas where the experiences of Latina WSW in this study converged, and, perhaps more interestingly, those areas where they did not. Certain themes, such as ethnic/racial identity development and sexual identity development, were richer in the level of detail provided by most of the women in this study and are therefore discussed more fully than, say, importance of social supports, a super-ordinate theme that was salient for some, but not all, of the women in this study.

While the following themes are presented separately to facilitate clarity for the reader, it should be noted that the experiences shared in this study are more interdependent than not; Separating them from one another is at best an attempt to portray the complexity of these women's narratives in a manner that is digestible. That said,

attempts have been made to balance clarity with this researcher's desire to honor the richness of the stories that were so graciously shared in this study.

Sexual Identity Development: "What's gonna happen?"

Time and again, as these women spoke about their sexual identities and how these developed over time, the overarching sentiment pervading their stories was one of anticipation and worry, i.e., "what's gonna happen?" Whether they were surrounded by greater or lesser amounts of support and understanding, these women all shared a concern for what would come of them exploring, and eventually naming, their attractions to women. While for some this concern was a loud and omnipresent voice, for others it was a kind of white noise that only came to the fore when their sexual identity explorations brought them into closer contact with this nagging worry. As varied as these women's sexual identity-based experiences have been, their lifelong concern of what would happen if, when, and how they began to live life more openly as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual women was a feeling all shared, albeit in different ways.

As the first super-ordinate theme that emerged from these women's narratives, "Sexual identity development" contained sub-themes referring to sexual identity-based experiences in general. Overall, this theme included experiences related to sexual identity labeling, navigation of sexual identity categories, awareness of both opposite and same-sex attractions, awareness of homophobia/heteronormativity, attitudes towards same-sex relationships, and influences on sexual identity development in general.

Several of the participants in this study recalled having an early awareness of their sexual attraction to same-sex peers, and these were often kindled by experiences at school where the pressures of fitting in with others gave way to moments of self-reflection on

whether and how they were different from their girl peers when it came to opposite-sex relations. This was the case for Selena, a 42-year-old, 1st generation, Puerto Rican lesbian woman. In recalling her early awareness of same-sex attractions and related experiences in a Catholic elementary school, she shared:

Yeah so I think it was, I remember thinking that, it was probably around then, I just remember thinking that women were beautiful, and I didn't, I didn't try and, like I didn't have any desire to be around men, like I just sort of saw it as, I just always wanted to be around women. Age didn't matter so much, and I remember in 2nd grade, I remember that I was supposed to chase boys, and I remember being like, why? I remember it being a challenge for me, I couldn't figure out why this would be the person that I would want to chase. It was funny because you would chase them, you would catch them, and then you didn't know what you were supposed to do. Like, just chasing kids around in a playground. But I remember thinking that with women I just, I wanted to check their faces, and just spend time with them, and hold their hand. And I knew that it wasn't appropriate. Like, it's not something that I would ever say out loud. I was never really that dumb. I wanna say that was almost around like 4.

Interestingly, Selena remembered being aware at such a young age that her nascent attractions to women, however natural they seemed to her, were somehow inappropriate and could not be openly talked about, much less explored. She would go on to discuss how such an awareness followed her throughout her elementary, middle, and H.S. years and the impact this had on her sexual identity development, an impact she was only able to begin undoing after her undergraduate studies. In a similar vein, another

participant, Jacinta, shared a comparable experience. Jacinta is a 57-year-old, 2nd generation Chicana lesbian, and like Selena also attended Catholic school growing up. She often felt “different” at school, and ultimately attributed these feelings to her early awareness of same-sex attractions. She stated:

I just knew that, um, uh, that I was attracted to women, girls, at that time, but I never said anything about it. And, you know, being in a catholic school, you know, you’re not going to say anything. You know, to me it’s like, oh my god, I can’t say, you know, go to someone and tell them, because, what’s gonna happen?

The question Jacinta posed, “what’s gonna happen?” is one that can be understood as emblematic of the experiences of most, if not all, of the women in this study – for many, the fear of what would happen if they admitted to themselves, and others, their sexual attractions to women began early and persisted throughout childhood, adolescence, and even their college years. For some, however, this question only came to bear later in life, after years of an almost dormant-like state regarding awareness of their own sexual attractions to women. This was the case for Idalia, a 35-year-old, 1st generation, Puerto Rican-Dominican, queer femme woman. She recalls first realizing she was queer after meeting another queer Latina in her first year at a private liberal arts college:

Yeah. So, the first time I became aware of my sexual orientation was when I met another queer Latina. In my mind, queerness looked like an older, butch, White woman, on a motorcycle, wearing leather...But with Maritza, the thing about her was this flash of insight. By seeing her in her own body being who she is I was able to name myself. I always thought I was just shy. But I think I also unconsciously knew that I was different and just didn’t have a name for it. ‘Cause

I never had a boyfriend, I never had a boyfriend when I was in H.S., when I was in middle, and I chalked it up to being shy and awkward, but I actually stayed away. I had a couple of opportunities, especially in H.S., once I was more comfortable in my skin. Um, but no. So, meeting Maritza for me was seeing myself reflected. Finally having something that was named.

Here, Idalia speaks to several key elements of her sexual identity development, ones that were found present in many of the other experiences shared by Latina WSW in this study. She recalls having had a lingering idea that she was “different” growing up, but that she was unable to give that difference a name or a shape, particularly as her assumptions of queerness did not appear to resemble her in any way as a Puerto Rican-Dominican, feminine young woman. Evident in her statement, too, was the importance of being faced with the possibility that being Latina could indeed co-exist with being queer, and how this served as a catalyst for her own awareness of herself as a queer Latina. This experience of feeling represented, and the importance this had for Idalia and other women in this study, will be revisited again later, as these point to both the importance of social supports and the importance of visibility and representation, other super-ordinate themes that emerged in this study.

Returning to the question Jacinta posed to herself when first realizing she was attracted to her same-sex peers – “what’s gonna happen?” – Idalia experienced a similar moment of apprehension and fear after encountering a queer Latina in college for the first time and realizing she, too, was a queer Latina. Idalia went on to describe how Maritza and other queer women of color she met in college helped her feel safe enough to

acknowledge her queerness for the first time. While the moment was an exciting one for Idalia, it quickly faded:

So, I met [Maritza], I had this immediate moment of recognition, alongside that I remember during the TriCo program just being up till all hours of the night talking to her and this woman, Jenny. Jenny was this Puerto Rican and Dominican woman from the Bronx. Beautiful, but also, like, they were the first people that I even half admitted the possibility to, that I think I might be queer. After that though, I remember completely repressing it, ‘what was I thinking, whatever.’ Once I got into the fray of school and having to deal with the pressures there and the new challenges there, I think I kinda pushed it aside. It was like, even if that’s there, there’s no way I’m gonna act on it. Um, because I was raised in a religious household, because, it just felt too, too scary to name out loud. It was safe in that moment with those two women. But after that it just was no longer safe. At least I didn’t think so.

Like so many women in this study, as Idalia began to grapple with the possibility that she was, and had always been, attracted to other women, the prospect of challenging heteronormative expectations rooted in Latino culture and religion seemed too scary a venture. Fortunately, Idalia and other women in this study all discussed the ways in which key social supports, exposure to queerness, and greater degrees of freedom as they entered their adult lives all functioned to provide them with opportunities to safely explore and navigate their emerging sexual identities. These and other factors influencing the experiences of Latina WSW in this study will be explored in greater detail in subsequent sections to follow.

Regarding their sexual identity development, Latina WSW in this study differed in their emerging attractions to men, women, and their present-day sexual orientations. Whereas Jacinta, Idalia, and most others in this study expressed an ongoing awareness of attractions to same-sex peers primarily, others expressed first becoming aware of their attractions to boys and men, only to later realize they were also intrigued by girls and women. Oftentimes, this realization was precipitated by gaining greater exposure to LGBTQ life in general, an occurrence that often took place when these women first moved out of their homes to major cities or when they entered college for the first time. This was the case for Monserrat, a 29-year-old, 1st generation, Afro-Latina lesbian woman:

And so, when I was able to go to college and just explore and see this beautiful population of real women who love women and guys who love guys, and how comfortable and accepted I felt it was that – it helped me realize my own sexuality that I just loved being with women. And I enjoyed being with guys too, but later as time passed, I realized this wasn't a bit more, it was more about the expectation of needing to be with a guy than actually being with one. So that's a bit about, yeah, like when I came to realize that. And I will say, one class in particular, human sexuality. I'd probably say that class is what changed me and my perspective more than anything 'cause in there I definitely got to learn about the LGBTQ community and really explore my own sexuality through academia and literature and that connection is when I was like, well, yeah, I am definitely attracted to women and I really want to be with women.

For Monserrat, having been exposed to discourse that broadened her understanding of human sexuality and the possibilities therein prompted a consideration of how her own sexuality was more centered around women than men, and how comfortable it felt to recognize this in a space that was affirming. With this realization also came an awareness of another important factor that several of the women in this study spoke to in varying degrees: that a heteronormative assumption of human sexuality had previously limited her expectations for amorous and sexual attraction to the realm of men. While this was an assumption that had been ingrained in Monserrat through her Catholic upbringing and, as she described, never having her parents or people at school talk about being gay or lesbian, going to college was the catalyst that sparked her initial explorations of her attractions to women.

Like Monserrat, other women in this study also discussed how the process of exploring and fully embodying their attractions to women were at times complicated by long-held heteronormative beliefs of what a relationship could look like, or of what being with a woman could or could not provide. This was the case for Cristina, a 25-year-old, 1st generation, Puerto Rican pansexual woman:

And I don't think it was something negative. It was that I simply didn't see myself in a relationship with a woman because maybe I really like, I really like the male physique, the big man, you know, tall, that I felt protected, maybe I would say, 'oh, I'm a woman, I already have what I need from a woman,' like being with another woman, I don't know, maybe didn't offer me, I didn't think would offer me the protection, I think it's that, I didn't think that they gave me protection, or that sense of security that I perhaps thought at the time men would give me.

In a sense, Cristina had internalized assumptions about what a relationship should provide, in this case protection, and with that came the belief that a woman would be unable to fulfill that role. What eventually helped divorce her from these long-held beliefs was her natural curiosity about and openness to her emerging sexual desires, traits which allowed her to ultimately find love and security in a relationship to another woman.

Unlike Jacinta, Idalia, Monserrat, Cristina, and other women in this study, Camila, a 25-year-old, Puerto Rican, bisexual woman, experienced far fewer degrees of personal conflict or confusion surrounding her emerging sexual identity. Recalling experiences of her early attractions to women, Camila shared:

It just never felt like a weird thing to me but because of, like, everybody around me, like, within my social group was okay with it, all the girls I hung out with were bi, not because we planned it out that way. It felt like it was a bi support group, like, a coincidence. So, it was, like, ok, 'so you like girls, I like girls too,' kinda. That's cool. So, it was like really natural. I don't think there was a day where I was like 'oh this is what?' I like girls now? Like it never felt like you know how some people have that like realization and freak out about it, I've never felt that, it's just so natural.

However, while Camila felt personally at ease with her attractions to women and found support in her friend group in high school, she disclosed an on-going experience of feeling her bisexuality has been silenced and not taken seriously throughout her life, particularly as she currently finds herself in a relationship to a cisgender male. As a result, Camila has chosen not to disclose her bisexuality to her family; at the same time,

she has also been keenly aware of how her bisexuality lays a tenuous claim to belonging in the LGBTQ community:

Well I think that within the gay community, like, bisexual people are not legitimate...I think, I've actually had to, like, rethink my label. I don't like labels, especially now. There's a lot of different labels, the whole pansexual versus bisexual conversation. So, like you know I decided I was bisexual when I was 14, that was the term we used back then so I'm using it now. So, yeah, like I don't know if I felt like I'm not bisexual enough, and I need to like switch it up to maybe bi-curious, but I don't think that's accurate either. I used to have a lot of anger, I guess, because you know like it's 'LGBT' but if you're not L or G, you're kind of just, like, ambiguous in their acronym.

Across these women, it is evident that the experience of developing their sexual identities as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual women is one that has been replete with moments of excitement and revelation, as well as challenges. While these women all share a common experience of acknowledging, and developing, sexual identities that include the possibility of loving someone of the same gender, their experiences of this journey have taken on different forms.

Ethnic/Racial Identity Development: “Culture, culture was always there”

For so many of the women in this study, their ethnic/racial identities represent such an integral part of their lived experiences, a point so focal that it seems to permeate every aspect of their journeys as Latina WSW (i.e., “culture was always there). Most, if not all, of the women in this study expressed a sense of pride in their ethnic/racial identity today and how wedded this is to their identities as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual

women. That said, there were notable differences in how these women arrived at this present-day sense of pride in being Latina. Whereas for some there had been little, if any, confusion or conflict around their ethnic/racial identities, others shared moments of considerable isolation, tension, or alienation surrounding their racial/ethnic identities. And so, while “culture was always there” for so many of the women in this study, their relationships to racial/ethnic identity, and their journeys to claiming a Latina identity, has taken on different forms.

Across cases, ethnic/racial identity development was another major theme that emerged from the stories of Latina WSW in this study. This super-ordinate theme included sub-themes related to ethnic/racial awareness and consciousness, enculturation, ethnic/racial identification, saliency of ethnic/racial identity, immigration, language issues, and awareness of racism and discrimination.

For example, consider the experiences of Idalia, a 35-year-old, 1st generation, Puerto Rican-Dominican queer femme woman. When asked what it is like for her culturally growing up, she shared:

Culture, culture was always there. I remember *mami* always speaking Spanish to us since we were little... We grew up in Boston, and at ten years old my brother got sick, so we went over to Puerto Rico, and we lived there for a few years. I lived in Puerto Rico from the time I was 10 till 14. Um, obviously that was kinda where I was steeped in culture, even more so than before. Mami always cared about it, uh, but when we moved, that was when, you know, the island wasn't just a story, but now there were smells, places, things, people, that I could really hold

on to and, like, now that world was filled with color, where it wasn't before, from my own lived experience.

In similar fashion, Alma, a 30-year-old Cuban and Colombian lesbian woman, grew up so steeped in her Cuban neighborhood in Miami, FL, that the prospect of anything non-Latino was decidedly foreign to her as a child:

But I didn't, I didn't know that every single person in the world didn't speak Spanish until I was about 5 years old, (laughs), you know? That was my world. I, I grew up with my grandparents, like, you know, they took care of me. I, I just, Cuban food, Cuban music, Cuban everything. Even *I Love Lucy* was on TV because, you know, Ricky Ricardo was on there (laughs). Culturally for me, I thought I was in Cuba for a good amount of time, but you know, I obviously learned that that wasn't the case. For me, culturally, it's just, I think Cuban-Colombian, it's always been there, it's always been a non-negotiable.

For Julieta, a 33-year-old, 1st generation, Boricua-Xicana lesbian woman, growing up Latina was such a prominent feature of her life that to her, Latino culture seemed less an influence and more an essence of being:

Spanish is my first language, so there was that, there was definitely dressing up more traditional, there was eating all the foods, Mexican and Puerto Rican, primarily Mexican because of the access. It was hearing the *novelas* in the background or listening to the music, so to me, I don't feel like it was, some people say, 'how were you influenced?' because it just was huge on culture, I was just raised really Latina.

And yet, while some women described their Latino culture as omnipresent throughout their formative years, others confided different experiences. Idalia and Alma would go on to share mostly positive memories of being raised in the bosom of their Puerto Rican-Dominican and Cuban-Colombian cultures, but Monserrat, a 29-year-old Afro-Latina lesbian woman, recalled bittersweet experiences growing up in a Dominican family in Denver, Colorado. On one hand, she shared vivid memories of having Dominican culture instilled in her through food, music, and holiday traditions; on the other, she recalled the ostracization she felt from extended family because of her lack of Spanish fluency:

Another thing is that I don't, I'm not as fluent in Spanish as the rest of my family, same with my siblings, 'cause my parents when I was little they were gonna put me in ESL 'cause I only knew Spanish or whatever and so they decided to only speak English to me at that point and then I grew up and basically lost my Spanish. So, so yeah, I basically do not have Spanish, like the Dominican Spanish language, that I wish. I wish I'd be able to speak, to have that language, and to have that dynamic with my family...I think just the, how embarrassing it would be when my family members would come in from New York, and they would stay with us for a few days, and they would be speaking Spanish and, like, obviously talking about me and looking at me like, 'oh, she doesn't understand.' But I do understand, like, I understand you, I mean, I can't talk at the same caliber, but I understand what you're saying. Yeah, so I would say every time that would come up would be the most annoying thing to me. Like, I know you're talking about me because I understand.

The process of coming into their ethnic/racial identities is also one that varied greatly among these women. For some women, growing up in communities where their Latino cultures were well-represented provided a backdrop and a soundtrack that largely facilitated their enculturation, which in turn aided the development of a salient Latina identity rooted in their specific ethnic/racial backgrounds. For others, growing up in regions of the country where Latinos are less represented resulted in experiences with ethnic/racial identity characterized by an overwhelming sense of being “other,” an awareness brought on by living or operating in predominantly White spaces. This was the case for Franny, a 32-year-old, 3rd generation, Mexican-Puerto Rican lesbian woman. Reflecting on what it was like to grow up in a predominantly White, middle-class neighborhood in the Midwest, Franny shared:

Uh yeah, so being, you know, Mexican and Puerto Rican, I look White ‘cause I’m pretty light, but when people find out I’m, you know, from that cultural background, ‘cause I’ve always lived in a middle class neighborhood where we were that one Latino family, so it was always kind of hard from that sense because never American enough or never White enough but always never Latina enough. So, culturally, that was always pretty conflicting.

For Franny, the experience of never being White enough or Latina enough left her feeling constantly out of place and relegated to a middle-ground of cultural worlds. Indeed, Franny’s experience perfectly illustrates Anzaldua’s (1987) concept of the borderlands – a space that is neither here, nor there, where those who do not (or will not) conform to dominant cultural paradigms are relegated. As a result, Franny and others who find

themselves in their own kind of borderlands are always deemed other, outsider, and it is from this vantage point that their experiences are best appreciated.

Layla, a 47-year-old, 1st generation, Afro-Latina queer woman, experienced similar feelings of non-belonging in relation to her ethnic/racial identities. As the daughter of a Costa Rican mother and a Haitian father growing up in Brooklyn, NY, Layla felt much like Franny did, never fitting in. When asked what her cultural upbringing was like, Layla remembered:

Mmm. Culturally, my God! So, I am Costa Rican, and I am Haitian, and I grew up – born and raised – in Brooklyn. (laughs). Um, and for me culturally I never felt like I fit in. Um, my first language was Creole, and by the time I got to kindergarten I went to Catholic school. So, um, my mother and father had divorced, separated, by the time I was 6, and in school it was more like, um, ‘you’re in America now, so speak English to your child,’ and my mother took that extremely seriously. So, she didn’t speak Spanish to me at all, and uh, so I never really felt like I fit in with Latinos. And, because the Creole was not in the home anymore and it was not the language we spoke, I was disconnected from the Haitians.

This sense of feeling disconnected from both worlds – the Latino one, and the Haitian one – would persist for Layla throughout her formative and later years. And later, after her mother’s passing, Layla felt her grasp on Latino culture weakened even more so. The process of re-claiming her ethnic and racial identities, and specifically her place within Latino culture, would take years and experiences that brought her into closer contact with

parts of herself that had been severed by societal expectations of what a Latina woman does or does not look like. Reflecting on these experiences, Layla recalled:

And so, I didn't necessarily have the appearance of, when you first look at me, this Afro-Latina woman. First of all, we didn't have the verbiage, right? And so, there was no identity for me. And I don't like being labeled, but I like knowing I'm connected, and I belong somewhere, right? And so, everyone spoke Spanish, so there was that barrier, that I didn't speak Spanish, my mother had died, so I couldn't say, 'here, listen to my mother, she can prove I'm Latina,' right? So, there was that. I just had my culture, that's all I had, I had my family, that's all I had.

And yet, she would go on to recall one particularly emotive experience that enabled her to feel seen as an Afro-Latina woman, and the impact this had on her:

I met this woman named Alicia, Alicia Santos, she and her partner decided to have like a bohemian night up in the, in the, I don't know if it was the Bronx or Spanish Harlem, I can't remember, but they decided that they needed artists to do poetry, and I'm an artist as a photographer, and she invited me to show my work as an Afro-Latina woman. And I was like, 'oh my god, she sees me!' I feel like crying (audible crying).

The sentiment shared by Layla in this statement was so powerful that she was moved to tears – such was the significance of feeling seen and recognized by others as an Afro-Latina woman. Like Layla, having a sense of belonging to their respective communities was a prominent feature of many of the stories of the women in this study. Also evident in Layla's experiences is the important role that visibility and representation

played in the identity development of Latina WSW in this study, a point to which we will return when we review that super-ordinate theme in greater detail.

Experiences with Ethnic, Sexual, and Gender-based Discrimination: “Because I was Latina”

Overall, all the women in this study reported experiences with discrimination; where these differed was the extent to which they reported some types of discriminatory experiences versus others. In other words, certain forms of discrimination (e.g., racism) were more prevalent in the lives of some women than others. By the same token, other forms of discrimination (e.g., homophobia) were less salient in some cases. And so, while some women attributed their discriminatory encounters to their racial/ethnic identity, i.e., “Because I was Latina...”, others experienced these as being more tied to gender or sexual identity or as a product of their intersectional identities as Latina WSW. That said, two areas of experiences with discrimination where women seemed to differ most were those related to racism and homophobia, as these reported experiencing greater (or lesser) degrees of racism and/or homophobia as related to their phenotype, gender presentation, and other identity factors.

In general, this super-ordinate theme was found to involve a range of identity-based experiences with discrimination. Sub-themes within this category referred to experiences with ethnic/racial, sexual, and/or gender-based discrimination, including homophobia, gender policing, awareness of homophobia/heterosexism, awareness of racism, as well as within-group discrimination experiences.

Regarding ethnic/racial discrimination, women who consider themselves more visibly White, White Latina, or White-passing tended to report being aware of racism in

general but having fewer personal experiences with racist discrimination directed at them. This was the case for Selena, who recalled the differential treatment her darker-skinned peers would receive in her Catholic elementary school:

I remember seeing it more so outside of myself with the girls that had darker skin, the kids that had darker skin. And just feeling like, I didn't have the word for racism, but I knew there was something happening beyond their behavior. Like it felt, like if this girl talks out of turn and her skin was much darker than mine, the teacher would literally pull her hair. So, we saw very clearly the difference versus the lighter skin girls, or the kids who weren't with White skin.

In a similar vein, Victoria, a 27-year-old, Peruvian, lesbian woman, recalled her experience of moving to the United States at the age of 18 and how the transition enabled her to gain a greater awareness of herself as a lighter-skinned Latina given the racialized context of the U.S.:

The way Peru was founded, and its history, it's so different from the U.S., this thing of the *mestizaje* (racial mixing) is such a part of the national identity, that thing that we all have a little bit of everything...but it's still nonetheless what you're, what you look like still plays a role, a huge role...but it's mixed with, its super mixed with the class thing, that class hierarchy, much more than here, I would say...It's hard to explain, I just do have to say that one of the hardest things moving here was understanding how race plays here...I've had, what's it called, privileges. More than that it's also the woman card, I'm talking about interactions with police officers, stuff like that. You know, I'm a White, blonde girl, I can get away with things, if I'm driving and I'm speeding, it's very crazy here that way.

In this example, Victoria underscores how her ability to pass as White confers her a set of privileges in the U.S., privileges she was less accustomed to receiving in Peru solely on the basis of phenotype. Like Victoria, this awareness of their own White privilege as lighter-skinned Latinas was shared by several of the women in this study, particularly as they grew older and noted a pattern of discrepancies in the ways they and their darker-skinned counterparts were treated.

While Selena, Victoria, and others may have had less direct experiences with racist discrimination, others confided memories of particularly vivid racist encounters. In recalling these, Jacinta, a Chicana who grew up in central California, shared a particular memory:

I think with racism I believe when I was in college, going for my bachelors, and this stands out to me because it was a white female teacher and I was doing some writing, and we had to do three chapters of a thesis that we were working on, and she accused me of having somebody else, because the first draft I sent in was terrible, and so I refined it, and the final draft was good, it was like A work. And she accused me of, and I was probably one of the few Latinas in that class, and she accused me of having somebody else write my work. And I, I mean, and I feel it was because I was Latina that she didn't think we knew how to write, or I knew how to write.

The experience of being assumed less intelligent or deserving of educational opportunities on the basis of race is an experience several of the women in this study would go on to share in greater detail. Others shared memories of especially violent racist experiences. This was the case for Layla, an Afro-Latina of Costa Rican and Haitian

descent who grew up in Brooklyn, NY. She recalled a vivid memory of being called a racial slur and how this served to solidify in her mind an understanding of hate on the basis of skin color:

Um, well, one day I was walking with my mother, and we were coming from the supermarket, and, I don't know what this older woman was thinking, this older White woman was walking towards us and I remember my mother and I having paper towels, you know, a thing of paper towels, and the woman was like, 'move out of the way, you fucking Black bitch!' or something like that. And I had never heard anybody speak that way, or that way to my mother...And um, you know, my mother was explaining to me as we walked away, 'you don't let anybody speak to you that way, it's not okay.' Um, so that was, I think I was probably, eh, probably 11 or 12 when that happened, but I was already aware of many things, like, the Martin Luther King story, and how he fought for civil rights, and, you know, that kind of thing, but not the in-depth stuff, but then this thing happened, I was like, oh my God. So, people can hate you for your skin color, like, hate you. So that became even more clear.

These cases exemplify how women in this study differed in the degree to which they directly experienced racist events in their lives; overwhelmingly, women in this study who were more visibly of color reported greater, and more violent, experiences with racist discrimination than their lighter-skinned counterparts.

In similar fashion, women also differed regarding their experience of homophobia and heterosexism. While all acknowledged homophobia and heterosexism as a presence in their lives, some women reported more frequent encounters with homophobia.

Experiences ranged from ones that were more verbal in nature to others involving physical assault. For example, consider the case of Yahaira, a 40-year-old, 1st generation, Puerto Rican-Dominican, lesbian woman. Remembering how homophobic slurs were present in her life from an early age, she shared:

And so, I'd never heard the word 'gay,' the word 'lesbian,' I heard *pájaro* [faggot], I knew what a *pájaro* was. Um, but the English words never really, the words in English never really made sense. I knew what a dyke was, I knew that too, but that was negative, so whatever that was, I knew I couldn't be, 'cause it always sounded so negative.

Like Yahaira, many of the women in this study discussed an early awareness of the forbidden, stigmatized nature of anything that deviated from the dominant heteronormative script of life. This message was one Yahaira and others in this study received both subtly and blatantly. From hearing the use of denigrating language when others in their lives discussed LGBT people to themselves being the recipients of more explicit communications, women in this study described various encounters with homophobia and heterosexism. Another instance of this was shared by Noelia, a 27-year-old, 1st generation, Salvadoran, lesbian woman. In discussing how experiences with homophobia (and racism) have shaped how she currently behaves publicly with her girlfriend, she shared:

I'm very attentive to like where we are, who's around us, can we hold hands? Can we kiss? Is it safe? Especially here in Texas. It's not the best place to be gay. Just because it gets scary sometimes, as in like even our own people. Like men just kind of approach you and they are like "oh you just haven't had a good dick, you

just haven't had a good dick you just don't know what's good for you." And to me, you know, it just boils my blood...It is exhausting, exhausting, but yeah, unfortunately my answer is, yes, I've had experiences with it, with racism and homophobia, throughout this whole entire time that I've been out, and I unfortunately have gotten used to it, and I don't see it anymore.

While many of the women in this study recognized the presence of homophobia and heterosexism in their lives, several women shared an awareness of how their more traditionally feminine gender presentation inoculated them from overt experiences with homophobia. This "femme privilege" is one that was prominent in the recollections of Idalia, a self-identified queer femme woman:

I think I'm shielded from [homophobia] a little bit because I'm femme presenting, now that I think about it. Because the people that I know that experience heterosexism and homophobia, were my, the woman I was with, that are more masculine-presenting. Like, Nina telling me stories, or Alexa, my partner now, things that people would say to her. One of my good friends, Krythia, she was walking in the stairwell carrying her bicycle up at this well-known organization, and carrying her bike up, a guy started walking down, and she was very masculine-presenting, and he just started yelling at her, saying all these things. Saying, calling her 'dyke, why you tryna be a man?' And she was by herself in this stairwell with this man. Imagine how scary that was?

Unlike Idalia, Victoria, a 27-year-old, Peruvian, lesbian woman, described herself as less-feminine presenting and how this has rendered her vulnerable to overt experiences

with homophobia. In remembering two instances where she was the direct recipient of homophobic taunts, she shared:

So, in NY, at one point, about a few years ago, I had my hair a lot shorter and I'm not particularly voluptuous, to put it that way. So, once I was in a subway where a guy started calling me a man while I was with my now wife and that was very awful. And the next time it happened to me again when I was sitting on a bench in the park, talking to my cousin, and my cousin happened to have long, flowy hair and was wearing a dress, so she looked very visibly feminine. And we were just talking, and this guy comes up to us and starts calling me 'lad,' and yelling at me, you know? And it was just like, it was very upsetting, honestly. I wouldn't have expected that to happen in NY, of all places, both things. So, I think those two were the most directed at me.

In sum, all the women in this study confided a range of discriminatory experiences directly related to various aspects of their identity. Across cases, women who were darker-skinned tended to report greater racist encounters; at the same time, women who identified as lighter-skinned Latinas expressed varying degrees of awareness of their own White privilege. On a similar note, while all women recognized the impact of homophobia and heterosexism in their lives, more feminine-identified women tended to report less overt (and violent) homophobic encounters when compared to their less feminine (or perceivably less feminine) counterparts.

Familial Conflict, Dynamics, and Expectations: “Let me go about this correctly”

Across all 13 interviews, women in this study spoke to (in varying levels of detail) the centrality of family in their lives and how this influenced their ongoing explorations

of self and sexual identity. While some women reported experiencing great amounts of anxiety and concern when contemplating family's potential reactions to their sexual identities, others reported this less so. And yet, despite the differences in experiences, all discussed in one way or another their shared thought in wondering how to go about coming out and living their truths "correctly," particularly with family. For these women, going about things "correctly" involved a series of internal conflicts, negotiations, and decisions that allowed them to navigate their changing lives in ways that were safer, and less disruptive, of their ties to family.

This super-ordinate theme included sub-themes referring to family-based conflict brought on by disclosure (i.e., coming out), familial dynamics and expectations regarding sexuality, and familial influences on sexual development. This theme group also referred to experiences with familial acceptance, rejection, and the importance of family support during and after the coming out process.

Most, if not all, of the women in this study endorsed the saliency of family in their lives and how important relatives were throughout their journeys as Latina WSW. For many of these women, their families exerted a great deal of influence on their emerging sexual identities and how they in turn navigated these. Consider the experiences of Julieta, a 33-year-old, Boricua-Xicana queer woman:

...one time when my dad and I were at IKEA, I'm pretty sure that we saw some kind of queer couple there because my dad was going on, I think I was in H.S. at the time, and he was telling me how, 'gay people can do what they want, but when you start adopting and having kids, you gotta be careful, because then your ideas start to get to the kids, and you don't know if they can actually be raised that

way,' and I remember that hitting me, and really sticking to me, because later on when I came out I was scared! Telling my dad like, oh lord, he's gonna burn me at the stake. That and for other reasons for my safety, I thought hmmm, let me go about this correctly.

While Julieta did eventually come out to her family and was met with support and acceptance, experiences like the one shared above instilled in her a fear that she would not be, a fear that led her to consider ways for “correctly” going about the process of coming out. Others shared similar memories of learning, directly or otherwise, of their families' assumptions and disapproving stances on LGBTQ persons. Idalia, a 35-year-old Puerto Rican-Dominican queer femme woman, shared a memory that typifies the reactions several of the women in this study were faced with after coming out to their families:

But I remember my dad being really sad that I wasn't, he thought, when I came out to him, was really sad that I wasn't going to be able to have a family. And what's a Latina woman without family? You know? Or, he thought that only ugly women were lesbians and they recruited the pretty women. Like, making them believe that they were queer when they weren't, and clearly, they weren't queer because they were pretty.

After coming out to her father, Idalia was faced with an assumption that is at once heteronormative and Latino: queer women are unable to form families, and as Latinas, these women are thought to violate *familismo*, a cultural norm that emphasizes familial ties as the primary social unit of life. When Idalia posed the rhetorical question: “And what's a Latina woman without family?”, she communicated an awareness of this fact, as

well as an understanding that this was the message her father was communicating to her. Idalia's reflection is a profound observation of the cultural pressures Latina WSW are faced with in the process of coming into and disclosing (or not) their sexual identities to family.

And while there were some notable differences in the degree of conflict experienced and how families responded to women in this study after coming out, an unanticipated pattern that emerged was the extent to which several of the women described the difficulties they experienced coming out to their mothers in particular. Many women described in detail the degree to which their mothers exerted their influence on them through subtle and explicit communications of their stance on LGBTQ issues. This was the case for Noelia, a 27-year-old, Salvadoran, lesbian woman:

I started dating in high school, which was a one of the big issues that I used to have in that relationship, with my mother. And my mother always kinda knowing, and we wouldn't talk about it. But she would express very negative feelings for the LGBT community. Kinda like, not addressing the issue, but just like letting me know about the community and how she felt about it. So, I had a lot of issues trying to keep my relationship in secrecy and still being the person that my mom wanted me to be.

In trying to adhere to the image of the person their mothers wanted them to be, most of the women in this study shared instances of feeling great amounts of internal conflict that complicated their efforts at coming out and fully embracing their sexual identities. This was the case for Jacinta, who grappled with the weight of not wanting to be a disappointment to her mother:

Um, the internal conflicts for me was more with my mom. My dad was always my biggest supporter, of everything I did. With my mom, it was more like I needed to be like she was, right? Dedicated to her family, you know, she was married, had children, had a wedding. And I think for her it was like, I would be so, she would be so disappointed in me, if she found out, you know? You know, so, um, it was scary. I mean, it was scary for me, and I didn't know how long I would be able to keep those two sides of me separate. So, I mean, that was the scariest part, being a disappointment to my mom.

Before coming out to their mothers and families, these women all shared a similar concern that embracing their sexual identities would cost them dearly, particularly where their mothers were concerned. While for several women in this study coming out was met with great degrees of support and validation from their mothers and families in general, for others the rejection came swiftly and painfully. When asked about her experiences with homophobia and heterosexism, Monserrat shared how her family has been the primary source of these stressors:

Yeah. Good deal of homophobia and heterosexism actually from my parents. I don't talk to, really don't talk to my parents anymore. They don't accept me, my sexuality, and I also married, and they don't accept my wife, they weren't there at my wedding or anything like that.

Yahaira for her part shared a similar experience, eloquently describing how her mother's "acceptance" of her after coming out has felt more like rejection than anything else:

It's, it's one of my, my I guess, one of my saddest times because, you know, one always wants that connection with that being that brought you here, regardless of the relationship one may have. And so, you know, it was really difficult to, to feel rejected. Because I didn't look a certain way or act a certain way or do the things she wanted. You know, for things like that I never understood it. So, it still makes me sad, right, 'cause like I told you, not a month ago, and, you know, she still has similar behaviors. And you know, like, wow, what, what is it? Why are you so? Like, she really wants to change me. That shit really fucks with your head. And she'll tell you, "I accept my daughter, even if she's made the decisions she's made and she chooses the life that she chooses, but I ask god every day for her to one day return to god." So, you know, whatever. That's the part that fucks with my head, that feels uneasy constantly because it never fully feels, I never fully feel accepted from my mom. I've never felt full acceptance. Even if she says it, she'll say like "I accept my daughter," the fact that you, you accept something, but you want to change anything, then you don't fully accept it. It's like, you know, I accept your face, but I won't take your nose. You know?

Like Yahaira, other women in this study went on to share their own experiences of having strained relationships with their mothers and never feeling fully accepted after coming out. For these women, the experience of being met with maternal rejection, whether passive or outright, has left an indelible mark on their hearts. It is a burden these women have learned to navigate over time, but one that still evokes feelings of sadness, frustration, and in many cases, resignation.

Apart from their shared struggles in coming out to their mothers specifically, women in this study also spoke to the centrality of religion in their families of origin and how their affiliation to various Christian denominations, mostly Catholic, influenced their developing selves. For some, growing up in a Catholic family meant never having any exposure to anything non-heterosexual, as Monserrat noted:

My parents being very Catholic and all that, we never talked about anything but heterosexuality and being straight and getting married to a guy and having kids and all that.

As a result, many of the women in this study discussed never having a model or a notion of what it would mean to date other women, much less claim a lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual identity. Without accessible examples to show them that loving someone of the same gender was not only an option but also a valid and viable one, most of the women in this study discussed feeling confused and scared when they first realized their attractions to women. This in turn led some women to initially repress their sexual and amorous attraction to women, only to later explore these more fully when they were able to move away from family for the first time.

For others, growing up in a religious household meant their families, in most cases their parents, voiced strong opposition to their sexual identities as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer Latinas when these did come out. Idalia, for example, grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, and after coming out she shared:

The hardest part is *mami*. Just her complete resistance at anything that has to do with my sexuality. Everyone else is fine. I mean, I've been out to family for at least 10 years now, *mami* even longer.

Monserrat shared a similar experience after coming out to her religious parents:

And so, when I tried to talk, I don't know if [my mother] told my dad, I don't remember, but tried to tell my dad and he like exploded as in 'I would never accept you being with a woman, I would never accept it, that is absolutely disgusting,' and all of that.

Monserrat would go on to share how her deeply Catholic parents currently remain opposed to her marriage to a woman, and the deep fissures this has created in her relationship to them. Jacinta similarly reflected on the impact her being lesbian has had on her relationship to her aging, devoutly Catholic mother. After coming out, she recalled:

It was liberating, it was my dad, like I said, my dad said, 'you know Jacinta, it doesn't matter who you're with, or what you're doing, you need to be happy.' My mom, on the other hand, was very 'this is not how we taught you, this is not what the church says is right,' and even to this point she still has a struggle with that part of it. Rectifying what the church teaches and, you know, accepting her daughter for who she is. So, I think if I hadn't had my dad supporting me, I would not have a relationship with my parents right now...they didn't disown me, my mom didn't disown me... I know friends went to the same school that I did where their parents didn't speak to them for years, so I don't know if I'm lucky or what, you know, about that. I just gotta put up with her negativeness about my life.

In sum, women in this study overwhelmingly spoke about saliency of family in their lives and how these exerted a great deal of influence and impact on their developing identities as Latina WSW. And while most of the women in this study described varying

degrees of rejection or difficulty faced after coming out to family, most of which was borne out of deeply held religious beliefs, others had more positive experiences to share. That said, almost all the women who received a warmer reception after coming out noted that while their immediate family were supportive, a certain level of shame and secrecy regarding their sexual identities continued to shroud their family life. Alma's following memory is representative of this pattern of experiences among the women in this study:

I think, I think I've had really positive experiences, took me a while to come out to my family, but they responded very positively. You know my mom, it took her some time, but she's come around, and I guess, I guess at the end of the day though, she won't, like the extended family will never find out. Like that's, that's absolutely off the table. That would be shameful. So, I guess it depends which Latinos you're referring too, is it family? You know, my immediate family, you know, they've been great, but my extended family, that's still a challenge.

Importance of Social Supports: "It was a safe space"

Overall, women in this study discussed the many ways in which having supportive others facilitated their process of self-discovery and actualization. Whether support came from LGBTQ friends, allies, or family members, these sources of support provided the necessary validation, affirmation, and solidarity needed when navigating multiple oppressed identities as Latina WSW. In listening to participant narratives, it seems the best way to summarize the importance of social supports in their lives was, in the words of one participant, that these were "a safe space." In finding safety with supportive others, Latina WSW in this study were able to more fully explore their

developing attractions to women and, eventually, take steps towards naming themselves as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual women.

This super-ordinate theme arose from the experiences women in this study shared regarding the importance of social supports before, during, and after coming-out. Specifically, sub-themes within this group referred to the role of queer friendships, other sources of social support (i.e., chosen family, community, etc.), and their importance to participants' identity development process.

The degree to which this was salient for women in this study differed significantly as some women discussed the role of social supports in their lives far more than others, at least more explicitly so. For example, when recalling the impact her friendships to other queer women of color had on her when she was in college, Idalia recalled:

But it was a safe space, it was a safe space. I can laugh when I look back. It didn't feel scary anymore, it didn't feel at that moment, meeting those women, meeting those people, that, um, I don't even know how to say it, but what, what they brought me, the most beautiful thing that they brought me is living their life as they, you know, living their life, being all of who they were, bringing themselves to the table, made it possible for me to see that it was possible. That I could. But I cannot tell you what a gift that is, that's huge. And I don't know if I would've come out had I not met them.

For Idalia, creating bonds with other queer women of color was the single most important factor helping her to come into her identity as a queer femme Latina. Having grown up Jehovah's Witness, and in a world ruled by heteronormative scripts, Idalia had not previously had the language for, much less considered, life as a queer woman. As such,

queer friendships were Idalia's introduction to the world of queer possibilities and played a vital role in her feeling safe enough to fashion an identity for herself that completely deviated from anything she had been previously taught.

For others, social supports played a similarly important, albeit less vital, role in their journeys as Latina WSW. For Layla, having queer friends who would encourage her to consider dating women provided the right amount of motivation when she needed it most:

And I said, "well...maybe I'll consider the other side," and so she leans back from the computer, it's really like TV, it's hilarious. She goes, "my team?!" I was like, you know, just shrugging my shoulders like, "I guess," or whatever. And so that night, we went and got a couple of bottles of wine, and we created an Ok Cupid site for me as a queer woman...in 20 days I had found my partner, and it was, just like that, just the way that went. And, yeah, it was pretty incredible. So that was my journey into my sexuality.

And for Victoria, finding her now-wife provided support she needed as well in her journey as a Peruvian lesbian woman:

And then I started dating the woman who I'm married to now. She helped a lot with that, and so did her family. That's been great. Mostly because she isn't Latin American, she grew up in Los Angeles, and for her it wasn't hard at all, not like it was for me.

In reflecting on what has been particularly helpful in her journey as a Chicana lesbian, Jacinta described finding supportive others as primordial:

So, I think it's just support and having someone to talk to and being able to hash out what's going on in your mind and not keeping it to yourself. Because you know, that's what we do as Latinos, we keep it in, we need to learn to share our feelings with people that we know we can talk to, even for somebody just to listen, I think that's key as well. It will take time, and there will be some struggles, but in the long run, you will be happy.

Across these examples, it is evident that social supports played an important role in the lived experiences of the Latina WSW in this study. Whether these mentioned explicit examples or not, their narratives as a whole are testament to the fact that, at our core, humans are inherently social beings. As such, feeling seen, supported, and understood by others are fundamental components of our collective psychosocial development; for the women in this study, having social supports became even more necessary, and transformative, in their respective journeys towards reconciling their various identities as Latina WSW.

Commitment to Activism and Human Rights: “I need to give back, and help others”

Invariably, participants in this study spoke about personal and professional endeavors to “give back and help others,” with a sense of urgency to pay forward the support and solidarity others had given them previously. For these women, this motivation to work towards social change, whether through educating others or devoting their efforts to politics, was borne out of their own experiences with feeling otherized, discriminated against, and generally unsafe as Latina WSW. In other words, these women all felt they bore a personal responsibility to make this world a better place for people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and queer women of color in particular.

Across several cases, a commitment to social justice and human rights activism was observed to be a salient experience. This super-ordinate theme group included attitudes and perspectives regarding social-justice related issues, awareness of societal injustices (e.g., racism), a deep concern for human rights, and a desire to engage in some form of activism towards social change.

For example, in describing how she tries to counter the many -isms characterizing her experience as a Salvadoran lesbian woman, Noelia shared:

I think the way that I kinda counter it is trying to educate whoever comes my way, as much as possible. And that to me is a healthy way to kinda combat you know, feeling in danger. Because I think if I only tell one person, then I've changed the world to one person and this person could change the world for one other person, and it just kinda trickles. Because being in danger and feeling in danger is really, it comes down to, not, not being able to talk about it. Not being able to feel like someone understands you, or at least that is for me. I can't speak for others, but for me, that's why I don't feel people understand or know enough about my struggles and what it means, because people are just so, you can be the brightest person, but you can be so oblivious to things like about love and you know, about um just a person that is, looks completely different from you cause that's another thing that I've, that I'm big on. Just trying to educate people.

For Noelia, educating others has become her primary tool for fighting back against the sense of danger she and others like her have felt, particularly as a Latina lesbian living in Texas. She attributes the danger she has often felt to a society that fundamentally misunderstands the struggles of people who are marginalized on the basis

of ethnicity or sexuality and, in doing so, creates an environment that is not safe for people like her. By educating others, Noelia, like other women in this study, feels she is doing her part to change the world, one person at a time.

Jacinta shared a similar experience when discussing how her roles as a Chicana lesbian, teacher, and elected local official afford her with avenues for enacting social change for her respective communities:

And, I can bring a perspective I think to my job that is different from other people's lives, and I think that helps, that helps with what I'm doing, how I'm reaching kids. And, you know, I have ideas about starting a foundation to help our LGBTQ Latino students with scholarships and mentorships that has not come to fruition but I'm still working on it. And it's just, you know, my position and what I've gone through, I need to give back. And help others.

For Cristina, the process of coming into her identities as a Puerto Rican pansexual woman has given way to a sense of empowerment and determination to do her part to work towards her social change for her communities. Her statement below is an apt example of the sentiments several of the women in this study shared when reflecting on how their experiences thus far have shaped their sense of purpose in life:

It's that power to be able to do something, that I feel empowered, perhaps that's the word. I feel empowered. I feel that I want the best for my different communities. I feel I belong to multiple communities and that I want to defend them, and that I want to work for each one of them.

Importance of Visibility and Representation: “My people, my tribe”

For so many women in this study, growing up Latina was, among other things, growing up in families and environments that were deeply religious, which in turn meant little, if any, visibility of LGBTQ life. The rare occasions when LGBTQ persons were referenced or alluded to, these were often discussed in disparaging ways. As a result, several of the women in this study discussed a lingering sense that anything not adhering to a heteronormative script was inherently wrong. Others discussed how their Latina upbringing meant not having any models for what being attracted to women could resemble in actuality; at the same time, seeing themselves reflected in other queer women for the first time meant finally having a name and a shape for who they were becoming. As one participant so aptly described, the sensation of finding home as a Latina lesbian in a new neighborhood led her to think she had found “[her] people, [her] tribe.”

For many women in this study, the role of visibility and representation was an important part of their experiences as Latina WSW. This super-ordinate theme referred to participants’ awareness of their ethnic and sexual group membership, the importance of societal representation, or lack thereof, and experiencing (or not) affirmation and normalization regarding their ethnic and sexual identities.

Yahaira eloquently shared just how powerful an impact queer visibility and representation had on her ability to accept and embrace herself as a Latina lesbian:

Anytime you, anytime you can, you can open a book and find home in it, and then realize that your story is part of a collection of stories...it was in that moment that I realized that I wasn’t the only person, and that somebody was speaking that I realized, oh shit, I could also speak. And I was very vocal about my queerness,

even if I didn't know what that meant fully, what it would evolve to...and it's what I tried to explain to my mother was, I'm not asking you for permission. I'm not, I'm just telling you this is what I am, and I'm pretty certain of it, you know? Because, having someone who, who has written, who has said, 'look, we are already here,' it just affirmed my, it affirmed this sort of like innate thing that I felt, 'I'm okay, I may not know what this is, but I'm alright.' Like, I'm not off, I'm not, there isn't a defect here, it's just, I need to figure out what it is. There's nothing wrong with it, I just need to figure out what it is. Like, I never felt like something was wrong with me.

For Yahaira, reading and finding that there were other queer voices out in the world provided a sense of comfort and relief that she was not alone in her journey and affirmed that she was indeed "alright," regardless of what she may have learned growing up, or the messages she may have received from the world at large.

Selena for her part recalled how moving to a visibly queer (of color) neighborhood in Brooklyn, NY, felt like she had finally found "her tribe":

So, I literally moved into the queerest neighborhood I could find, which at the time was Park Slope in Brooklyn, it's not that now because it's been gentrified beyond belief...But at the time it was not just the queerest, but where the queer women were, the queer women of color, in Park Slope...It just felt like, oh my god, I'm home. Finally, finally, this is what it was supposed to be like. I feel like there was a little bit of a learning curve, I think I was so sheltered and not sheltered at the same time, but it just felt amazing. It's just like, I found my people, I found my tribe.

Like Yahaira and Selena, Layla remembered a similar experience of feeling fully represented and seen for the first time as an Afro-Latina queer woman, an experience that moved her to tears as she shared it:

I met this woman named Alicia, Alicia Santos, she and her partner decided to have like a bohemian night up in the, I don't know if it was the Bronx or Spanish Harlem, I can't remember, but they decided that they needed artists to do poetry, and I'm an artist as a photographer, and she invited me to show my work as an Afro-Latina woman. And I was like, 'oh my god, she sees me!' I feel like crying (audible crying). It really felt...absolutely incredible. Because I hadn't felt that way since my mother had transitioned. So, it was just super powerful to be seen and to be able to express, in a culture that I belong to, that was welcoming me, and so at the actual event she then had me speak on stage, and ask me beautiful questions about my own culture and my experience as the woman that I am, and, and on top of that being queer, because she's queer, her partner's queer, and so, it was just like a beautiful moment of just like all of me being expressed and being reflected back to me. And so, yeah, that was just an incredible moment, and it was the beginning of my personal self-acceptance. And yeah, I've been going ever since.

While the importance of visibility and representation was not an aspect of lived experience explicitly shared among all women in this study, what was shared across experiences were memories of being otherized on the basis of race or sexuality, disruption or loss of family ties after coming out, and other feelings of disconnection from others. And while most women did not discuss these as being attributable to a lack

of queer visibility or representation, a psychological understanding of human development offers a different lens from which to make sense of their collective experience. The above statements from Yahaira, Selena, Layla, and others point to how powerful an impact having oneself reflected in social life can have. Not only are the experiences heartfelt, but they provide the validation and affirmation necessary that make it possible for all individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities, to develop healthy self-images. In so many ways, feeling represented in our world requires there to be visible demonstrations of our existence outside of ourselves. In finding we are like others and not alone in our “differentness,” we find the corrective emotional experience needed for healthy psychosocial development.

Experiences of Intersectionality and the Borderlands: “This is who I am”

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the experiences shared by women in this study were largely interdependent in nature. Their various experiences with sexual, ethnic/racial, and gender identity were often multiply-determined; that is, they were at once influenced by factors attributable to any part of their intersectional identities. After lifelong experiences with their developing identities as Latina WSW, all the women in this study discussed feeling empowered, and proud, in naming their truths. In boldly asserting themselves and claiming, “this is who I am,” these women have arrived at a place where their multiple identities are able to not only co-exist but perhaps more importantly, thrive and flourish.

Possibly the most emblematic of this entire study, this super-ordinate theme group referred to the process of encountering and navigating intersectional conflicts, both within and outside of Latino and LGBTQ communities. This super-ordinate theme also

included sub-themes referring to feelings of intersectional saliency, pride, and the reconciliation of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities, a process that often involved family, chosen or otherwise.

When asked what it meant for them to be Latina and lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer, most women provided responses that acknowledged the intersectional nature of their lived experiences thus far. Consider for example Noelia's response to this question:

I talk a lot, a lot about it, in class. Simply because a lot of people don't understand how intersected those identities are for me. I am different in many, many, many ways, from my classmates and from friends that I've made, from people that I meet. It feels very, can't explain it in any other way but cursing, so I'm sorry that you'll transcribe this, but it feels really shitty at times, really, really shitty that I not only have to navigate my culture but I also have to navigate being a lesbian and then I have to navigate them when they intersect, which is many times.

Like Noelia, other women in this study similarly spoke at length about the frustration and challenges that came with having to navigate both an ethnic/racial and sexual minority status at the same time. Frustration was often also accompanied by other feelings, from feelings of loss to others of pride and empowerment. Reflecting on her experience throughout the interview, and on what it means to her today to be a Boricua-Xicana queer woman, Julieta shared:

I mean, a bunch [of feelings]. From being empowered, to, some of the grief and mourning of friends and family, of just everything. But then also so much joy to be able to say, this is who I am, who cares? You know, because now that you've opened the flood gates, I'm like, oh my gosh I forgot about this one time, and oh

my gosh there's this other time. Like, the friend I told you about in ACHA who helped me come out to myself, of course I came out to people who I knew first comfortably to make sure I was safe, and then later on to family members and then moving on out after that. But she took me to a queer bar in Mexico, because at that time you didn't need a passport, it was just an ID, you could drink when you were 18. And I remember that, because there was something super, super empowering about hearing your music, in your language, and being queer and just gay as all hell about it, without giving a damn. Hearing a drag queen singing '*a quien le importa*' ('who cares') out loud to everybody, like, this is who I am.

Julieta's memory here is not only strikingly vivid in its imagery, but an apt portrayal of several facets of the Latina WSW experience discussed throughout this chapter, such as the role of social supports, of racial/ethnic/sexual identity, and of feeling seen and represented outside of yourself. For Julieta, that experience of being in a queer bar in Mexico and hearing a drag queen sing '*a quien le importa*' served as an affirmation of all parts of her existence. The experience is a beautiful one that perfectly summarizes the culmination of Julieta's journey to reconciling her Latina culture with her sexual identity as a queer woman. For the uninitiated, it may help to share an excerpt from the song Julieta referenced, as the song itself communicates a very clear message of acceptance and celebration of self:

La gente me señala/ Me apuntan con el dedo/ Susurra a mis espaldas/ Y a mí me importa un bledo/ Que más me da/ Si soy distinta a ellos/ No soy de nadie/ No tengo dueño...Mi destino es el que yo decido/ El que yo elijo para mí.

People point at me/ They point with their fingers/ They whisper behind my back/
And I could care less/ What do I care/ If I'm different from them/ I belong to no
one/ I have no owner...My destiny is what I decide/ What I choose for myself.

Like Julieta, Layla's journey with navigating her Latina culture and emerging
identity as a queer woman has given way to a sense of pride and empowerment that
allows her to feel confident and free to express all of who she is today:

[being an Afro-Latina queer woman] means absolute freedom, especially in this
time. In comparison to all of the world we have lived in, since I was born in 1971,
to where we are now in this world, I know Trump is our president and that's
horrible, but our consciousness in this world now is so much more free that I feel
like I can be this Afro-Latina woman, who is queer, and expressive, and an
expression of God, and just absolutely be 100% myself, without any, like not one
knot in my body of fear, confusion, doubt or worry. It's just, I'm free. That's it.

Like Noelia, Julieta, Layla, and others, Idalia spoke at length about the many
challenges she has experienced as a Puerto Rican-Dominican queer femme woman. From
feeling out of place in her own skin growing up, to first recognizing herself as a queer
Latina woman, and later disavowing this for fear of the repercussions that would follow,
Idalia shared how certain moments in her life have been pivotal in her journey towards
embracing herself fully. When asked what it means to her to be a Latina queer femme
woman today, Idalia shared:

I remember the first time I was able to have my family and my queer friends in
one room, for a birthday party, I'll never forget it. Oh my god. There are no
words. There are no words to describe it, when you can finally bring all of

yourself to the table, and not have to constantly leave it at the door, for a fear of whatever. And not only that, but to have the people that I love in one room celebrating all of it. (audible crying). I'll never forget that. That moment in my life will always be special. That's the only way I can describe it. When you have, I mean, so many different identities, that aren't welcome, how much you're on guard, automatically, until you can finally be at ease.

To borrow Idalia's words, for most if not all of the women in this study, being a queer, bisexual, lesbian, or pansexual Latina today meant finally being at ease with all parts of who they are. For these women, finding peace within those borderlands of existence meant finally, after all the struggles, finding home within themselves.

What Does it Mean to be a Latina WSW?

This study involved a total of 13, self-identified Latinas. They were Puerto Rican, Dominican, Salvadoran, AfroLatina, Chicana, Peruvian, Mexican, Mexican-Puerto Rican, Puerto Rican-Dominican, Cuban-Colombian, and Boricua-Xicana. These women ranged in ages from 26 to 57 years of age and were from cities representing various regions of the United States, coast to coast. Overall, these women identified as queer, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual. All held higher education degrees, and some were working towards master's or doctoral degrees at the time of interview. Diverse identifications and regionalities aside, these women's narratives were surprisingly as similar as they were different. It is at these convergences that one comes to best appreciate what it means to be a Latina WSW.

For starters, these women all experienced a set of internal and external challenges related to their emerging sexual identities. While for some the realization that they were

attracted to women came quick, for others the process was slower (sometimes much, much slower). Whether this happened during girlhood, adolescence, young adult, or later adult years, all spoke about the myriad feelings that accompanied these self-reflections: giddiness, excitement, confusion, fear, incredulity, curiosity, apprehension, acceptance, and everything in between. Complicating this process of self-discovery, their various affiliations to Latina culture often presented challenges as these women grappled with how to reconcile their emerging sexual identities with a cultural identity that traditionally has little, if any, room for Latina sexualities to be openly acknowledged and actualized.

In their collective journey, the degree to which these women consolidated their sexual and racial/ethnic identities was directly related to the extent to which they were able to have the full range of their humanity reflected, affirmed, and accepted by others around them. For Idalia, Julieta, Franny, Monserrat, Alma, Jacinta, Noelia, Yahaira, Selena, Camila, Cristina, Victoria, and Layla, this meant having not only their queer selves represented and affirmed but having access to embodiments of queerness that were Latina as well. All spoke to the comfort brought on by realizing that not only was it possible to be lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual as a Latina, but that they were not alone, that others before them had traversed a similar journey of self-discovery and had come out on the other side – scathed, perhaps, but living authentically, and on their own terms. These representations, in turn, were at once motivating and protective as they encouraged these women to explore and name their truths while buffering them from the inevitable blows of coming out to family, to others, and moving through the world as Latina WSW.

On the topic of family, these women differed in the extent to which they faced dismissal, rejection, acceptance, or something in between, but most shared a similar sense of wondering what would happen, and what would *la familia* think, if/when they finally self-disclosed. Still others asked themselves just how “out” they needed to be to extended family, making decisions along the way that best served their developing needs for affirmation, belonging, and safety. In their own way, each spoke about the awareness that their sexuality was in defiance of traditional norms for Latina womanhood. When Idalia posed the rhetorical question, “What’s a Latina woman without family?” she was referring to this Latino cultural fact: To exist comfortably in the world as Latinas, there are rules that need to be followed and, in claiming a sexuality that does not revolve exclusively around men, Latina WSW are instead walking a path of their own design and choosing. Latina WSW do so at the expense of disturbing not only cultural norms, but the familial ties that are the very fabric of Latino culture. If nothing else, to be a Latina WSW means finding the courage amidst the fear to dream up a life where it is possible to be both/and, where the choice is not whether to be Latina *or* love women, but rather, how that truth gets lived, and who gets to be a part of the journey. To be selective in this way is daring, courageous, and indicative of the vast amount of hope that characterizes this group of women.

As racial/ethnic and sexual minorities, the women in this study also shared memories of their very intimate experiences with the ugly underbelly of human relations: racism, sexism, and homophobia. Most impressive about their collective story is the extent to which these women have drawn strength from encounters meant to oppress and denigrate their existence in this world. All have made *corazón de tripas* or *de tripas*

corazón (depending on who you ask), a Spanish saying that literally translates to “making a heart of guts,” but which really means having courage in the face of fear and persevering despite the odds. Having been personally victimized by others wishing to shame them for the way they looked or whose hand they held while walking down the street, these women all spoke to the ways in which they were committed to making this world a better place for all marginalized peoples. These women have, either through professional vocation or personal endeavors, dedicated themselves to raising awareness in the hopes that others like them will encounter a kinder world, a world that is more accepting, even affirming, of all versions of humanity.

Altogether, these women’s experiences also highlight the myriad ways that moving through the world as Latina WSW influences mental health and overall psychosocial development. Time and again, women in this study discussed the shame and stigma they internalized regarding LGBTQ identities. Not having a name for this inculcation early on, many recalled knowing as children and teenagers that anything non-heterosexual was wrong – a major transgression on the rules of sexual and amorous engagement. This internalization of shame and stigma surrounding same-sex desires would go on to contribute to denial and repression of emerging attractions to women, social isolation, and in many cases, bouts of stress, depression, and anxiety. By the same token, these very experiences provided opportunities for growth to happen. As these women struggled with carving out a space for themselves in a world that so delimits the contours of their existence, they developed the kind of psychological resilience that comes of surviving, and eventually thriving, as a marginalized people in society. Without romanticizing the experience of the oppressed, it seems that to become a Latina WSW

implies a strength of will and psychological endurance needed to counter the many –isms these women have contended with throughout their lives.

And so, when asked what it means to be a Latina WSW, these women all agreed: it means embodying a sense of empowerment, it means being proud of being Latina *and* loving women, it means being responsible for the change they wish to see in the world, and it means never giving up the hope that they rightfully belong, and always have. Ultimately, the interconnectedness of these identities, and the wisdom gained from having lived in the borderlands between traditional Latino culture and mainstream heteronormative society, is the essence of their experiences as Latina WSW.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study sought to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Latina WSW through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit perspectives on their lived experiences as ethnic/racial, sexual, and gender minorities. Recognizing that the lives of Latina WSW are influenced by myriad identity-based stressors discussed in the literature, this study endeavored to contribute to these empirical conversations the voices of Latina WSW themselves and how these describe and make sense of their lived experiences in relation to these stressors thus far.

Given studies conducted by Acosta (2010; 2013) and Espin (2012) on lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas, I anticipated that Latina WSW in this study would share experiences similar to those discussed by these authors. In particular, I expected Latinas to describe life-long attempts to reconcile their Latina culture and values with their emergent sexual identities. Across the experiences shared by the women in this study, this certainly proved to be true. While for some women their experiences involved relative degrees of comfort with their developing attractions and sexual identities, for others these realizations caused significant amounts of distress, especially as they began to grapple with what it would mean to violate cultural norms of Latina womanhood as they claimed a sexual identity inclusive of same-sex attractions. This was especially true for women who described growing up in religious households, suggesting that the saliency of religiosity in families of origin may be associated with greater degrees of conflict in the sexual identity development of Latina WSW.

Another important factor in participants' experiences appeared to be significant life events that motivated or accompanied greater degrees of comfort and explorations of

non-heteronormative desires. For Latinas in this study who moved away from home to pursue post-secondary education, their first encounter with LGBTQ spaces and discourse ignited a curiosity and desire to more fully explore their attractions to women in environments that were free from supervision or immediate familial influence. Conversely, these same encounters and newfound freedom during their postsecondary years made some of the women in this study uncomfortable and at times unable to fully engage with their developing sexualities until later in life. Even so, these experiences provided the necessary catalyst and normalization needed for these women to begin to consider their emerging sexual identities with greater openness and acceptance, particularly as they transitioned out of college and into their later adult years.

As expected, Latina WSW in this study discussed at length the challenges faced as they grappled with how to reconcile their Latina cultures and their emerging attractions and desires towards women. Their recollections of the resistance, dismissal, and sometimes rejection they faced when coming out to family was consistent with the writings of Espin (1984; 1997; 2012), Anzaldua (1987), and Acosta (2010) on lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas, all of whom have documented the cultural feats Latinas must face in the process of claiming agency over their sexualities and defining sexual and amorous lives that do not revolve solely around men.

An interesting pattern that emerged regarding these experiences was the fact that a majority (8 out of 13) of the women in this study shared similar accounts of the great difficulty experienced when coming out to their mothers specifically. Whereas other family members responded to their disclosures with reactions ranging from tacit acceptance to full-on acknowledgement and support, mothers' reactions were especially

negative in their dismissal and, in many cases, outright rejection of their daughters. While this pattern of experiences was not consciously anticipated at the outset of this study, it was not at all foreign to this lead researcher, herself a queer Latina with a similar history of pronounced maternal conflict in the context of coming out.

And yet, in an effort to theoretically contextualize the experiences shared by these women, a closer reading of Anzaldúa's (1987) work in *Borderlands* provides a helpful consideration of cultural factors contributing to this phenomenon. In discussing how Latino culture determines acceptable (and forbidden) behaviors for Latinas, Anzaldúa (1987) noted: "Culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them." (p. 16). If we understand Latina mothers as agents who are tasked with transmitting cultural messages about what it means to be a Latina woman, and all the expectations therein – namely, prioritizing *la familia*, remaining virginal until marriage, marrying men and having children, etc. – then it makes sense that Latina WSW encounter strong opposition from their mothers in the process of coming out. Anzaldúa (1987), Espin (1984; 1997; 2012), and Acosta (2010) have pointed to the ways in which Latino culture frames lesbian, bisexual, and queer Latinas as rebelling against and even betraying Latino culture. The stories shared by women in this study are testament to these observations made in the literature and provide the reader with greater clarity on the ways in which these cultural responses to Latina WSW emerge, along with the psychological toll they exert.

Relatedly, several of the women in this study discussed a lingering fear of disappointing their mothers and not emulating them fully. It was this fear of eventual disapproval and rejection that kept them most paralyzed in the process of exploring their

developing identities as bisexual, lesbian, pansexual, or queer women. Reflecting on a comment a lesbian student made to her once, “I thought homophobia meant fear of going home,” Anzaldua (1987) wrote:

...how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la raza* [the race], for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. (p. 20).

And so, while for Latina WSW stressors such as homophobia and heterosexism undoubtedly exert great amounts of pressure and internal conflict, it seems a potentially stronger current in their journeys may be that involving family, with their mothers being particularly important actors backed by cultural power and influence. Latina WSW thus navigate their emerging sexual identities with great amounts of apprehension and fear that doing so implies relinquishing, or being rejected by, their literal (biological) and figurative (cultural) mothers. Such a conflict exerts a great psychological toll on Latina WSW as these are forced to painfully consider the costs of forging self-concepts inclusive of their racial/ethnic and sexual selves. In the process of doing so, the pressure to adhere to cultural norms of Latina womanhood makes it seemingly impossible to arrive at an identity where both being Latina and choosing women as intimate partners can peacefully coexist.

Findings from this study not only confirm prior observations regarding the cultural pressures LBQ Latinas contend with in the process of their overall identity development but also highlight the mother-daughter relationship as a potentially critical

mechanism by which cultural forces such as *familismo* and *marianismo* are transmitted and enforced for Latina WSW. By bringing attention to this dynamic in the lives of Latina WSW, this study suggests one of perhaps several specific pathways by which Latina WSW experience culturally-specific psychological distress in the sexual identity development process. In doing so, this study extends prior discussions in the literature by posing that mother-daughter relationships in the lives of Latina WSW may be a valuable avenue for future research on the psychological needs of these women, particularly as these relate to sexual identity.

Experiences shared by Latina WSW in this study also paralleled those discussed by Araujo and Borrell (2006), Chavez-Dueñas et al. (2014), and others regarding the role of ethnic/racial discrimination in Latino mental health. Consistent with research on the disparate experiences Latinos have with racial discrimination, reported experiences with racist discrimination differed among women in this study according to phenotype. Overwhelmingly, women who self-identified as White Latina or White-passing tended to report far fewer experiences with overt ethnic/racial discrimination. Conversely, women who self-identified as being darker-skinned or more discernably a person of color in appearance tended to report greater experiences with discrimination; in some cases, these experiences involved being the recipient of racial slurs or physical violence, such as spitting.

These differences aside, it should be noted that although self-identified White Latina or White-passing women in this study reported experiencing less discrimination overall, those who grew up in or found themselves in predominantly White regions of the country reported a persistent sense of otherness that caused significant amounts of

distress. That is, despite the relative privileges afforded to them for their lighter skin, these women recalled feeling otherized and fetishized by their White peers, consistently reminded that they were “different.” This was most evident in Franny’s case, a 3rd generation Mexican-Puerto Rican lesbian woman who has spent the majority of her life in predominantly White regions of the country, for example. As such, while there were differences in the nature and extent of reported discriminatory experiences among the women in this study, racial/ethnic discrimination should be viewed as a stressor impacting the mental health of Latina WSW across the board, albeit with individual-level differences depending on phenotype and geographic location. To this last point, future research examining the impact of ethnic/racial discrimination experiences of Latina WSW may examine in greater detail whether and how geographic location is associated with any discernable pattern of reported mental health experiences.

In a similar vein, differences in the degree to which women endorsed overt experiences with homophobia/heterosexism were observed in this study. While all participants acknowledged the role that minority stressors such as homophobia and heterosexism played in their lives, what emerged were differences in experience largely attributable to gender presentation. Overall, women who self-identified as femme or more traditionally feminine tended to report far fewer overt experiences with homophobia and heterosexism directed at them, especially when they were unaccompanied by their female partners. Among these women, all verbalized an awareness of the protective nature their femininity played, functioning to inoculate them from homophobic verbal or sexual harassment.

Related to this awareness of “femme privilege” were memories they shared of witnessing, or learning, of the homophobic violence their less-feminine partners or friends were subjected to. At the same time, women in this study who self-identified as less-feminine or more masculine-presenting evinced a keen awareness of the ways in which their gender presentation not only defied heteronormative expectations of womanhood but also consistently exposed them to homophobia and heterosexism. And so, while all the women in this study discussed an on-going awareness of homophobia and a modification of their behaviors to down-play their queerness in places deemed “unsafe,” they greatly differed in the extent to which they themselves had been the recipients of homophobic taunts and violence. It seems that while homophobia and heterosexism may be an omnipresent force in the lives of Latina WSW, the impact of these are unfairly distributed, with women who play less by the rules of gender, so to speak, bearing much of the cost.

This pattern of experiences sheds light on facets of the minority stress experience discussed by Meyer (2003), specifically delineating areas that may differentially determine the extent to which Latina WSW are specifically impacted by minority stressors. In his work on minority stress and the havoc this can wreak on the psychological health of LGB persons, Meyer’s (2003) outlined a) internalized homophobia, b) stigma (expectation of societal rejection), and c) discrimination experiences, as the processes by which distress may be experienced and/or reach clinically significant levels. Meyer (2003) further described that the degree to which these result in greater or lesser distress relies on factors such as individual socioeconomic

status, the extent to which an individual endorses an LGB identity, the valence of this endorsement, and nature of that individual's coping ability and social support.

Given these considerations, results of this study suggest that the minority stress experiences of Latina WSW may be not only influenced by the amount of discriminatory experiences these endure, but specifically the degree to which they are perceived to be a sexual minority, a judgement society often makes using gender presentation as a proxy for sexual orientation. That is, experiences shared by Latina WSW in this study suggest that their gender presentation determines the extent to which these are perceived to be sexual minorities and, therefore, targets for homophobia. Future research on the minority stress experiences of Latina WSW may explore this phenomenon in greater detail, either by seeking to empirically establish the association between gender presentation and impact of homophobia on mental health, or by determining if identification with certain gender variables are more predictive of psychological distress among Latina WSW than others.

Apart from individual-level differences with sexual identity development and identity-based discrimination, Latina WSW in this study also described a variety of key interpersonal events that either facilitated or complicated their ability to fully embrace an identity inclusive of their Latina culture and sexual identity. These interpersonal events differed in nature across cases but often involved either dating other women for the first time, participating in the larger LGBTQ community as women of color, or how their disclosure (i.e., "coming-out") was handled in the context of family. While the relative saliency of any one of these types of experiences differed across women, all shared experiences that spoke to the importance of having supportive environments facilitative

of self-exploration and eventual cohesion surrounding their various identities. To be sure, the absence of supportive environments, whether through direct social/familial rejection or lack of ethnic/racial and queer visibility, functioned to complicate their ability to fully integrate their Latina culture with their emerging sexual identities as lesbian, bisexual, queer, and pansexual women. And while these challenges were commonplace across participants in this study, most if not all reported arriving at a present-day sense of pride and empowerment in their intersectional identities. In most cases, this reconciliation of their ethnic/racial/sexual identities involved a series of life moments that provided participants with the validation and acceptance they needed to slowly internalize an overall positive self-concept inclusive of their Latina cultures and sexual identities.

Relatedly, and consistent with the motivation to contribute an understanding of the Latino sexual minority experience that moves beyond deficit perspectives, stories shared by Latina WSW in this study were replete with examples of psychological endurance, hope, and resiliency. Garnets et al. (1990), Meyer (1995, 2003), and others have discussed how experiences LGB persons have with homophobia and related stressors, while harmful, create opportunities for growth and resiliency as well. In turn, these experiences afford LGB persons with coping skills that not only facilitate healthy psychological adaptation but equip them to effectively manage general life stressors as well.

To be sure, all participants in this study provided myriad examples of their psychological perseverance despite the odds. In the face of cultural messages that did not resemble their emerging concepts of Latina womanhood, or visible representations that could model what a lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual Latina looks like, women in

this study all held on to an internal hope that, however faint the odds, they would eventually make sense of who and what they were becoming. Even during instances where directly facing or claiming a queer identity seemed too scary and dangerous a prospect, these women sought comfort and validation through friends, books, or other popular media. At their own pace, these women all eventually took steps towards openly interrogating, and attempting to reconcile, their Latina culture and sexual identities. In doing so, these women all discussed feeling empowered today, a strength they have drawn from their lifelong struggles as both women of color and as sexual minorities. Equipped with the awareness that they are not alone, and that it is not only possible, but necessary, to accept all parts of themselves, these women all discussed a shared motivation and commitment to do their part in creating a better world so that others like them may have an easier journey ahead. While these women differed in the level of detail with which they discussed this desire, all shared examples of the ways in which they have already done their small part to work towards social change, or strategies they envision themselves engaging in the future. Collectively, these women are all activists in their own way, desiring to be visible so that the next generation of Latina WSW can encounter a more affirming world, sooner than they did, in their respective journeys towards self-definition. Or, as Alma put it: “I just have to be present, I have to be visible, because the second I’m not, I feel like that’s when it’s okay to change society so that we’ll never be visible.”

Limitations

While this study aimed to capture a diverse range of Latina WSW experiences, certain recruitment and sampling constraints may have impacted the resultant sample

included in this study, the findings that emerged, and the conclusions that can be drawn from these. As I utilized convenience, snow-ball, and purposive sampling to both recruit participants suitable to this study and gain access to a population that is traditionally “hidden” (Meyer et al., 2009), individuals included in this study are likely not a fully representative sample of Latina WSW. As expected, participants were largely from extended networks on-line and off-line that I am a part of and through word-of-mouth referrals from individuals familiar with me or interested in LGBTQ issues. I recognize the inherent conflict in this sampling strategy – on one hand, I was well-positioned to recruit participants needed for this particular study; on the other, this reliance on myself and participants for recruitment have inherently limited my sample to individuals that were reached by mine or participants’ efforts.

In doing so, it is reasonable to assume that individuals recruited via these means and who eventually self-selected to participate possess character traits that shaped the degree to which they disclosed, what they shared, and how they shared it. For example, women in this study likely participated because they have already reached a place in their lives where they felt comfortable enough to discuss their identity-based experiences in hindsight, and with a great level of detail and insight. For Latinas who are earlier on in their journeys of self-discovery and self-actualization, participating in a study concerned with exploring the intimate lives of Latina WSW may have been an intimidating venture. For others who may be currently experiencing some degree of internal conflict regarding these identities, participating in a study of this kind may not have been appealing either. As such, findings from this study may be most applicable to Latina WSW who explicitly endorse a lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual Latina identity and are presently

experiencing a sense of cohesion and self-acceptance surrounding these identities. These considerations aside, attempts were made to gain a sample that was diverse in factors such as age, ethnicity, and sexual identity. By focusing on a well-defined subset of such a population, my hope has been to off-set some of these practical limitations by utilizing as diverse a sample as possible to provide a credible portrayal of Latina WSW and their identity-based experiences.

Another potential limitation in this current study could have been my positionality as a queer Latina. In discussing my practice of reflexivity at the outset of this study, I noted that my motivations for pursuing this line of research were both deeply personal and professional in nature. As a queer Latina, I have personal commitments, and perspectives, gleaned from lifelong friendships and experiences within the LGBTQ community, specifically the LBQ women of color communities that I have been a part of. With this study, it was my hope to utilize my training as a counseling psychologist to systematically explore the stories of women like me, stories which I noticed needed telling, particularly within the world of psychological research on sexual minority women. While it has been my hope that such proximity to the queer Latina experience would have afforded me with intuition and empathy to elicit and understand participants' stories, it is also possible that such a positionality exerted another kind of influence on my findings. As a queer Latina, it is entirely possible that I withheld from probing or eliciting more information from participants at moments where I felt I "got it," where I felt I so understood them that I failed to prompt for more disclosures.

That said, I made efforts throughout this study to continuously bracket out my assumptions as a queer Latina, and in this regard, several analytic exercises were helpful.

For starters, I consistently reminded myself throughout that while I am a queer Latina, I am not THE queer Latina. I am, very specifically, a Dominican, cisgender, queer, (very) feminine-presenting, 29-year-old woman engaged to a cisgender male. In naming these identifiers, I have tried to consistently remind myself that while I am somewhat of an “insider” to the Latina WSW experience, I am also an outsider at times, particularly as someone who has the privilege to be assumed straight and fit societal expectations of feminine appearance.

In addition to this reminder, I engaged in iterative note-taking throughout to document moments where participants’ narratives were evoking personal memories or feelings from past experiences. Doing so helped me proceed with data analysis in a more mindful and judicious manner. Relatedly, having Dr. Debbiesiu Lee as my external auditor also helped as she provided feedback throughout that illuminated any potential blind spots created by my subjectivity; at other instances, her feedback was also supportive and encouraging of those moments where my personal experiences were indeed facilitative of understanding participants’ perspectives.

Importantly, the inherent limitations involved in translating qualitative data from Spanish to English should also be noted. While all of the participants in this study were fluent in English, most were fully bilingual and chose to engage in Spanglish at times. Two participants in particular responded in Spanish for most, if not the entire, interview. In an effort to streamline data analysis and present results uniformly, Spanish portions across all interviews were translated by the lead researcher into English. Doing so unquestionably diluted some of the rich symbolism contained in Spanish phrasings, a common pitfall of translations across languages. That said, two bilingual

(English/Spanish) Latino psychologists were consulted with to ensure that translations were not only sound but also faithful to the actual expressions of participants in Spanish. Proceeding in this way allowed for the closest English approximation of Spanish expressions to be achieved.

As a major goal of data analysis was to involve participants in member-checking of the data, it is important to note that the way this was carried out may also present as a limitation in this current study. After themes were derived across all 13 interviews, a master list of themes and their descriptions was compiled. Participants were then contacted via e-mail and asked to provide suggestions, comments, or any other feedback to this researcher if they felt the themes did or did not represent their individual experiences as shared in this study. Of all who were contacted, three replied and expressed full agreement with the themes provided. This e-mail approach to member-checking could have resulted in fewer responses as participants may have been less motivated to reply after their participation in the study had ended. As such, findings presented should be considered with this limitation, along with the others described above, in mind.

Research, Practice, and Policy Implications

This study aimed to contribute to psychological understandings of the interplay between multiple factors of identity, their associated stressors (e.g., race/racism, gender/sexism, etc.), and the overall experience of being a Latina WSW. In doing so, this study has provided qualitative data from which hypotheses can be developed for future empirical studies. For example, findings from this study suggest areas for future research may examine features of mother-daughter relationships and their associations with sexual

identity development among Latina WSW. As a majority (8 out of 13) of the women in this study emphasized the difficulty they experienced when coming out to their mothers in particular, it seems this pattern of responses may be indicative of a significant dynamic in the lives of Latina WSW. Specifically, future research can examine the role of maternal responses to sexual identity disclosure in the identity development of Latina WSW. Potential avenues for research in this area may involve examining the association between negatively valenced maternal responses (i.e., dismissal, rejection) and psychological distress among Latina WSW, or establishing if maternal responses to sexual identity disclosure function as a moderator of the relationship between factors such as internalized homophobia and psychological well-being among Latina WSW.

The experiences shared by Latina WSW in this study also suggest levels of outness to family may be examined as a potential predictor of psychological well-being among Latina WSW. Specifically, women in this study shared different strategies for navigating the coming out process with extended family in particular, with most (7 out of 13) choosing not to explicitly come out to members of their extended family, particularly those of older generations. These women described their needs for emotional safety, preservation of family ties and appearances, and maintaining group cohesion as primary motivators for not coming out to family. Given these findings, future studies may specifically examine differences in levels of outness to family members of different generations, such as first cousins, aunts/uncles, and grandparents, and whether these differences are consistently correlated with greater or lesser levels of psychological well-being among Latina WSW.

Results from this study also suggest other areas for research may include an examination of social supports, exposure to LGBTQ discourse, and perceived LGBTQ (of color) visibility as mediators of sexual identity formation among Latina WSW. Across participants, the relative presence or absence of these factors influenced the extent to which these women experienced greater (or lesser) degrees of comfort with their developing identities as Latina WSW, suggesting these are likely important factors in the identity formation process of Latina WSW. Still other potentially fruitful areas for future research on Latina WSW may involve studies that examine the role of trait-specific moderators of the interaction between cultural values such as *familismo* and levels of outness for Latina WSW. For example, women in this study differed to the degree they were comfortable defying Latino cultural norms when they first began to explore their emerging identities as bisexual, queer, lesbian, and pansexual women – future research could examine whether there are specific personality traits, i.e., extroversion, introversion, or agreeableness, to name a few, and the degree to which these moderate the relationship between endorsement of cultural values and levels of outness among Latina WSW.

Clinically speaking, this study has also provided data that can inform the practices of counseling psychologists, clinical psychologists, mental health counselors, or other psychotherapists providing care to Latina WSW. Participants in this study have shared experiences that provide perspective on clinical issues such as adjustment concerns and stressors, mood disturbance, family conflict, intimate relationships, and general anxiety, to name a few. In each of these areas, practitioners are encouraged to use what is learned

from this study to better understand the potential clinical needs of Latina WSW without over-generalizing and losing sight of individual experience and idiosyncrasy.

For Latina WSW, generally speaking, it may be important to assess attachment history, degree of religiosity within family of origin, and past experiences with LGBTQ life, as these are all factors that served to either complicate or facilitate the identity exploration of women in this study. Even for Latina WSW whose immediate presenting concerns do not involve identity-based conflict, these considerations still hold. As it is a psychological fact that, by nature, human beings do not possess conscious access to their psychic lives (McWilliams, 2011), assessing these areas can sensitize clinicians to psychosocial factors that may come to bear in the course of treatment.

Findings from this study can also be utilized to develop specific interventions when working with Latina WSW in individual therapy. For instance, women in this study routinely discussed the difficulties they encountered when trying to integrate a sense of themselves as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual women with their Latina identities. Clinicians may readily recognize this expressed difficulty as cognitive dissonance, intrapsychic conflict, or dichotomous thinking, depending on their theoretical orientation and style of practice. When working with Latina WSW, it may thus be helpful to elicit or hone in on thoughts, feelings, and other reactions, with a particular sensitivity to the conflict or rigidity these women may be experiencing as they explore and consider how to reconcile seemingly disparate parts of their identities. In wading through this material, it may be especially useful to process affect states brought on by these explorations, as the stories of Latina WSW in this study suggest that feelings of shame, loss, fear, and confusion can serve to complicate the journey to self-discovery and self-acceptance. For

others who may be less verbally inclined, or more psychically defended and unable to engage with cognitive or affective material forthrightly, projective and other non-verbal techniques may be especially useful in creating insight or establishing meaningful connection with disavowed parts of the self. For instance, sand-tray therapy, an expressive and projective mode of therapy that involves the use of sand tray materials to facilitate nonverbal communication, has been shown to establish safety and control for individuals struggling with emotional concerns that have not been openly discussed (Kalff, 1981). Such an intervention may prove a vital tool in working with Latina WSW who are experiencing great degrees of internal conflict but find themselves unable to express subjective distress specific to their identities.

Findings from this study also suggest clinicians may find it helpful to engage in multigenerational family work with Latina WSW. As the topic of family was a consistently recurring theme in the lives of these women, clinicians should consider integrating into their current practice a focus on the family, in this case the Latino family, as a multigenerational system whose functioning and dynamics shape and influence the emotional lives of Latina WSW. According to Bowen's (1978) family systems theory, an adequate assessment of clients necessarily involves an assessment of the family system they occupy, as the concerns clients typically bring to counseling are often a product of the family's internal dynamics. To be sure, women in this study often shared how their perceptions of family attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals influenced and shaped their decisions to come out (or not) as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or pansexual women. Experiences shared by Latina WSW in this study thus suggest it may be important for clinicians to explore any family-based messages these women have received regarding

their identities and how family may subtly or explicitly contribute to their identity-based distress. In this regard, clinicians may guide clients in the creation of a multigenerational genogram to facilitate the processing of family influences on their developmental processes as Latina WSW. Doing so provides a concrete way of not only identifying familial sources of messages received but can also help clients externalize and understand their identity-based distress as partly emanating from a dynamic family system rather than personal pathology.

Clinicians are also urged to consider expanding their treatment interventions for Latina WSW to those beyond the realm of individual psychotherapy, such as connecting these women to LGBTQ of color support groups or encouraging engagement with media that actively portrays queer women of color in dynamic ways. For so many of the women in this study, not seeing themselves represented in society complicated their ability to imagine themselves ever fully living their truths. By the same token, these women vividly described the comfort, affirmation, and hope brought on by seeing themselves reflected in popular media for the first time. Among some of these mentions were *Vida*, a STARZ original series revolving around the lives of two Mexican-American sisters, which is based on *Pour Vida*, a short story written by Richard Villegas Jr., and Sara Ramirez's role on *Grey's Anatomy* as Dr. Callie Torres, a bisexual Latina. For Latina WSW who are struggling with identity formation, coming out, or unresolved conflict surrounding their identities, cognitive material and affective states evoked by these out-of-therapy experiences can be utilized to facilitate processing and energize meaning-making in treatment. In the context of a strong therapeutic alliance, such processing can play a

significant role in helping Latina WSW reconcile, and find comfort in, their multiple identities.

Lastly, and given the social justice and advocacy commitments of our profession (Vera & Speight, 2003), results from this study may also inform future policy measures aimed at addressing the health needs of LBQ Latinas and reducing health disparities in this area. Recommendations for policy include the creation of funding mechanisms at the federal, state, and local level that foster the creation of mental health initiatives aimed at sexual minorities of color in general and Latina WSW in particular. For instance, funding can be allocated for the creation of public health media campaigns geared towards Latino audiences to raise awareness and create a public discourse on the cultural conflicts that arise for Latina WSW. Luckily, some of these media projects are already in existence through the work of social media influencers that use their platforms and following to engage audiences on social justice concerns. That said, Latino audiences at large, particularly those who are not of the millennial or neighboring generational cohorts, are likely not reached through these platforms. Public health media campaigns at the federal and state level can thus play a role in creating greater awareness and normalizing the Latina WSW experience, which may in turn alleviate some of the stigma these women face overall.

In addition, federal legislation regarding mental health care should acknowledge the identity-based mental health needs of Latina WSW as deserving of more adequate reimbursement for mental health professionals treating adjustment and stress concerns related to cultural and sexual identity. Considering the stronghold managed care currently has on the provision of mental health services in this country, specifically in deciding

which conditions necessitate which treatments and only reimbursing for a narrow subset of these, policy measures at the federal and state level should seek to grant providers with greater discretion in making these service delivery determinations. While identity and stressor-related concerns may not be viewed by insurance panels as issues worthy of specialty care, research has time and again suggested otherwise. Given these concerns have well-established, demonstrably deleterious impacts on health, such an approach would begin to address the mental health disparities that characterize this population.

Relatedly, specialty care for Latina WSW (and sexual minorities of color in general) should be understood as involving licensed mental health professionals with adequate training in providing culturally competent services to this population. As such, policy at the federal and state level should also require that providers obtain the necessary training to equip them with the competence needed to deliver care that is not only affirming but also effective. Such measures would serve to create enforceable guidelines that can standardize care and ensure that only professionals with the appropriate training are receiving reimbursement commensurate with the time and financial investment made to obtain continuing education in these areas of practice. To be sure, many mental health professionals are already engaging in these kinds of continuing education; for these individuals, this policy recommendation would seek to adequately compensate their ongoing efforts at specializing in the mental health care of Latina WSW and other LGBTQ people of color.

At a state and local level, funding may also be allocated towards sustaining programming at schools that facilitate healthy psychosocial development for sexual minority youth of color. This can be achieved through student clubs advised by faculty

trained in these issues, or via support groups led by school counselors with training on the intersectionality of ethnic/racial and sexual identities. These measures would be preventative in nature with the potential to curtail the development of future mental health concerns in the population of sexual minorities of color, and Latina WSW, specifically. To this end, clinicians with expertise in these areas of practice may even elect to, when possible, offer consultations to school faculty and staff who otherwise may not have access to specialized training due to limited resources. Within lower-income communities this may be especially true as property taxes within a given locality often determines the amount of funding schools have to operate with. Thus, mental health professionals are urged to consider donating their time and expertise to the development of school programming that can create a more affirming, and therefore health-promoting, learning environment for LGBTQ students of color, and Latina WSW in particular.

Conclusion

Given the disproportionate rate of mental health issues among sexual minority women of color and their susceptibility to a variety of identity-based stressors (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism), this study sought to explore the narratives of a presently under-studied subset of this population: Latina WSW. This study engaged in detailed examination of the lives of Latina WSW through in-depth interviews that elicited these women's perspectives on their journeys and struggles vis-à-vis their racial/ethnic and sexual identities. Relatedly, this study proceeded with a feminist standpoint and sought to amplify the voices of Latina WSW by utilizing their stories as the primary source of data for meaning-making. In doing so, careful attention has been paid to the subjective experiences of Latina WSW, which have been distilled to themes reflective of the Latina

WSW experience. In turn, these themes underscore intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic dynamics specific to the lives of Latina WSW.

Findings from this study have confirmed prior discussions in the literature regarding the experiences of sexuality minority women of color in general and sexual minority Latinas in particular. Namely, results were consistent with research that has documented the intersecting, concomitant roles of identity-based stressors on the mental health of Latina WSW. At the same time, this study has also brought to light specific areas of the Latina WSW experience that appear to be ripe for future research. These include the role of maternal influence and mother-daughter relational dynamics on the identity development process of Latina WSW, as well as the relationship between gender presentation, heterosexism/homophobia, and mental health, among others.

Importantly, this study has also provided an examination of the Latina WSW experience that departs from the dominant, deficit paradigm that currently characterizes much of the research on sexual minorities (of color). Above and beyond descriptions of lifelong experiences with racism, sexism, or homophobia, women in this study also confided anecdotes replete with hope, faith, consciousness-raising, community-building, activism, and other efforts that point to the perseverance and resiliency that characterizes Latina WSW. While these women may be socially positioned as minorities in a society that has long privileged the proverbial White, heterosexual, Christian, cis-male figure, it is clear from the narratives reported in this study that such a social location is a significant, but not a definitive or determinant factor, of their lives. Their stories reveal that far from being powerless agents, these women are impressive protagonists, in spite of the circumstances they face as Latina WSW. To be sure, such an appreciation cannot

be achieved when researchers perpetually study so-called vulnerable communities from a deficit-driven lens. If nothing else, this study urges researchers, clinicians, and lay readers alike to take a second look, hand over the mic, and listen carefully, lest we fall prey to the dangers of a single story.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Script

Study Title: Voices from the Borderlands: The experiences of Latina WSW

My name is Zamira Castro, M.S. Ed., and I am a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Debbiesiu Lee in the Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program at the University of Miami. I am currently conducting a study about the experiences Latina/x women who have sex with women (WSW) have with their multiple identities. this study hopes to answer the following question: What does it mean to be a Latina/x woman who has sex with other women? The motivation for this study comes from an understanding that, as sexual minorities, Latina/x women have unique experiences navigating their ethnic and sexual identities. This study hopes to add to psychology's knowledge base by exploring those stories from the voices of Latina/x women themselves. If you are interested in participating, you will be asked to take part in an interview lasting about 45 minutes to one and a half hours. The interviews can be done in English or Spanish and may take place over the phone or in person if you reside in Miami, FL.

To participate you must be: 1) 18 years of age or older 2) identify as bisexual, lesbian, queer, or as a woman that has been or is currently amorously involved with women, 3) identify as Latina, Latinx, Hispanic, or by a specific Latino ethnicity (e.g. Dominican, Puerto Rican, Venezuelan, etc.), and 4) as a woman regardless of birth sex or gender expression. If you are interested in participating, please email Zamira Castro at z.castro@umiami.edu with your first name and primary phone number.

Gracias!

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Voices from the Borderlands: The experiences of Latina Women who have Sex with Women

Principal Investigator: Zamira Castro, M.S. Ed, a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Debbiesiu Lee (faculty advisor/dissertation chair).

Department: Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, School of Education and Human Development, University of Miami.

Study Contact Name: Zamira Castro, M.S. Ed.

Study Contact Telephone Number: 305-898-8280

Study Contact Email: z.castro@umiami.edu

Summary: The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form.

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

We ask you to take part in a research study because you (a) are 18 years of age or older, (b) self-identify as bisexual, lesbian, queer, or as a woman who has been or is currently amorously and/ or sexually involved with women, (c) identify as a woman regardless of birth sex or gender expression, and (d) identify as Latina, Latinx, Hispanic, or by a specific Latino ethnicity (e.g. Colombian).

What should I know about this research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Why is this research being done?

This dissertation study seeks to explore the stories of bisexual, lesbian, queer, or other Latina/x women who have sex with women. By doing so, this study hopes to answer the following question: What does it mean to be a Latina/x woman who has sex with other women? The motivation for this study comes from an understanding that, as racial, gender, and sexual minorities, Latina/x women have unique experiences navigating their identities. This study hopes to add to psychology's knowledge base by exploring those stories from the voices of Latina/x women themselves.

You will be one of 10-15 participants in this current study.

How long will the research last and what will I need to do?

We expect that you will be in this research study for one-time interviews that will last approximately 45 minutes to one and a half hours.

You will be asked to take part in either in-person or phone interviews based on preference and availability.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

This study aims to be a positive experience of reflection and exploration. Because of this, there are currently no known or anticipated risks associated with this study. That said, discussing past experiences with ethnic culture and sexual identity may provoke some difficult feelings for some individuals. Should you experience any concerns as a result of participating in this study, please consult the mental health resources guide provided to you. During the interview you may choose not to answer certain questions, take a break, or stop the interview. If you would like to discuss any concerns related to participating, you may contact the lead researcher, Zamira Castro, M.S. Ed., z.castro@umiami.edu.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include gaining a greater awareness of your ethnic and sexual identity or personal development overall. The findings from this study may also help counseling psychologists and related professionals consider the specific mental health needs of Latina WSW.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate.

Detailed Information: The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research study is to explore the stories of bisexual, lesbian, queer, or other Latina/x women who have sex with women. By doing so, this study hopes to answer the following question: What does it mean to be a Latina/x woman who has sex with other women? The motivation for this study comes from an understanding that, as racial, gender, and sexual minorities, Latina/x women have unique experiences navigating their identities. This study hopes to add to psychology's knowledge base by exploring those stories from the voices of Latina/x women themselves.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at 305-898-8280 or email Zamira Castro, M.S. Ed. at z.castro@umiami.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). The Human Subject Research Office (HSRO) provides administrative support to the University of Miami's IRBs. Please call the HSRO at 305-243-3195 if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.
-

How many people will be interviewed?

We expect about 10-15 people here will be in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

You will participate in either of the two following interview formats:

Phone Interviews

You will review this consent form, a list of mental health resources, and then be asked to complete a short demographic form before the interview date. You will be asked to complete and return the signed consent form via email prior to the interview. Before beginning the interview, the lead researcher will explain the study and ask if you have any questions or concerns. Afterwards, you will be asked to provide your verbal consent to begin recording. You will take part in an interview that will last anywhere from 45 mins to 1.5 hours. Interviews will ask questions about experiences you have had related to your racial, ethnic, and sexual identity. Interviews will be audio recorded. No participant names will be placed with the recordings. Audio recordings will be assigned an ID number and files containing participants' names will be stored in a separate file.

In-Person Interviews

You will review this consent form, a list of mental health resources, and then be asked to complete a short demographic at the beginning of the interview. You will be asked to sign this consent form and complete the demographic form prior to starting the interview. Before beginning the interview, the lead researcher will explain the study and ask if you have any questions or concerns. Afterwards, you will be asked to provide your verbal consent to begin recording. You will take part in an interview that will last anywhere from 45 mins to 1.5 hours. Interviews will ask questions about experiences you have had related to your racial, ethnic, and sexual identity. Interviews will be audio recorded. No participant names will be placed with the recordings. Audio recordings will be assigned an ID number and files containing participants' names will be stored in a separate file.

After Interviews

After all interviews have been conducted, you will be contacted via email by the lead researcher and provided with a summary of the overall findings in the form of general themes. You will be asked to share your perspective on the general themes in relation to your interview responses. You will be given two weeks to respond. If you do not respond,

it will be assumed you agree with the themes. This step helps the lead researcher confirm she is correctly capturing what was said during the interview.

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be contacted via email to ask for clarification on your interview up to 6 months following the interview.

Participation in any part of this study is voluntary and you may refuse to participate in certain activities, such as providing post-interview clarification or perspectives on study findings. If you wish to withdraw at any time, please contact the lead researcher, Zamira Castro z.castro@umiami.edu.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time, it will not be held against you.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

This study aims to be a positive experience of reflection and exploration. Because of this, there are currently no known or anticipated risks associated with this study. That said, discussing past experiences with ethnic culture and sexual identity may provoke some difficult feelings for some individuals. Should you experience any concerns as a result of participating in this study, please consult the mental health resources guide provided to you. During the interview you may choose not to answer certain questions, take a break, or stop the interview. If you would like to discuss any concerns related to participating, you may contact the lead researcher, Zamira Castro, M.S. Ed., z.castro@umiami.edu.

What if I get hurt as a result of my participation in this study?

Although risks are unlikely, if any emotional injury should occur, talking to someone such as a counselor may help. If you have insurance, your insurance company may or may not pay for these costs. If you do not have insurance, or if your insurance company refuses to pay, you will be expected to pay. Funds to compensate for pain, expenses, lost wages and other damages caused by injury are not available.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Your information will be shared with the sponsor of this study, if any. The “sponsor” includes any persons or companies that the sponsor hires to help oversee the study. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the University of Miami IRB and other representatives of this organization. Your information may be looked at and/or copied for research, regulatory or other purposes by:

- The sponsor, if any;
- The Food and Drug Administration;
- The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS);
- other government agencies;
- other University of Miami employees for audit and/or monitoring purposes; and

- other investigators and/or organizations collaborating in the research

One possible limitation on confidentiality is if information is revealed concerning harm to yourself or others, child abuse, neglect, or other forms of abuse that is required by law to be reported to the appropriate authorities.

Your information that is collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies, even if all of your identifiers are removed.

This research is covered by a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. With this Certificate, the researchers may not disclose or use information, documents, or biospecimens that may identify you in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other action, suit, or proceeding, or be used as evidence, for example, if there is a court subpoena, unless you have consented to this use. Information, documents, or biospecimens protected by this Certificate cannot be disclosed to anyone else who is not connected with the research, except 1) if there is a federal, state, or local law that requires disclosure (such as to report child abuse or communicable diseases but not for federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings; see below); 2) if you have consented to the disclosure, including for your medical treatment and related administrative activities; or 3) if it is used for other scientific research, as allowed by federal regulations protecting research subjects.

The Certificate of Confidentiality will not be used to prevent disclosure as required by federal, state, or local law of suspected harm to self or others.

Student Rights

If you are a student, your decision not to participate or to withdraw from the study will not affect your grades or other academic standings at the University of Miami.

Employee Rights

If you are an employee of the University of Miami, your decision not to participate or to withdraw from the study will not affect your employment at the University of Miami.

Publication

We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

PARTICIPANT'S STATEMENT/SIGNATURE

- *I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me.*
- *I have been given the chance to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to call.*
- *I agree to be in the research study described above.*
- *I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.*

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Appendix C - Demographic Form

Date of Birth: _____

Gender Identity: _____

Sexual Identity/Orientation: _____

Ethnic Identity: _____

Racial Identity: _____

Generational status: _____ 1st generation _____ 2nd generation _____

Other

If other, please specify: _____

Relationship Status: _____

Are you a parent/caregiver? If so, please specify: _____

City/State of Residence: _____

Educational Level: _____ Completed Elementary _____ Completed Middle School

_____ Studying GED _____ Received GED _____ Completed H.S.

_____ Some College (Courses, Associate's, etc.) _____ Bachelor's Degree (B.A., B.S.)

_____ Master's Degree (M.A., M.S., etc.) _____ Doctoral (Ph.D., M.D., etc.)

_____ Other

Employment or Occupational Status: _____

Religious/Spiritual Affiliation: _____

Appendix D - Mental Health Resources

For UM Students:

The UM Counseling Center provides a range of services, including individual and group therapy, career assessment, psychological testing, and others. Among its services is the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Questioning Therapy Group, which meets on Tuesdays from 5pm to 6:30 pm and provides a highly confidential, safe place to talk about concerns related to sexual orientation. Call to schedule an appointment at 305-284-5511. Walk-ins are also welcome.

For All:

NATIONAL SERVICES

Are you in Crisis? Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) to be connected to a trained counselor at a crisis center nearest you.

Mental Health Hotline Numbers and Referral Resources (*For a complete list visit the following link*)

From: <https://www.healthyplace.com/other-info/resources/mental-health-hotline-numbers-and-referral-resources/>

Selected Hotline Numbers:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233• Drug & Alcohol Treatment Hotline 800-662-HELP• Family Violence Prevention Center 1-800-313-1310• Gay & Lesbian National Hotline 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)• Gay & Lesbian Trevor HelpLine Suicide Prevention 1-800-850-8078• Healing Woman Foundation (Abuse) 1-800-477-4111• Help Finding a Therapist 1-800-THERAPIST (1-800-843-7274)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)• Panic Disorder Information Hotline 800- 64-PANIC• Post Abortion Trauma 1-800-593-2273• Rape (People Against Rape) 1-800-877-7252• Rape, Abuse, Incest, National Network (RAINN) 1-800-656-HOPE (1-800-656-4673)• Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK• Suicide & Crisis Hotline 1-800-999-9999• Victim Center 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255)
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Appendix E - Interview Guide

1. What was growing up like for you?
 - a. Describe your cultural upbringing
 - b. What was it like for you to grow up in your culture?
 - c. Describe growing up in your family
 - d. What was it like for you to grow up in your family?
 - e. Describe your neighborhood experience.
 - f. What was it like for you to grow up in your neighborhood?
 - g. Describe your school experience.
 - h. What was school like for you? (Elementary, middle, high-school, college)?

3. When did you first become aware of your: (1) race, (2) sex/ gender, (3) sexual orientation?
 - a. What, if any experiences have you had of (1) racism, (2) sexism/ genderism, (3) heterosexism.

4. How has it been for you to share your experiences with me? (as a Latina/lesbian/ woman)? What feelings came up for you?

5. What does it mean for you to be a Latina (lesbian, bisexual, queer, etc.) woman today?

6. What is it like for you to be a Latina WSW among Latinos?