Ohio Communication Journal
A publication of the Ohio Communication Association

Ohio Communication Association

2023 Executive Committee

Guidelines for Manuscript Submissions

The *Ohio Communication Journal* is an annual peer-reviewed online publication that publishes original scholarship bearing on the breadth of the field of communication studies. Within this broad purview, it welcomes diverse disciplinary, conceptual, and methodological perspectives, especially scholarship covering a wide variety of topics from every facet of the field and debut papers from undergraduate and graduate students.

The *Ohio Communication Journal* believes that research must be carried out in an ethical fashion, so we subscribe to the National Communication Association Code of Professional Ethics for Authors and we expect submissions to reflect these guidelines. These guidelines enjoin authors to use inclusive and non-defamatory language.

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(1) The manuscript is original work and proper publication credit is accorded to all authors.

(2) Simultaneous editorial consideration of the manuscript at another publication venue is prohibited.

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(5) All legal, institutional, and professional obligations for obtaining informed consent from research participants and for limiting their risk are honored.

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2022 Call for Papers

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The *Ohio Communication Journal* publishes extended, complete studies that generally do not exceed 30 double-spaced pages (including references), except in cases where "thick description" of qualitative/ rhetorical data may require a slightly extended length. The *Ohio Communication Journal* is committed to an eclectic approach and to the publication of high-quality articles from a variety of different areas within the field of communication including: critical studies, state of the art reviews, reports of topical interest, supported opinion papers, and other essays related to field of communication. Manuscripts may be philosophical, theoretical, methodological, critical, applied, pedagogical, or empirical in nature.

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relationships, or the classroom environment have changed as we have adapted to living, working, and learning in a pandemic.

Manuscript Submission Process

After removing all identifiers in the properties of the document (go file-properties-summary and delete your name and affiliation), authors should submit one electronic double-spaced copy of the manuscript and one separate title page in Microsoft Word (preferred). See the Ohio Communication Association website under "Journal" for specific submission guidelines.

All manuscripts should conform to the most recent edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) Style Manual 7th Edition. The cover page must contain: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) the author's name, (3) author's institutional affiliation, (3) the mailing address, (4) the author's phone number, and (5) author's e-mail address. The second page of the manuscript must include the title and a 50–100-word abstract.

For more information about the *Ohio Communication Journal*, please visit the Ohio Communication Association website at https://ohiocomm.org/ohio-communication-journal/.

Volume 61 Acceptance Rate

The acceptance rate for Volume 61 of the *Ohio Communication Journal* was 33%.

Featured Publications

Short Essays

Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 1–14

"To Restore the Soul of America:" Religious Rhetoric in Joe Biden's President-Elect Victory Speech

Valerie Lynn Schrader

On November 7, 2020, after being declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, Joseph R. Biden delivered his President-Elect victory speech to a crowd in Wilmington, Delaware. Through a generic analysis of religious language in Biden's victory speech, I suggest that Biden uses religious language in the tradition of American civil religion in an attempt to unify the country after a highly divisive and contested election, as well as to provide hope and comfort in the midst of a global pandemic. While Biden's address adheres to the themes previous research has associated with the President-Elect victory speech genre, his address appears to utilize religious language more frequently than other victory speeches. I suggest that this is partly due to the unique circumstances in which Biden delivered his address: during a global pandemic, without the concession of his opponent, and at a time when many Americans refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of his election. Because there was no concession speech delivered by his opponent, Biden's President-Elect victory speech attempted to achieve all of the objectives usually accomplished by a victory speech working in conjunction with a concession speech. Biden's decision to utilize "Consoler-in-Chief" rhetoric in his victory speech is also discussed.

Keywords: rhetorical criticism, political rhetoric, presidential rhetoric, political communication, generic criticism

Introduction

On November 7, 2020, four days after the presidential election, Joseph R. Biden was declared the winner, at least by most reputable news outlets. Hours later, he delivered his President-Elect victory speech in front of a socially-distanced, mask-wearing crowd who watched from their vehicles in Wilmington, Delaware (Phillips, 2020). The situation in which Biden delivered his speech was unique for several reasons. First, the event took place during a global pandemic, where most attendees, aside from those directly involved in the organization and running of the event, participated via drive-in and virtually at home from their televisions, computers, and phones. Biden, Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris, and their families wore masks when they weren't at the podium speaking. Furthermore, the event was unique in that no concession speech was delivered by President Donald Trump, and many Americans refused to accept the results of the presidential election – so much so, that many of them later stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in the January 6, 2021 insurrection as Congress met to formally count the electoral votes that gave Biden his victory.

Though he may have been elected and taken office in unprecedented times, Biden is no stranger to American politics, having served as a Senator from Delaware for 36 years and as Vice President under President Barack Obama ("Joe Biden: The President," 2021). In addition of having the distinction of being the oldest person elected president (Peter, 2020), Joe Biden is also only the second Catholic president of the United States (Khalid, 2020). Biden "carries a rosary in his pocket and attends mass every Sunday" and is "known as a deeply devout person of faith" (Khalid, 2020, para. 6). Biden, who has experienced great personal loss, both in 1972 when his first wife Neilia and daughter Naomi were killed in a car accident and in 2015 when his eldest son Beau died of brain cancer, is said to have relied on his faith in order to cope with the tragedies he experienced in his life (Phelps & Saenz, 2015). Asma Khalid (2020) of *NPR* notes that Biden routinely uses religious references when speaking (para. 4), and his usage appears to be more associated with his personal identity than as a political ploy, although his campaign used it as a strategy in framing the 2020 presidential election as "a battle for the soul of a nation" (para. 5). She observes that Biden's "speeches are woven with references to God, biblical language, or the Pope" (para. 1).

Valerie Lynn Schrader (PhD, Ohio University, 2010) is a Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences at the Schuylkill campus of Penn State University. Address correspondence to the author at vls146@psu.edu.

In this essay, I explore Biden's use of religious language in his November 7, 2020 President-Elect victory speech. Through generic analysis as a research method, I suggest that Biden uses religious language in the tradition of American civil religion (Bellah, 1998) in an attempt to unify the country after a highly divisive and contested election, as well as to provide hope and comfort in the midst of a global pandemic. While Biden's address adheres to the themes previous research has associated with President-Elect victory speeches, his address appears to utilize religious language more than other victory speeches. I suggest that while this is likely due to Biden's identity as a Catholic, it is also a result of the unique circumstances in which Biden delivered his address: during a global pandemic, without the concession of his opponent, and at a time when many Americans refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of his election. Because there was no concession speech delivered by his opponent, Biden was placed in the unique situation of attempting to deliver a sole speech that would encompass all of the characteristics typically accomplished through two speeches: a victory speech working in conjunction with a concession speech. Biden's decision to utilize "Consoler-in-Chief" rhetoric in his victory speech is also discussed in this article.

Religious Language in Presidential Rhetoric

For the purposes of this article, I utilize Warner et al.'s (2011) definition of religious references in presidential rhetoric, which they adapted from Preston's (2006) definition of religious words: "those words that in and of themselves connote a relationship to faith in a higher, spiritual god and that relate to a recognized denomination or faith, including civil religion if it incorporates the values and rituals of a faith based religion" (Warner et al., 2011, p. 161). This definition encompasses terms that directly relate to a specific religion, as well as terms that express "American civil religion," a "social construction" (Mathison, 1989, p. 129) which is "derived from Christianity" (Bellah, 1998, p. 104) but vaguely refers to God and never mentions Jesus Christ specifically in an attempt to connect with the diverse American public. As Toolin (2001) explains, American civil religion is "a belief system that draws upon the religious ideologies and common historical experiences of the American people" (p. 39). Bellah (1998) argues that American civil religion "at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in, or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" (p. 12). Williams and Alexander (1994) suggest that American civil religion "has both priestly and prophetic orientations – it celebrates and criticizes" (p. 4). Hinckley (1990) observes the role that presidents play in espousing American civil religion, suggesting that presidents are "the moral leaders and high priests of the American society" and that they "preach, reminding the American people of religious and moral principles and urging them to conduct themselves in accord with these principles" (p. 73). Roderick Hart explores the concept of American civil religion in two books, *The Political Pulpit* (1977) and *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (2005), the latter of which he co-edited with John L. Pauley II. Hart (1977) examines "distinguishing aspects of civil-religious discourse" (p. 67), including expedient complexity, non-existential content, ritualistic presence, and prosaic animus. He concludes that,

> unless the American people suddenly choose *not* to accommodate one another through public ritual, or to recreate and promulgate their national myths, or to continue to honor the rhetorically based contract they have enforced upon church and state, civic piety – of a changing yet changeless variety – will continue to distinguish the cultural and symbolic landscape of the United States. (Hart, 1977, p. 111, emphasis Hart's)

In this article, I explore Joe Biden's use of religious references rooted in the tradition of American civil religion in his 2020 President-Elect victory speech.

Scholars have often explored the use of religious language in different speech genres, including inaugural addresses (Bellah, 1998; Browne, 2002; Coe & Domke, 2006; Daughton, 1993; Iancu & Balaban, 2013; Isetti, 1996; Lucas, 1993; Slagell, 1991) and war messages (Coles, 2002; Diez-Bosch & Franch, 2017; Parillo, 2000; Warner et al., 2011). Boase (1989) notes that "with the exception of

Washington's short one-hundred-thirty-five-word second inaugural, every President's first official address, usually in the peroration, has invoked divine blessing" (p. 1). Coles (2002) explores the use of religious language in conjunction with a "manifest destiny" theme in two war messages: George H.W. Bush's Gulf War rhetoric and Bill Clinton's rhetoric concerning the Kosovo conflict. She observes that Bush's rhetoric is more "priestly" in that it creates the vision of the United States as a "chosen nation" (p. 413), and that Clinton's rhetoric is more "pastoral," suggesting that the United States has "fallen short of the promise" (p. 414). Warner et al. (2011) study how Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush used religious language to justify war, noting that both presidents "used inherently religious language to escalate, launch, and justify their respective wars" (p. 167). They conclude that "when American presidents sprinkle their definitional reasons for war with religious language…they can generate more support – if they do not go too far, meaning if they stick with basic, Western, civil religious concepts" (p. 168).

Religious references are also often found on the campaign trail (Boase, 1989; Isetti, 1996; Medhurst, 2005), in public policy debates (Siker, 2012), in rhetoric in times of crisis (Friedenberg, 2005), at White House Prayer Breakfasts (Ofulue, 2005), in presidential eulogies (Schrader, 2011), in State of the Union speeches (Coe & Domke, 2006; Smith, 2011) and in commemorative epideictic rhetoric (Bostdorff, 2003). Scholars have particularly noted the use of religious rhetoric by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Ofulue (2005) observes Bill Clinton's use of religious rhetoric at a 1998 White House Prayer Breakfast, arguing that Clinton uses religious language at an event with clergy in an "attempt to redeem for himself a persona as the leader of American civil religion after personal scandal" (p. 128). Schrader (2011) examines Bill Clinton's use of religious references in his Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial Prayer Service Address, suggesting that presidents may use "religious rhetoric in times of crisis to console the grieving audience" (p. 13). Smith (2011) explores the change in George W. Bush's Manichaean religious rhetoric in his study of the 2006 State of the Union Address. Also studying George W. Bush's use of religious language, Bostdorff (2003) compares Bush's post-September 11 rhetoric to the Puritan rhetoric of covenant renewal, noting that "the president's discourse depicted a benevolent God and placed primary blame for the nation's problems on external sources, rather than on his 'parishioners'" (p. 294). In this article on religious rhetoric in Biden's President-Elect victory speech, I observe how Biden has used a number of these strategies noted in previous work, including the "manifest destiny" theme (Coles, 2002), the invocation of divine blessing (Boase, 1989), and consolation rhetoric (Schrader, 2011).

While religious references have been studied in a wide range of presidential addresses, few scholars have explored the use of religious references in President-Elect victory or concession speeches. Weaver (1982) notes that Jimmy Carter's concession speech during the 1980 presidential election utilized religious references and that this act was in line with his "image as a 'charitable Christian'" (p. 488). In their study of George W. Bush's President-Elect victory speech and Al Gore's concession speech after the contested 2000 election, Ritter and Howell (2001) note that Bush and Gore's speeches contained a greater number of religious references than previous victory and concession speeches. They suggest that this increased usage of religious references, in conjunction with their own personal beliefs (Gore as a Southern Baptist and Bush as a Methodist), indicates that they may have viewed the results of the election as "the hand of God in America's destiny" (p. 2328). Through this article on Joe Biden's use of religious rhetoric in his President-Elect victory speech, I seek to contribute to the literature on the use of religious language in this speech genre.

The Rhetoric of President-Elect Victory Speeches

Victory and concession speeches are part of what Weaver (1982) refers to as the "dramatic ritual" of the presidential campaign process (p. 480). She argues that "public announcements of victory and defeat are important elements in the transition from political conflict and division to reconciliation and the development of a shared sense of purpose" (p. 480). She notes that it is through the "reciprocating ritual"

of victory and concession speeches that "a campaign officially terminates" and "the rhetorical ending occurs" (p. 481).

Through her study of victory and concession speeches from 1952 to 1980, Weaver (1982) observes two types of conventions used in these addresses: procedural conventions that have formed a "set of requirements that govern the situation," and substantive conventions, which "govern the content of acknowledgement statements" (p. 481). Among the procedural conventions she observes are 1. that the "loser must concede before the victor can announce" (p. 481), 2. that "each statement must be a response to its counterpart" (p. 482), 3. that the "losing candidate appears personally to a crowd of supporters, surrounded by [his/her/their] family" (p. 482), 4. that personal messages are sent from the losing candidate to the winning candidate, 5. that the "winning candidate appears personally, but not necessarily surrounded by supporters or family" (p. 482), and 6. that incumbency has the ability to change these conventions "with regard to how much emphasis the victor places on the message of concession" (p. 482). Substantive conventions of both concession and victory speeches include expressing gratitude and appealing for unification, while concession speeches also focus on "loyal opposition" and offering support to the new president (pp. 484-485), and victory speeches focus on showing humility and dedication to the country (pp. 485-486). Corcoran (1995) extends Weaver's (1982) work by exploring all presidential concession speeches from 1952 to 1992, concluding that concession speeches involve "complex spiritual concerns: catharsis, confession, and forgiveness" (p. 284).

Building on the work of Corcoran (1995), Weaver (1982), and Welch (1999), Ritter and Howell (2001) conclude that victory and concession speeches: 1. serve as "a formal declaration of victory or defeat," 2. "call for national unity," 3. pay "tribute to American democracy," 4. "affirm the candidate's campaign," 5. publicly acknowledge the "transformed roles for candidates," and 6. thank supporters (p. 2316). Ritter and Howell (2001) suggest that these six characteristics have been reflected in victory and concession speeches since the 1950s, when these speeches were first televised to the general public (p. 2317). They found that during the 2000 election, Bush and Gore amplified some themes, such as declaring defeat or victory and calling for national unity, while truncating others, such as affirming the campaign, acknowledging the transformation of roles, and thanking supporters. In this study of Joe Biden's President-Elect victory speech, I note how Biden attempts to accomplish all six of the characteristics noted previously by Ritter and Howell (2001).

Scholars have also examined how victory and concession speeches have changed during the 21st century. Willyard and Ritter (2005) study the victory and concession speeches given by Bush and Kerry after the 2004 presidential election. They note how the ritual was unusual in that both vice-presidential candidates spoke before and from the same stage as the presidential candidates, and that Kerry's running-mate, John Edwards, delivered a speech with a message that was inconsistent with Kerry's message of concession (p. 489). Howell (2011) explores how the issues of gender, race, and age were addressed in McCain and Obama's concession and victory speeches after the 2008 presidential election. He argues that while both candidates adhered to the conventions of the genre and both addressed issues related to race, neither candidate addressed issues related to age, and only McCain addressed issues related to gender. Mirer and Bode (2015) explore concession statements in a new medium: tweets. In a study of 200 Twitter feeds of congressional, gubernatorial, and senatorial candidates in the 2010 mid-term election, they found that while some concession traditions, such as thanking supporters, affirming the campaign, and acknowledging role transformation were observed, others, such as calling for unity and legitimizing or praising democracy, were disregarded. While the ritual itself and the media used to conduct the ritual may change, it appears that the majority of the conventions of the genre have been maintained in victory and concession rhetoric in the 21st century.

President-Elect victory speeches are frequently studied in conjunction with concession speeches, as illustrated in the work by Ritter and Howell (2001) and Weaver (1982), as the two speeches together often provide a thorough response to a rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). Weaver (1982) goes so far as to argue that "victory and concession statements are inseparable parts of the process of 'acknowledgement'" (p. 481), and Willyard and Ritter (2005) echo the importance of studying victory and concession speeches in conjunction with one another, stating that "victory and concession speeches are reciprocal in nature"

(p. 497). Welch (1999) observes that it is important to examine such speeches not only from a genre perspective, but also through the influence that a specific rhetorical situation may have on the speeches. For example, in their discussion of the 2000 presidential election, Ritter and Howell (2001) note that George W. Bush faced a number of constraints when delivering his victory speech: he lacked a clear mandate, did not win the popular vote, and faced a divided electorate. In the 2020 presidential election, while Joe Biden won the popular and the electoral vote, receiving more votes than any presidential candidate in history (Montanaro, 2020), thus having a mandate, he, like Bush, faced a divided electorate, but for a different reason: Biden's opponent refused to concede, and misinformation regarding election fraud was being spread to the point that many Americans believed Biden had "stolen" the election. His opponent, Trump, further aided the spread of these falsehoods not only by refusing to concede but through tweets, such as the 300 tweets amplifying voting falsehoods observed by Linda Qui (2020) of the *New York Times* ten days after the election, and remarks such as "We will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved" (Gearan & Dawsey, 2021, para. 2). Unlike in other situations where victory and concession speeches have worked together to restore faith in American democracy and legitimize the democratic process, Biden faced the unprecedented rhetorical situation of accomplishing the same tasks without the help of a cooperative opponent. Ritter and Howell (2001) note that typically the ritual of victory and concession speeches begins when "the vanquished opponent initiates the ritual by offering a private concession to the victorious candidate followed by a public declaration of concession" (p. 2316). However, in the 2020 presidential election, no such offering was provided by "the vanquished opponent," placing Biden in the unique situation of attempting to deliver a speech that would encompass all six characteristics of the victory and concession speeches alone.

Method

In this article, I use generic criticism to better understand Biden's use of religious language in his President-Elect victory speech. Generic criticism is a type of rhetorical criticism that is "based on the idea that observable, explicable, and predictable rhetorical commonalities occur in groups of discourses as well as in groups of people" (Benoit, 2009, p. 77). Drawing from the work of Aristotle and Kenneth Burke, Campbell and Jamieson (1982) define genres as "dynamic fusions of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements" and as "constellations that are strategic responses to the demands of the situation and the purposes of the rhetor" (p. 146). They note that a "generic perspective recognizes…that all rhetoric is influenced by prior rhetoric [and that] all rhetorical acts resemble other rhetorical acts" (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 22). Benoit (2009) explains that in order to conduct generic criticism, a critic must first identify a genre of discourse, and then, using an inductive approach, study numerous examples of this genre in order to "develop a description or generalization of its characteristics" (p. 77). Finally, a critic must apply what has been learned about the genre in order to "understand and evaluate other, as yet unexamined, instances of that genre" (p. 78). In this article, because the President-Elect victory speech as a speech genre has been examined in detail by previous scholars (see Corcoran, 1995; Howell, 2011; Ritter & Howell, 2001; Ritter & Howell, 2010; Welch, 1999; Weaver, 1982; Willyard & Ritter, 2005), my analysis will focus primarily on Benoit's (2009) final step of generic criticism, noting how Biden's speech both embodies elements of the genre and incorporates different elements that are not commonly associated with President-Elect victory speeches. I argue these different elements are due to the fact that no concession speech was given; therefore, Biden's speech needed to do the work of both a victory speech and a concession speech simultaneously.

Analysis

After Vice-President Kamala Harris introduced him, President-Elect Joe Biden jogged to the podium wearing a mask as Bruce Springsteen's "We Take Care of Our Own," a song with lyrics that emphasize American pride, played in the background. While this act may seem informal and perhaps un-presidential to some, it served two purposes: to illustrate Biden's physical fitness, thereby nonverbally

putting to rest questions that had been raised – primarily by the Trump campaign - regarding his health and age (Lucey & Thomas, 2020), and to convey the importance of, and Biden's commitment to, wearing masks to combat the spread of COVID-19. Before beginning his remarks, Biden greeted Harris at the podium, paused for a photo-op with her, and then pointed out a number of people he saw in the audience, including representatives from Delaware and his sister. Harris also put on a mask to greet him, and they both wore masks for the photo-op, further reiterating the nonverbal message of the importance of wearing masks during the pandemic.

As he took the podium, Biden declared victory, accomplishing the first of Ritter and Howell's (2001) characteristics of victory and concession speeches, assuring his audience that "the people of this nation have spoken," and that "they have delivered us a clear victory," "a convincing victory," and "a victory for 'We the People.'"[1] To further support this claim, Biden added that "we have won with the most votes ever cast for a presidential ticket in the history of this nation – 74 million." By providing a statistic describing the number of votes received, Biden supported his argument for his listeners, and attempted to put to rest questions regarding the legitimacy of his election. While all President-Elects declare victory in their victory speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001; Weaver, 1982; Willyard & Ritter, 2005; Howell, 2011), this was especially important for Biden, who lacked a concession speech from his opponent. As Trump's statements and lack of concession speech continued to cast doubt on the election's legitimacy, Biden was placed in the unusual and awkward position of declaring victory and justifying the legitimacy of the election on his own, which likely accounted for the speech beginning with a declaration and defense of his victory.

Immediately after declaring victory and stating that he was "humbled by the trust and confidence" placed in him by the American people, which served to transfer his role as candidate to the role of President-Elect, Biden used language through which he sought to unify the country, accomplishing the second characteristic of victory and concession speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001). In an echo of his campaign rhetoric, he stated, "I pledge to be a President who seeks not to divide, but unify; who doesn't see red states and blue states, but a United States, and who will work with all my heart to win the confidence of the whole people." While unifying the country has consistently been part of victory and concession speeches in previous years, it is even more important during highly contested elections when Americans are passionately divided on issues. Ritter and Howell (2001) observed that during the highly contested 2000 presidential election, both Gore and Bush "expanded their treatment" of the "calling for national unity" theme because they felt it was vital in helping the country move forward (p. 2328). Unlike in 2000, however, Biden could not rely on his political opponent to provide a complementary unification message, which may account for why the unity theme was repeated so often throughout his victory speech.

Biden then offered statements that accomplished the functions of paying "tribute to American democracy" and "affirming the candidate's campaign" (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316). He referenced three of his campaign's goals - "rebuild[ing] the backbone of the nation – the middle class," "mak[ing] America respected around the world again," and "unit[ing] us here at home" – the last of which also connected with the unification purpose of his victory speech. It is here where the first religious reference in the address appears: Biden began this section by stating that he "sought this office to restore the soul of America." While this statement directly referenced a campaign theme, the word "soul" also implies a spiritual element. In a *New York Times* article, Elizabeth Dias (2020) explores what was meant by this campaign slogan, suggesting that it conveyed a broader morality that transcended specific religious and philosophical ideals. In this speech, as well as in campaign communications that utilized the phrase, Biden used American civil religion to expound his vision for the country. Civil religion, as Bellah (1967) explains, consists of a "public religious dimension expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" (p.

[1] This article does not use page numbers when referencing quotes in Biden's speech because at the time this study was conducted, the speech only appeared online, and websites do not typically use page numbers. For a complete transcript of the speech, please see https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-religion-technology-race-and-ethnicity-2b961c70bc72c2516046bffd378e95de

4); it is intentionally vague in order to enable the majority of the populace to identify with it and the speaker who invokes it. American civil religion has served "as the glue that holds a diverse and pluralistic nation together" (Isetti, 1996, p. 686). Restoring "the soul of America" may mean different things to different individuals and communities, but it implies a return to a broader morality that many associate with the country.

In the next part of the speech, Biden thanked his family, friends, and supporters, illustrating the sixth theme, "thanking supporters," in victory and concession speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001). He began by thanking his wife, referring to himself as "Jill's husband" and praising her roles as a military mom and an educator, assuring "America's educators" that they would "have one of [their] own in the White House." He continued by thanking his children and the rest of his family before turning to his running mate, Kamala Harris, and noting her historic win that made her "the first woman, first woman of South Asian descent, and first daughter of immigrants" elected to the office of Vice President. He noted that this is "long overdue" and that in her election, "America has bent the arc of the moral universe toward justice." The use of the word "moral" here also implies a religious dimension, suggesting that the pursuit of justice – and in particular justice for marginalized communities in the form of political representation – is part of America's duty as a nation, as well as part of America's civil religion.

He then thanked Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff by making a joke that they are "honorary Bidens and there's no way out" before thanking his campaign team and volunteers. In a return to the unity theme, he stated that his campaign coalition was the "broadest and most diverse in history" and then specifically mentioned a number of different groups: "Democrats, Republicans, Independents, progressives, moderates, conservatives, young, old, urban, suburban, rural, gay, straight, transgender, white, Latino, Asian, Native American," and "African American." He saved "African American" for last in order to praise this particular group of Americans for "always hav[ing his] back," "especially for those moments when this campaign was at its lowest." By referencing different groups in the country, Biden cast a wide net that celebrated diversity while promoting unity by showing how different groups of people came together in pursuit of a common goal. This praise of diversity enabled him to make a short policy statement. He stated, "I wanted a campaign that represented America, and I think we did that. Now that's what I want the administration to look like." Without focusing on the details of possible future cabinet picks, Biden let his audience know that diversity would be a priority in his new administration. This also served a transitionary function, enabling him to shift from the role of candidate to the role of President-Elect.

Biden then returned to the unity theme by addressing Trump supporters, and appealing "for the healing of partisan wounds" (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316):

> I understand your disappointment tonight. I've lost a couple of elections myself. But now, let's give each other a chance. It's time to put away the harsh rhetoric, to lower the temperature, to see each other again, to listen to each other again. To make progress, we must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are not enemies. We are Americans.

Through this statement, Biden recognized the polarization that existed throughout the campaign (and, indeed, long before the 2020 election campaign began) and made a plea to move forward as a unified nation. This plea introduced Biden's next religious reference: in a quote from Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, Biden stated, "The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season – a time to build, a time to reap, a time to sow, and a time to heal. This is the time to heal in America." While many President-Elects have utilized American civil religion by referencing God in their victory speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2328), it is rare that a President-Elect explicitly mentions the Bible. I believe this was included for two reasons: first, as a personal choice by Biden himself, who is a devout Catholic (Khalid, 2020), and second, as a means of connecting to religious Americans who may have voted for Trump. Frank Newport (2020), a senior scientist at Gallup, suggests that while the Catholic vote was split between Trump and Biden, and religious Americans who practiced non-Christian religions primarily supported Biden, white evangelicals overwhelmingly supported Trump. A direct reference to the Bible in a section of his victory speech that

addressed Americans who did not vote for him may have been an attempt by Biden to connect with the white evangelicals who voted for his opponent. In this way, the religious reference to Ecclesiastes served as a call to national unity, urging Americans to join together and move forward.

In the next section of the speech, Biden addressed future goals, asking "What is the people's will? What is our mandate?" This served to further transition his role from candidate to President-Elect and affirmed the campaign's objectives and values. Using a war metaphor, Biden stated that "Americans have called on us to marshal the forces of decency and the forces of fairness. To marshal the forces of science and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time." These "battles" included "the battle to control the virus, the battle to build prosperity, the battle to secure your family's health care, the battle to achieve racial justice and root out systematic racism in this country, the battle to save the climate, the battle to restore decency, defend democracy, and give everybody in this country a fair shot." He repeated the word "battle" with each description in order to emphasize the gravity of these struggles. In this list, Biden presented the values of his new administration, and at the end of it, declared that "Our work begins with getting COVID under control." This enabled him to state his first specific policy goal: "On Monday, I will name a group of leading scientists and experts as Transition Advisors to help take the Biden-Harris COVID plan and convert it into an action blueprint that starts January 20, 2021. That plan will be built on a bedrock of science. It will be constructed out of compassion, empathy, and concern." With this statement, he drew a distinction between his future administration's management of the pandemic and the previous administration's management,[2] further reinforcing the transition of his role from candidate to President-Elect.

Biden again returned to the unity theme of the speech, while clearly defining his new role. He stated, "I ran as a proud Democrat. I will now be an American president. I will work as hard for those who didn't vote for me as those who did." In another reference to American civil religion, he declared, "Let this grim era of demonization in America begin to end - here and now." This "demonization" referred to Democrats and Republicans refusing to work together to solve the country's problems, although it implied the lack of civility between people with different views throughout the country as well. Biden said that he would make the choice to cooperate, and that he "call[s] on Congress – Democrats and Republicans alike – to make that choice with [him]." While this statement emphasized his new role as President-Elect, it also encouraged the unification of a divided nation and, through religious references related to American civil religion, designated cooperation as "right" and division as "wrong."

The speech transitioned to a section in which Biden placed the demands of the current moment within the context of major moments in American history. He referred to these as "inflection points" that have shaped America, and specifically noted Lincoln "coming to save the Union" in 1860, FDR "promising a beleaguered country a New Deal" in 1932, JFK "pledging a New Frontier" in 1960, and Obama making history in 2008 as the first Black man elected President. Biden placed this moment in that succession and returned to his theme of the "battle for the soul of America." Using another religious reference, he stated, "Our nation is shaped by the constant battle between our better angels and our darkest impulses. It is time for our better angels to prevail." This statement referenced Lincoln's first inaugural address, which ended with "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely as they will be, by the better angels of our nature." Like Lincoln, Biden called upon his audience – the American people – to let their "better angels prevail" by serving as a "beacon for the globe" and by setting a positive example for the world.

This reference to America as a "beacon for the globe" implies the myth of manifest destiny, which Coles (2002) explains involves the United States being viewed as on a "mission by example" (p. 407). Fairbanks (1981) identified two "missions:" 1. a divine mission to serve as an example of democracy for the rest of the world, and 2. a mission to lead other nations to democratic ideals. In this

[2] Please see Parker & Stern's 2021 article in *Public Administration* for an analysis of the Trump Administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

part of his speech, Biden utilized the first mission of the manifest destiny myth by suggesting that the United States be a "beacon for the globe," serving as an example of democracy for the rest of the world.

This example, in Biden's view, is illustrated through the possibilities and opportunities that America should provide, including the "opportunity to go as far as [people's] dreams and God-given ability will take them." The use of this religious reference also appeared in various instances of Biden's campaign rhetoric, including his Democratic National Convention speech in August 2020 and on a section of his campaign website geared towards Catholics entitled "Highlights from Joe Biden's Vision for America." It is likely that the reference was both a personal choice and designed to connect with the Catholic segment of his audience, as the phrase "God-given" in reference to people's purposes and dignity as humans is commonly used in Catholic rhetoric and social teaching.

Further elaborating on the possibilities and opportunities in America, Biden claimed that "We're always looking ahead." He then used repetition of the phrase "ahead to an America" to build excitement as he moved to the end of the speech:

> Ahead to an America that's freer and more just. Ahead to an America that creates jobs with dignity and respect. Ahead to an America that cures disease – like cancer and Alzheimer's. Ahead to an America that never leaves anyone behind. Ahead to an America that never gives up, never gives in.

He ended this segment of the speech by saying, "This is a great nation, and we are a good people. This is the United States of America, and there has never been anything we haven't been able to do when we've done it together." This served primarily to rally his audience, but it also emphasized his campaign (and administration's) goals and the repeated unity theme of bringing Americans together.

While the speech could have ended with this rallying cry to work together and look forward to a brighter future, Biden continued to speak, switching to a more solemn tone as he returned to the present moment. He referenced a hymn that "means a lot to [him] and to [his] family, particularly [his] deceased son Beau." He told his audience that this hymn "captures the faith that sustains me and which I believe sustains America, and I hope it can provide some comfort and solace to the more than 230,000 families who have lost a loved one to this terrible virus this year." Biden then proceeded to quote "On Eagle's Wings," a hymn written by Michael Joncas in the 1970s that references Psalm 91. It is perhaps not surprising that the hymn quoted mentions the eagle, the United States' national emblem, providing a metaphor for not just the healing of individuals but the healing of a nation:

> And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,
> Bear you on the breath of dawn,
> Make you to shine like the sun,
> And hold you in the palm of His Hand.

Isetti (1996) states that "biblical stories and archetypes are often employed in public speeches…because they can become an effective literary means of expressing the depths of human experience" (p. 685). While Biden's speech did not use a biblical story or archetype, the religious quote of a hymn serves the same function: to "express the depths of human experience." In his use of this religious quote, Biden took on an unusual role for a President-Elect in a victory speech: he became "Consoler-in-Chief," a role that Presidents often use when delivering memorial service speeches after a national tragedy (Davies, 2017) or in rhetorical hybrid speeches such as presidential eulogies (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982). While other religious references in this speech are likely due to Biden's personal religious beliefs and an attempt to connect with particular segments of his audience, with this quote, Biden directly stated why he chose to include it: in hopes that it would "provide solace" to those grieving the loss of loved ones who died from COVID-19. With this statement, he tried to console his audience, many of whom had suffered losses during the pandemic.

He concluded his speech by tying together multiple themes that he referenced previously in the speech: unity, consolation of those grieving, a call for justice, and hope for the future. He stated,

> And now, together – on eagle's wings – we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do. With full hearts and steady hands, with faith in America and in each other, with a love of country and a thirst for justice, let us be the nation that we know we can be. A nation united. A nation strengthened. A nation healed. The United States of America.

Here, he referenced the hymn he had previously quoted, as well as American civil religion through the word "faith" and manifest destiny through the phrase "work that God and history have called upon us to do." This statement also appears to have a similar rhythm and meaning as the conclusion of Lincoln's second inaugural address, which reads,

> With malice towards none and charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and all nations.

It is perhaps not surprising that Biden's speech resembles both of Lincoln's inaugural addresses in certain ways. Some political commentators have suggested that the country has not been as divided as it is now since the Civil War (Brownstein, 2021), as evidenced by the insurrection at the Capitol two months after the delivery of Biden's speech. Biden also was elected during a particularly difficult time (during a global pandemic), as was Lincoln (just before and during the American Civil War). Lincoln's rhetoric, which emphasized national unity and moving forward in a time of division and crisis, likely influenced Biden and his writing team. Furthermore, Biden's usage of both the battle metaphor and religious rhetoric parallel Lincoln's rhetoric, which often utilized religious language (Slagell, 1991; Parillo, 2000). Because of the circumstances in which Biden delivered his speech, Lincoln's rhetoric likely provided inspiration to Biden and his team, which would account for certain similarities between Biden's victory speech and Lincoln's inaugural addresses.

Before closing, Biden added one more personal story at the end of the speech that extended his use of the word "faith:" he explained how his grandfather used to tell him, "Joey, keep the faith" while his grandmother would tell him, "no, spread the faith." He urged Americans to "spread the faith," finishing with "God love you all and may God bless the United States of America." While "God bless America" is a common conclusion of presidential speeches which serves to invoke divine blessing (Boase, 1989), Biden added his own personal ending, with which he concludes all of his speeches: "And may God protect our troops." This statement denotes his role as a military father, as his son Beau was a recipient of the Bronze Star. Biden's frequent use of religious language, and in particular his use of personal narrative that includes religious language, suggests that his personal religious beliefs influenced his rhetoric at the end of the speech. Biden finished with a repeated "thank you" as a playlist including Jackie Wilson's "Higher and Higher," Kygo and Whitney Houston's "Higher Love," and Tom Petty's "Won't Back Down" played, and his wife joined him on stage, followed by his family, Vice-President-Elect Harris, her husband, and their family. Confetti was sprayed, American flags waved, car horns beeped, and fireworks were launched as victory was celebrated in a socially-distanced way by those in attendance in their vehicles.

Conclusion

While Biden's President-Elect victory speech addressed the six themes identified by previous studies on victory and concession speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316), the circumstances in which Biden delivered the address required an adjustment to how these goals were accomplished. Because there was no concession speech to accompany Biden's victory speech, Biden was presented with the unusual

challenge of accomplishing all of the goals by himself that would typically be accomplished in two speeches. This was an especially difficult task regarding the themes of calling for national unity and paying tribute to American democracy due to his opponent's refusal to concede and unfounded accusations of widespread voter fraud, which questioned the American electoral system, and thus American democracy itself.

The speech repeatedly emphasized the themes of the "call for national unity" and the "transformed roles for candidates" (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316) perhaps more than most President-Elect victory speeches. The "call for national unity" was perhaps the most prominent theme in the speech, and Biden emphasized this in various ways: by calling for the end of the "demonization" of political opposition, by referencing important historical moments, by recognizing the diverse groups of Americans who made his election possible, by utilizing a battle metaphor, and by noting objectives that had the potential to create common ground. The "transformed roles for candidates" theme also took a leading role in Biden's speech. In most victory speeches, the "transformed roles for candidates" takes place with the help of a concession speech from the losing candidate. However, because there was no concession speech, Biden defended the legitimacy of the election at the beginning of the speech and then returned to this theme frequently throughout the speech in subtle ways, such as talking about his administration's plans, emphasizing unity under his leadership, and providing solace as Consoler-in-Chief to those who lost loved ones during the pandemic.

A particularly unique characteristic of Biden's victory speech is his decision at the end of the speech to take on the role of Consoler-in-Chief. While this is a role that presidents often play when faced with responding to national disasters and tragedies (Davies, 2017) or in situations like presidential eulogies where a rhetorical hybrid speech is required (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982), it is rare that a President-Elect would choose to take on such a role during a victory speech. Biden likely made this choice because of the unique situation in which he found himself – having been elected President in the midst of a devastating global pandemic in which hundreds of thousands of Americans had lost their lives – and because of his previous experience in mourning his first wife and daughter, and later his son Beau. Biden's choice to become Consoler-in-Chief early is further illustrated by both his later decision in January 2021 to hold a memorial service for those who died from COVID-19 the evening before his inauguration and by his decision to include numerous religious references in his victory speech. In previous work (Schrader, 2011), I have noted that presidents may use religious language to console a grieving audience, and Biden did this through his reference to the "On Eagle's Wings" hymn at the end of his victory speech.

As Ritter and Howell (2001) observe, "victory and concession speeches reflect the individual people who present them" (p. 2328). I contend that the high number of religious references in Biden's speech is primarily due to his own individual personality. Warner et al. (2011) suggest that "the personal religious lives of presidents can influence their worldview, and therefore their rhetoric, as well as how their rhetoric is perceived" (p. 155). Biden's victory speech reflected the personality of its speaker: a devout Catholic who attends mass regularly and often uses religious references in his personal everyday speech (Khalid, 2020). Despite the difficult circumstances in which the speech was delivered, Biden's victory speech provided some closure to the 2020 presidential election and addressed all of the themes of victory and concession speeches in a way that aligned with his personal beliefs. Through this speech, Biden promoted unity and celebrated the democratic electoral process, seeking to "restore the soul of America" through the promise of a hopeful future.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 15–24

"It's Like Pulling Teeth": Mothers' Perception of Supportive Communication Postpartum

Sarah S. LeBlanc
Lindsay M. Butcher
Rachel P. Mitchell

This present study centers on the reception of supportive communication by new mothers during the postpartum period. Specifically, this study is grounded in the Theory of Incongruent Verbal and Nonverbal Communication and examines how supportive communication is received. Semi-structured interviews revealed new mothers find discrepancies in supportive verbal and nonverbal messages. These mixed messages result in new mothers questioning their worth and family relationships.

Keywords: postpartum, motherhood, supportive communication

Introduction

This study aims to understand how new mothers perceive incongruencies in postpartum supportive communication messages within interpersonal relationships. In the United States, approximately 80% of new mothers experience "baby blues" and 11% of new mothers, in the United States, are diagnosed with postpartum depression (Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2019). Despite the research on social support postpartum (Arnold & Kalibatseva, 2021; Charvet et al., 2021), one area of concern that needs exploration is how new mothers perceive postpartum support messages.

Any biological mother, including the researchers of this study, will tell you that the postpartum period provides a multitude of challenges (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), 2018). New mothers must adapt to a variety of challenges experienced during the postpartum stage (ACOG, 2018). Some new mothers fear stigmatization, judgment, and even barriers to receiving support (Miller et al., 2019). In experiencing these multiple challenges, new mothers know they need help, but they often struggle to ask for it (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019).

Postpartum mothers may not seek out help because of society's lack of understanding of PPD symptoms and miscommunication among medical professionals (Thomas et al., 2014). Yet, these findings do not consider what role family plays in support and how postpartum mothers perceive family members' communication. In some cultures, the maternal grandmother moves into the family home to assist with the baby during the first six months of the child's life (Machette, 2018); however, how the new mother perceives messages from her mother or other family members is not understood. We want to know how new mothers perceive familial support messages based on the message and the accompanying nonverbal behavior of the sender.

The use of verbal and nonverbal communication can be considered "misleading and obsolete" (Jones & LeBaron, 2002; Streeck & Knapp, 1992). Jones and LeBaron (2002) suggest an integrated approach by examining communication's verbal and nonverbal components. What is being said verbally may differ from what is communicated nonverbally. To understand how the verbal and nonverbal components may impact the perception of supportive communication, we turn to the Theory of Incongruent Verbal and Nonverbal Communication (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2021) to serve as an analytical tool. We chose this theory because of its heuristic value as well as how the theory requires researchers to examine both the verbal and nonverbal components of messages. To set the foundation for this study, we

Sarah S. LeBlanc (PhD, University of Missouri, 2012) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Purdue University Fort Wayne. Address correspondence to the first author at leblancs@pfw.edu.
Lindsay M. Butcher (MA, Purdue University Fort Wayne, 2022) is an Assistant Director of Student Conduct & the CARE *Team* at Purdue University Fort Wayne.
Rachel P. Mitchell (MA, Purdue University Fort Wayne, 2022) is an Assistant Director, First-year Advising Center at Purdue University Fort Wayne.

provide explanations of supportive communication research and the discrepant verbal-nonverbal profile theory (DVNP).

Literature Review

Supportive Communication

Often, individuals seek support when they are in a distressed state (Burleson, 2008a, 2008b); yet seeking support does not necessarily mean receiving support. The need for support is often a result of stress and emotional hurt stemming from negative self-talk or negative messages from others (Burleson, 2003). When we seek support from others, we need others to assist us in coping with our perceived distress. Social support from family improves the psychological and physical health of individual family members (Miller-Day, 2011).

The conceptualization of supportive communication is important to this study. Supportive communication centers on comforting behaviors (Burleson, 1994) or messages to alleviate or lessen the emotional distress of others (Burleson & Samter, 1985). The research looks at emotional support for "specific lines of communication behavior enacted by one party with the intent of helping another cope effectively with emotional distress" (Burleson, 2003, p. 552). It is an intentional effort to assist a new mother in coping with the upheaval a new baby brings to her life (Burleson, 2003). But the perception of supportive communication lacks in the target's reception of this message. For example, a grandmother may say to the new mom "All my children were potty trained at 12 months" but the new mom may perceive the message as communicating "you're not potty training your child correctly" (LeBlanc & Butcher, 2022).

Support research underscores how researchers look at the goal-directed behavior of the helper but not how the target perceives the "support" message (Burleson, 1994, 2003). New mothers are the target and whom they seek support from is the helper. The reciprocal nature of support and communication is not addressed because research only looks at the originator of the support and not the recipient (Burleson, 2009). Johnson et al. (2020) first attempted to address this gap by examining how emojis were used as supportive communication within an IVF online community, but it was not determined how the recipient of the emoji message defined it as support. Charvet et al. (2021) tried to address the gap by examining the types of social support mothers-to-be received but not how they perceived the specific message itself nor how the support impacted a new mother.

Support varies widely among individuals and cultures (Burleson, 2003). For example, new mothers of Asian descent reported lower postpartum depression (PPD) scores during the postpartum period (Machette et al., 2020) supporting the claim that families influence other family members' health (Miller-Day, 2011). This is because much of the Asian culture practices the new mother's mother moving in for a minimum of the first six months of the baby's life to help the new mom and the family. When helpers are successful with their comforting interaction, this should result in two effects for the targets: the messages should help one to feel better right then and the messages should have a long-term impact (Burleson, 2003). These moments of comfort and emotional support should enhance the relationship between the helper and the target. Therefore, a new mom's good physical and psychological health will impact the rest of the family (Miller-Day, 2011). Not adequately addressed in the research, though, is how family members' messages of support are perceived and whether that perception impacts a new mother's health. Sufredinin et al. (2022) determined that insufficient support is associated with a greater risk of PPD or anxiety. Anderson Dearman (2011) attempted to address this gap by using autoethnography to explore how PPD impacts families but also how the critical role of social support from family impacts a new mother's postpartum health.

Discrepant Verbal-Nonverbal Profile (DVNP) Theory

Jones and LeBaron (2002) advocate for the merging of verbal and nonverbal components but make note of how research focuses either on verbal or nonverbal behaviors. While the data for this piece is from interviews, the analysis made note of how participants' stories mentioned both verbal and nonverbal communication from the helpers. These memories "co-construct and negotiate meanings" in the interaction between the new mother and the family member (Jones & LeBaron, 2002, p. 504). Grebelsky-Lichtman's (2021) DVNP theory asserts that discrepancies between the verbal and nonverbal components of a message impact the receivers' perceptions, feelings, and behaviors. The discrepancy is classified as an inconsistency or a contradiction between verbal and nonverbal communication (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2014a, 2014b, 2021) and can be found in about every interpersonal conversation (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2017). The message may be found to be inconsistent or contradictory because the communication performed differs from the communication said. For example, a child may say "I'm not tired", but their yawning, stretching of arms, and cuddling communicate that they are tired. The verbal message contradicts the nonverbal actions of the child. This discrepancy impacts the perception of not only the message but also the speaker (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2021). In studies examining parent-child communication, speakers were found to be less knowledgeable, prepared, or competent when discrepancies between the verbal and nonverbal components were at odds (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2014a, 2014b).

DNVP research focuses on how female politicians communicate, journalists' responses to discrepant communication, and parent-child communication. Given the heuristic nature of DVNP, we introduce the theory to the new mother–family member/friend dyad. We seek to understand how new mothers perceive their family members' supportive communication based on the members' verbal and nonverbal communication. Additionally, we wonder how these perceptions influence a new mother's sense of self, given that DVNP impacts the receiver. We introduce the following research questions:

RQ1: What discrepancy(ies) do new mothers observe between the sender's verbal and nonverbal supportive communication?

RQ2: How do these discrepancies impact how the new mothers see themselves?

Method

After receiving IRB approval, we recruited new mothers through our personal and social networks. We sought recommendations from our participants on other new mothers who might be willing to participate. To be eligible, participants had to fulfill our definition of a new mother; we defined new mothers as having an infant between the age of 6 weeks to 1 year. It did not matter how many children our participants had before the interview but rather it was more important that they had given birth within 1 year of the interview date. We choose this time frame for two reasons: 1) Six weeks postpartum is the discharge date from the labor and delivery medical provider, and 2) the first birthday is the cut-off for an infant being part of the infant mortality rate.

We interviewed 22 self-defined new mothers. Eighty percent of the participants reported being first-time mothers and ranged in age from 21 to 40 (M = 32.3, SD = 5.47). Education included degrees such as an associate's (n = 4), a bachelor's (n = 11), a master's (n = 6), and Ph.D. (n = 1). While we hoped for a diverse population, 90 percent of participants were white, and all participants were married at the time of their interview. Participants came from a variety of states including Missouri, Arizona, Indiana, Illinois, and North Carolina.

Data Collection

We employed a semi-structured interview to capture how new mothers perceived and received support. While our data collection began in late 2019 with phone and face-to-face interviews, COVID-19 precautions resulted in all interviews being moved to an online environment, such as through video software or by phone.

Participants were recruited through posts on the researchers' respective personal social media accounts, with Facebook being the primary outlet. Snowball sampling allowed additional qualified participants to be made aware of the opportunity to be part of the research. Eligible participants could share the post with others they deemed suitable for the study and those who were not eligible could still share the post with those whom they thought could be interested or fit the criteria.

A copy of the IRB-approved consent form was provided when each participant was initially contacted. The participant would then sign the form and return it to one of the researchers where they would then work together to schedule a time to conduct the interview. All new mothers participated in a semi-structured interview with one of the researchers, during which an interview guide was used. Interviews lasted anywhere between 45 and 90 minutes, with the average time being 65 minutes. Each interview was transcribed by an outside third party, which produced 299 pages of single-space data. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was an iterative process using the steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). As researchers, our interest resides in the participants' experiences. We found that we agreed with Braun and Clark (2006) when they wrote "thematic analysis can be a method which works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality" (p. 86).

Sarah LeBlanc addressed steps 1 and 2 of Braun and Clark's 6-step process. First, a thorough reading of 299 pages of the transcript was accomplished to become familiar with the data (Step 1). After reading through the transcripts, she went back and highlighted or cut and pasted the data that referred to supportive communication either directly or indirectly. By doing this task, the data became more manageable.

Before coding began, all of us sat down and discussed what was meant by supportive communication. Not only were we looking at "specific lines of communication behavior enacted by one party with the intent of helping another" (Burleson, 2003, p. 552), but we also made a list of "support" verbs or phrases, such as the words help, assist, or comfort. We decided not to focus on whether support was provided, but rather on the offers of support through either verbal or nonverbal means.

Lindsay and Rachel then coded (Step 2) the data, noting *invivo* codes, the repetition of codes, and memoing, where they wrote words, questions, or phrases that represented what was happening in the data as well as their individual reactions to the data. Lindsay and Rachel met via virtual means to discuss the codes and discuss any inconsistencies. After completing and sharing their codes, they met to sort the codes and considered how the codes worked together to develop themes (step 3). They used the codes and examples from the data to map out the themes using MS Word and derive a table. At the end of their code analysis, they presented their initial themes and subthemes. We met virtually to review and refine the themes (step 4) as well as to name and define the decided-upon themes (step 5). Dr. LeBlanc drafted the results and shared them (step 6). What follows is the result of the analysis collaboration.

Findings

When it comes to communicating support to new mothers postpartum, it may not be what is said but rather how it is said, the paralanguage surrounding the message (RQ1). We also sought to understand how these messages impact how a new mother sees herself (RQ2). To address this, we examined 22

interviews and noted perceived discrepancies between the receiver, the new mother, and the sender, a family member, regarding verbal and nonverbal supportive communication.

Are You Here to Support Me or Just Pretend?

Our first theme centers on the verbal communication of family members indicating that they will be there to help but are never available to assist when help is requested. While family members' verbal signs symbolize wanting to help, their lack of action in working to decrease the stress of the new mother communicated a contradicting message. Jolene told us that "The memorable ones (messages) are, 'We're always here for you and call if you ever need anything.' And I feel like those failed." Both families indicated that they would support the new parents, but Jolene and her husband found that was not the case during the postpartum period. "Neither of our parents came to help," Jolene related, which left Jolene feeling alone and isolated. She stressed that as the child approached their first birthday, it was still like "pulling teeth" to get the grandparents to visit.

Other participants noted that family members would visit but do the bare minimum in supporting the new mother. Nellie explained, "they [our families] don't necessarily swoop in and offer help without us asking." Other respondents would ask for help but the assistance would not last very long. Mary Sue related the story of returning home with her mom and her baby after a check-up at the pediatrician to make dinner:

> I was preparing dinner for everybody, and I said to her (grandmother) and my dad, "Will you watch her while I cook dinner?" And they were happily playing in the living room and then just all of a sudden, "Hey, let's go into the kitchen with Mom." Well, the minute my daughter saw me, of course, she wants to be on me, that I need to hold her or entertain her or whatever... And my thought was, "I asked you to watch her. I asked for help and you didn't help me." Those kinds of things happen more often than not with my parents and I do wish they would help out a little bit more just to ease some burden or to allow me to get some cleaning or shopping, cooking, and just daily chores done.

New mothers wish grandparents, or other postpartum visitors, would just help more without being asked or giving the mom a moment by herself, or as Mary Sue said: "give me a breather". Mary Sue's remark demonstrates an incompatibility of the word "help." For the mother, help meant keeping the child in the other room and not in the kitchen where mom was. For the grandparents, help meant just a few minutes of bonding time and then giving the child back to mom and dad. These incompatible definitions were communicated through the grandparents' actions, leaving Mary Sue feeling as if her parents did not support easing Mary Sue's burden.

The feelings of being overwhelmed and being a failure seem to associate with the help being there and then just disappearing. Julia said her mother stayed the first postpartum week and the mother-in-law stayed the second postpartum week. "Both of them were very helpful, they helped cook. They helped clean." But Julia noted that after they left, they would not help unless they were specifically asked and, just like Jolene, it was like "pulling teeth" to get the maternal grandparents to help. These contradicting messages leave the new mother feeling confused for two reasons. First, new mothers can't comprehend why certain grandparents, or other family members, don't help, even though they offered. And second, new mothers could not understand why the definition of help changed between being present within the new mother's home and not being present.

This theme*, Are you here to support me or just pretend?* highlights the contradiction between verbal and nonverbal supportive communication of supportive communication from family members. When individuals volunteer to help a mother so she can make dinner, take a nap, or even catch up on laundry, the mother desires their actions to match this sentiment. When incongruence occurs, it can be detrimental to the support new mothers seek.

You Say You Are Here to Support Me But Your Actions Speak Differently.

The second theme centers on discrepancies between coming over to support the new mother by being present and visitors coming over just to see the baby. Playing with the new baby assists new mothers in some ways, but also leaves the new mother questioning her worth and her relationship with her family. First, many participants felt unsupported when visitors arrived and just wanted to see the baby. Beatrice explained that after her son was born people would ask, "Does he sleep a lot? Is he a good baby? That was nice. People were concerned about him." Beatrice's words capture how others' verbal communication asked about the well-being of the baby, which is a good thing. Winifred's experience captures how the focus of the visitor changes once they arrive at the new mother's home. Visitors come to see the baby under the guise of offering support or "being there for the new mother." Our participants described being a conduit, feeling that they were treated as if they didn't matter or that visitors wanted to help the baby but not the mom. While not a family member, this dichotomy was captured in a story shared by Francis. She asked her OB/GYN doctor about the swelling in her feet, but the doctor responded, "That's not my problem. I deal with your baby, not your feet." As the new baby becomes the epicenter of concern, the focus shifts to the baby's physical needs instead of the physical needs and health of the new mother.

Second, participants described how the metamessages behind questions, comments, or advice sounded more critical than supportive. Peggy remembered her mother asking her, "How are you doing?" The question was glossed over as the grandmother continued talking. When the grandmother asked the question, she didn't want Peggy to respond. Meg felt like she had been "blown off. Just a little bit" when talking with family. Their comments and questions dealt more with the baby's welfare and less with the new mother's. These comments and actions could be perceived as no one caring about the new mother.

Next, there are those comments that are perceived as new mothers being incompetent. For example, Millie said,

> And she was ten weeks old and I knew something was wrong, and she ended up being very severely allergic to dairy and eggs. And I did not listen to anybody, and I was very insistent like, "I'm going to cut dairy out, that is the number one allergy for babies right now," and I did, and I was right. And my mother-in-law did not believe me, and she kind of scolded me "You're making something out of nothing". Then I turned around and got her allergy tested and lo and behold she did have allergies. And my mother-in-law kind of didn't like that, she really kind of went on her merry way.

Millie's narrative highlights how new mothers are questioned about their decisions regarding their new child. This form of questioning often causes the new mom to question her competence. Betty explained how her friend only comes around once a month, but each time she does she communicates as if she doesn't like how Betty is parenting.

> If I say a cuss word and she doesn't think that's okay because I shouldn't be raising my daughter with cusswords around. I would reply that she's in the other room playing on the floor and not listening to what I'm saying or in the aspect of she's six months old. I can't seem to get it in her head that it's not her daughter to raise.

Finally, Mary Jane explained how questioning what family and friends mean behind their messages often turns negative rather than becoming a learning moment for both the new mother and the family member:

> Supportive communication, I still think I struggle with that. My grandmother doesn't have a good way of telling me nicely. We get into arguments all the time about that. We can't seem to get along but she'll say it one way and then I don't understand it. So then I ask her about it and she

> turns around to look like I don't know what I mean and I'm like that doesn't help me.' I don't know how to explain it.

While family, friends, and other visitors may seem like they are communicating support when visiting the new mother and baby, new mothers are perceiving their messages differently, often questioning their competence and self-worth.

Discussion

This study aimed to uncover how new mothers perceive the supportive messages they receive from family, friends, and visitors postpartum. Our two research questions guided our analysis: 1) what discrepancy(ies) do new mothers observe between the sender's verbal and nonverbal supportive communication? and 2) How do these discrepancies impact how the new mothers see themselves? In analyzing the data, two themes emerged: *Are you here to support me or just pretend? And, you say you are here to support me but your actions speak differently.*

Interpretation

Our first theme centered on the contradiction between what was being said versus the actions being taken. This contradiction supports Grebelsky-Lichtman's (2014a, 2014b, 2021) claim that verbal and nonverbal communication contradicts each other in every form of conversation. The same can be said for family members communicating support during the postpartum period for new mothers. These contradictions not only impacted the receiver of the message but also how the new mother perceived the sender(s) of the message (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2021).

Our participants' experiences were similar to each other in that they perceived the verbal and nonverbal intentions behind the support messages as not being in sync. These findings support Grebelsky-Lichtman's (2021) claim that incongruencies between verbal and nonverbal led receivers of the message to perceive the message differently but also impacted how they perceived the sender of the messages. More importantly, these inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal meanings within the message impact how the receiver perceives themselves. Tannen (2006) reminds us that every message has a metamessage, a message within the message. "It's only when the metamessage the speaker intends – or acknowledges – doesn't match the one the hearer perceives that we notice and pay attention to them" (p. 13-14). Our participants described feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and alone when they paid attention and noticed the difference in what was being said and how it was being communicated nonverbally. Given that new mothers often do not seek support because of fear of judgment and stigma (Thomas et al., 2014), family and friends need to keep in mind what they are saying and how their behaviors at that moment are impacting their message.

The second theme highlighted how messages of support often leave new mothers feeling unsupported. These findings highlight how the receiver of the support message interprets the response instead of the directed behavior of the helper (Burleson, 1994, 2003). Our participants perceived the support as being directed more toward the baby and not the mother, often leaving the mother feeling like a conduit or just the carrier of the baby. Therefore, instead of using specific lines of communication intended to help the mother, these messages family and friends communicated leave the mother in despair resulting in the mother dealing with more emotional distress (Burleson, 2003).

Implications

This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring women's solicited responses about support during the postpartum period. These solicited responses not only confirm what we know about new mothers and the postpartum period, but also demonstrate the heuristic value of supportive communication and DVNP. First, this study focuses on the receiver of the supportive communication

instead of the sender The perception of supportive communication from the receiver of the message expands the heuristic nature of supportive nonverbal and verbal communication by interpreting how the receiver of the support perceived the message. This finding not only demonstrates the heuristic value of supportive communication but also opens the door for more supportive communication studies using DVNP. We saw that the senders' nonverbal messages contradict the verbal communication actions. Grebelsky-Lichtman (2014a/2014b) argued that speakers were deemed less credible when their nonverbals contradicted their verbal messages. Contradicting nonverbal and verbal behaviors impacts the receivers' perceptions, feelings, and behaviors (Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2021). Hence, family and friends may be seen as less supportive by having their nonverbal messages contradict their verbal messages.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study was limited in several ways. First, our participant pool lacked a representative sampling of new mothers in the United States, limiting our findings' generalizability, particularly across non-Caucasian mothers or mothers without interpersonal support. Future research should strive to recruit more diverse participant sets so that adequate representations of mothers from all backgrounds can be explored and shared.

Second, our study focused on the receiver of the support communication and not the dyad. Afifi et al. (2021) suggest bi-directional interviews. Therefore, future research should try to collect data from new mothers and their main source of support (i.e., their mother, mother-in-law, friend, or spouse). Examining the bi-directional nature of supportive communication would allow researchers to capture the intent behind the message and how the receiver interprets the message, allowing for discrepancies to be addressed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is not to discourage friends and families to reach out to the new mother or even drool over the new baby. But rather, this study demonstrates that what is being said by friends and families is different than what the new mother is hearing. Adjusting to life with a newborn is not easy and we should work to make sure our actions complement our words when entering the newborn's and new mother's world.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 25–39

Implicit and Explicit Bias Towards Black and White Transgender and Cisgender Men

R. E. Purtell https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1082-847X
Christine E. Kunkle https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4166-4594

Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) frames our examination of college students' perceptions of Black and White transgender and cisgender men with attention to participants' prior contact and own social identities. A total of 280 college students participated in 2x2 factorial design online experiment administered via Qualtrics in which they randomly viewed a photo and description of a Black transgender man, White transgender man, Black cisgender man, or White cisgender man, and then completed subsequent measures addressing their communicative attitudes toward them (i.e., social attraction, desired social distance), measures of implicit bias (toward transgender people; Axt et al., 2021; Carpenter et al., 2019), and transphobia and subtle racism. We found a significant positive association between prior intergroup contact and transphobia. Participating cisgender men, compared to participating cisgender women, had higher implicit bias toward individuals identifying as transgender. A main effect of gender, but not race, of the photographed individual and participants' ratings of their social attractiveness emerged. We also found that participants desired significantly more social distance from transgender men compared to cisgender men and had significantly greater social attraction toward cisgender men compared to transgender men. These findings, as well as their implications for SIT, are discussed as well as practical implications for dominant group members seeking to reduce negative attitudes towards individuals identifying as transgender.

Keywords: intersectionality, social identity, intergroup contact, Black masculinity, implicit bias, transphobia

Introduction

Individuals confirm themselves and others through interactions, putting communication at the center of identity (Social Identity Theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social category or group membership, from a social identity perspective, is pivotal as it involves both emotional attachment to the group(s) and social consensus on how a given group is perceived (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups must navigate a society that so often traduces who they are via multiple systems of oppression and unique systemic disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991). Gender and racial identity are two such social categories that are highly visible and typically salient early in life (Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Intersecting racial and gender identities carry considerable consequence when someone shifts out of their category-based norms to bravely assert that their sex assigned at birth is not their true identity.

More recently, Nash (2008), a Black feminist scholar, has criticized the lack of clear definitions, methodology, and empirical validity of intersectional scholarship. Most relevant to the current study, though, is her particular critique that Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualization of intersectionality "render[s] Black women's experiences the aggregate of race and gender" (Nash 2008, p. 7) and that Black women are positioned as "prototypical intersectional subjects" (p. 8). In some ways, this enhances rather than lessens their burden. Further, Nash (2008) professes that intersectional scholarship may neglect the ways that other intolerance schemas (e.g., transphobia) intersect with patriarchy and racial oppression. Nash (2008) points out that a goal of both intersectional and Black feminist scholarship is to move beyond binary thinking and categorizations—such as race and gender—which the current study works toward in examining the unique (mis)treatment of Black transgender men as they are subject to intersecting

R. E. Purtell (PhD, West Virginia University, 2023) is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. Address correspondence to the first author at rep0027@mix.wvu.edu.
Christine E. Kunkle (PhD, University of Nebraska at Lincoln, 2009) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University.

oppressive systems of patriarchy, racism, and transphobia. Thus, in this study, we assess public perceptions—both communicated (explicit bias) and implicit—of transgender men, and we also consider the role of these men's race. Using cisgender men and White men as comparisons, we address perceptions of and behaviors toward individuals with unique intersectional identities as Black transgender men, taking into account stereotypical and normalized hypermasculinity associated with the Black male identity (Davis, 2001; Rogers et al., 2015) and the hyper(in)visibility of individuals who identify as transgender (Petermon, 2020).

Literature Review

Intersectional Identities of Black Men

Theoretically driving this study, SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) recognizes the importance of social groupings to human interactions and wellbeing. Originally born out of interest to explain intergroup conflict, SIT distinguishes between one's personal identity, or their perception of themselves as a unique individual, and one's social identity, or their combined membership in particular social groups. Individuals are emotionally involved in their group memberships (or categories) which also carry some social consensus. SIT theorists also point out that intergroup conflict arises often without warrant or the presence of competing group interests and suggest that mere saliency of group difference is enough to trigger competition over—real or perceived—scarce resources. In the college classroom, scarce resources might be defined by students as good grades or attention from instructors.

Additionally, SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) claims that individuals strive for positive self-evaluations through their own group memberships and comparison to groups and thus seek to achieve status by evaluating their own groups as superior to others on some social dimension. These groups also come with connotations which threaten one's personal identity. Thus, individuals will strive for positive social identities based on favorable comparisons and when a social identity is unfavorable, individuals will enact certain responsive strategies, some of which—to be discussed—are related to gender performance. SIT is employed here as a lens to examine communication interactions among college students based on perceived intersectional social identities of others in college classroom settings.

Gender is one prominent, visibly determined social category. Gender has been defined as a multidimensional construct involving the mere knowledge of gender categories, felt compatibility with one's own gender assignment, felt pressures to conform to this assigned gender, and attitudes toward gender groups (Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001). Individuals develop stable conceptions of their gender identity by middle childhood and also have a sense of how typical a member they perceive themselves to be of their gender category (Egan & Perry, 2001). Felt gender compatibility is positively related to psychological adjustment through self-esteem and peer acceptance, whereas felt pressure for gender conformity and intergroup gender-based bias can be harmful (Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001).

As with gender identity, membership within one's racial group becomes salient around age 3–4. Once salient, individuals develop a racial lens through which they interpret and reflect on many of their experiences and social interactions throughout their lifetime (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Negative race-based experiences (e.g., stereotyping) are negatively related to academic achievement, which is mediated by assimilation, as children are further harmed when highly concerned about how they are viewed by their peers (Smalls et al., 2007). In striving to be equated with dominant group members in their social circles, self-identifying racial minorities show less interest and curiosity about academic materials and activities, less persistence in their education, and more problematic behavior at school (Smalls et al., 2007).

While gender and racial identities are salient group memberships that have major communication implications, the impact of an individual's combined gender and racial identities is even more complex. Their intersections produce exclusions from both feminist theory and antiracist policy, and unique marginalization far greater than the sum of the two systems (Crenshaw, 1991). In shifting to Black men's identities, we move toward addressing the interplay of these identities and biases. Seminal works by

Davis (2001) and Rogers and colleagues (2015) suggest that gender centrality and masculinity are prevalent in the expression of the Black cis male identity. Additionally, Black women rated their intersectional identities as more important than womanhood or Blackness alone (Settles, 2006), so it is possible that Black men experience similar saliency of their racial and gender identities. As early as middle school, Black children whose sex was assigned male at birth demonstrate understanding and value in traditionally masculine ideals and evaluate their peers based on physical appearances, clothing, and rapport with female classmates thus producing and reproducing their communicatively defined authentic Black masculine identity (Davis, 2001).

Being hypersexualized at school also made it more difficult for young Black boys to challenge norms associated with hypermasculinity (Davis, 2001). Emphasized gender centrality was also found amongst Black male students enrolled in an all-Black male charter school. They experienced related anxieties about being perceived as gay due to their attendance at an all-male school. These same young Black men indicated higher gender identification than racial identification, reflecting the powerful American gender binary which places men as superior to women (Rogers et al., 2015) which may also extend to trans identities.

Several researchers have attempted to understand why masculinity is so central to the Black male identity (Cunningham, 1999; Cunningham et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2004). One study found that exaggerated masculinity was associated with exposure to negative social experiences via negative stereotyping in communities and secondary educational settings (Cunningham, 1999), and these effects held true over time (Cunningham et al., 2013). Hypermasculine attitudes may emerge as result of risks and stress related to the structure, composition, and scarce resources of urban neighborhoods in addition to general socialized gender norms in the U.S. in a sample of Black adolescent cis-males (Spencer et al., 2004). Scholars like Cabrera and colleagues (2022) also argue that men of color are underrepresented—compared to their female counterparts—and marginalized within higher educational settings, in part, because of their gender and thus that intersectionality and other theories of identity can be used to understand the duality of both gendered racialization and racialized gender.

Taken together, these results suggest that the development and/or expression of hypermasculinity may be a consequence of, or coping mechanism for, adverse experiences related to Black men and boys' racial identity. Because of this, Black transgender men likely are further challenged to confirm their identified gender in social interactions, both within their racial ingroup and with those belonging to other social categories.

Psychosocial Traits Related to Perceptions of Individuals Who Identify as Transgender

In accordance with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we highlight the dynamic aspects of identity, and begin assessing perceptions of Black transgender men their unique identity intersection. There is no known assessment of this specific phenomenon. This is intriguing because prototypical stereotypes of Black people generally reflect only Black *men* and disregard other gender identities of those who identify as Black (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Interestingly, Black women experience more depressive symptoms and decreased self-esteem after experiencing interference with their Black identity, as compared to interferences with femininity (Settles, 2006). Taken together, it is possible that Black women, nonbinary, and/or transgender individuals have their experiences further muted by a dominant discourse about Blackness that centers on Black men, albeit harmful. Even when this harmful communication is condemned, addressing stereotypes about Black men alone may do little to acknowledge the discrimination experienced by Black women, nonbinary, and/or transgender individuals, further placing a premium on Black masculinity.

In addressing transgender identities generally, many researchers have investigated psychosocial traits (e.g., Miller et al., 2000; Roberts et al., 2017; Smiler & Gelman, 2008), demographic variables (e.g., Flores, 2015; Norton & Herek, 2013), and social experiences (e.g., Ching & Xu, 2018; Flores, 2015; King et al., 2009) that may contribute to perceptions of individuals who identify as transgender. Some researchers have also investigated how perceptions of transgender individuals influence support for public

policies which advocate for transgender rights (e.g., Axt et al., 2021; Flores, 2015; King et al., 2009). Taken together, the extant body of research provides an overview of many of the mechanisms contributing to general perceptions of individuals who identify as transgender.

Regarding psychosocial traits, while implicit transgender attitudes predicted gender essentialism (or the belief that biological sex is the primary determinant of gender) over and above explicit attitudes toward transgender individuals, both implicit and explicit preference for cisgender individuals is positively associated with transphobia (Axt et al., 2021). Gender essentialism is also associated with individuals' desired sociopolitical distance from transgender individuals (Roberts et al., 2017) and conformity to social norms related to masculinity (Smiler & Gelman, 2008). Gender essentialism led to stereotyping and transprejudice in an experimental investigation (Ching & Xu, 2018) and negative attitudes among heterosexual individuals toward transgender people were correlated with authoritarianism (endorsement of strict obedience to authority), as well as conservatism, binary conceptions of gender, and anti-egalitarian beliefs (Norton & Herek, 2013). Disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism were also found to be indicative of greater opposition to transgender bodies and rights and therefore their means of nonverbal identity expression in social contexts (Miller et al., 2000).

SIT posits that one's own social identity in part drives perceptions of outgroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Gender and sexuality were found to moderate the relationship between implicit and explicit preferences for cisgender individuals and transphobic attitudes (Axt et al., 2021). Several studies reveal cisgender men's generally less favorable attitudes toward transgender people than those held by cisgender women (Flores, 2015; Norton & Herek, 2013; Smiler & Gelman, 2008). Additional demographic variables that have been demonstrably linked to negative attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender include perceivers who are Republican, Born Again Christians, and Black (Flores, 2015).

Across social categories of perceivers, having prior social contact with someone from a perceived outgroup (Allport, 1954), has also been shown to influence attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender (Axt et al., 2021; Ching & Xu, 2018; Flores, 2015). This intergroup contact is also associated with decreased desire for social distance from them, transprejudice, and discrimination as well as increased awareness of discrimination (King et al., 2009). Contact with individuals who are transgender is related to increased support for civil rights and policies that protect their rights (Axt et al., 2021; Flores, 2015; King et al., 2009). This study employs both social identity-based and communication components in addressing public perceptions of transgender and cisgender Black and White men.

Rationale

Worthen (2013) argues that both the gender and sexuality of the target of prejudice are important, unique constructs contributing to the marginalization of certain social identities. We extend this to incorporate race. SIT asserts individuals' use of categories such as race and gender for social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and that both gender and race are central to an individual's status within social hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 2004). Thus, members of traditionally marginalized social categories are, at least implicitly, encouraged to engage in outgroup derogation of individuals perceived to be of a lesser status in a given social hierarchy. This derogation may be implicitly expressed by lowered perceptions of social attraction (McCroskey et al., 2006) and increased desired social distance (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). Research supports this claim in that minority individuals that are relatively high in status exhibit increased ingroup bias (Rudman et al., 2002) allowing groups to maintain their powerful positions in social hierarchy, according to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Additionally, minority individuals relatively low in status have reported greater degrees of ingroup devaluation compared to those perceived as higher in social status (Rudman et al., 2002) likely in attempt to move toward a higher position in the same social hierarchy. This both reflects Nash's (2008) point that individuals at the same social category intersections have varying degrees of oppression and privilege and that may contribute to the marginalization of Black transgender men as they may encounter additional barriers to identity expression in their own racial social group due to identification (or lack thereof) with masculine norms.

College is an environment where many students of color struggle to confirm their social identities and whose performance may suffer (Cabrera et al., 2022). This is due to adverse experiences in their environment that often vary as function of their previous experiences with racism and discrimination (Curtis-Boles & Bourg, 2010; Torres et al., 2010; Trent et al., 2020). As a result, men of color are generally underrepresented in college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2022). Alternatively, this environment may also provide college students the freedom to reflect upon and explore their gender and/or sexual identities for the first time (Stevens, 2004) albeit still in a society that traduces both those racialized as non-White and gender identities existing outside of the male/female binary. The current study will investigate U.S. college students' perceptions of individuals who are transgender with differing racial identities. Therefore, the current study posits the first three hypotheses.

> **H1:** Black men will be rated (a) higher on desired social distance and (b) lower on social attraction than White men.
> **H2:** Transgender men will be rated (a) higher on desired social distance and (b) lower on social attraction than cisgender men.
> **H3:** There is a significant interaction effect between race and gender on the ratings of desired social distance and social attraction, such that Black transgender men will be rated (a) higher on desired social distance and (b) lower on social attraction than their White transgender counterparts.

In addition to examining college students' differential attitudes toward individuals who identify as Black transgender men vs. White transgender men vs. Black cisgender men vs. White cisgender men, we also sought to replicate previous findings which link both implicit and explicit forms of bias against individuals who are transgender. Additionally, college students may or may not have knowingly encountered individuals with identities that exist outside of the gender binary and such intergroup contact may improve attitudes toward outgroups under optimal conditions (Harwood, 2010). Thus, we examined our participants own identities (e.g., Flores, 2015; Norton & Herek, 2013; Smiler & Gelman, 2008) and previous intergroup contact with individuals identifying as transgender, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (e.g., Axt et al., 2021; Ching & Xu, 2018; King et al., 2009). Based on aforementioned trends, we posit the study's final two hypotheses.

> **H4:** Compared to cisgender women, cisgender men will score (a) higher on transphobia and (b) have more negative implicit attitudes—measured via IATgen (Carpenter et al., 2019) toward individuals who identify as transgender.
> **H5:** Compared to those who have not, participants who have had prior contact with individuals who identify as transgender and other LGB individuals will (a) score lower on transphobia and (b) have more positive implicit attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender.

Method

Participants

Participants were 280 college students whose ages ranged from 18 to 35 (M = 20.01, SD = 1.86). Participants were relatively evenly distributed across class rank with n = 80 (28.6%) in their first year, followed by sophomores (n = 67, 23.9%), seniors (n = 66, 23.6%), and juniors (n = 65, 23.2%) with n = 1 (0.4%) participant selecting "Other." Participants primarily identified as cisgender women (n = 187, 66.8%), followed by cisgender men (n = 86, 30.7%), two (n = 2, 0.7%) nonbinary individuals, and one (n = 1, 0.4%) transgender woman. Two (n = 2, 0.7%) participants elected not to answer this question and two (n = 2, 0.7%) participants selected "Other." This sample was predominantly heterosexual (n = 243, 86.8%), with a few participants identifying as bisexual (n = 20, 7.1%), lesbian (n = 3, 1.1%), and gay (n = 1, 0.4%). Six (n = 6, 2.1%) participants selected "Other" and seven (n = 7, 2.5%) participants elected not

to disclose their sexual orientation. This sample was predominantly White (n = 231, 82.5%) with remaining participants identifying as Black/African American (n = 16, 5.7%), Middle Eastern (n = 10, 3.6%), Asian/Asian American (n = 8, 2.9%), Hispanic/Latinx (n = 5, 1.8%), and Indigenous/Native American (n = 1, 0.4%). Five (n = 5, 1.8%) participants selected "Other" and four (n = 4, 1.4%) participants elected not to disclose their racial identity.

Procedures

After IRB approval, participants completed an anonymous online survey administered via Qualtrics. Within the survey, they were randomly assigned into one of four conditions in a 2x2 factorial design with a gender photograph/description condition (cisgender man or transgender man) and a racial photograph/description condition (Black or White). In each condition, the participant (1) viewed a photo of an individual paired with a vignette describing the pictured individual's enacted social identity and (2) responded to a series of questions about their perceptions of the individual and the other assessed variables and demographics. The vignettes read as follows: "Dee, the photographed individual, is a student at your college or university and has the same major as you. Dee identifies as a [transgender] man. Imagine the following situation. You are enrolled in a course at your college or university in which there will be several group assignments over the course of the semester. Your instructor chooses the groups and Dee is placed in your group. You will be required to work with Dee on several assignments that will significantly influence your grade at the end of the semester. Try to imagine the situation." Participants were recruited via convenience sampling through communication courses at a large university in the Midwest United States and through the first author's personal network on Facebook. Students received marginal extra credit for their participation. As detailed below, the survey was designed to measure: Desired Social Distance (Bogardus, 1933; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015), Social Attraction (McCroskey et al., 2006), Transphobia (Nagoshi et al., 2008), Implicit Attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender (Axt et al., 2021; Carpenter et al., 2019), and Subtle Racism (Henry & Sears, 2002), as well as demographic variables and prior intergroup contact with transgender and other LGB individuals.

Instrumentation

Desired Social Distance

Participants' desired social distance from the pictured individuals was measured using a formerly adapted version of the Social Distance scale (Bogardus, 1933; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). The Social Distance scale is a 6-item measure that asks participants to rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*Extremely Unwilling*) to 7 (*Extremely Willing*) the degree to which they would be willing to perform each behavior toward an individual. Originally designed to target individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the items were adapted slightly to reflect willingness to perform these behaviors toward the individual in the viewed photo. Sample items include, "How willing would you be to move next door to Dee?" and "How willing would you be to make friends with Dee?" A reliability coefficient ω of .830 was obtained for this measure.

Social Attraction

Participants' social attraction toward pictured individuals was measured using the Social Attraction subscale of the Interpersonal Attraction scale (McCroskey et al., 2006). The Social Attraction scale is a 12-item measure that asks participants to respond on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) with a series of statements to assess how socially attractive they find an individual. Sample items include, "I think Dee could be a friend of mine," and "Dee just wouldn't fit into my circle of friends." A reliability coefficient ω of .921 was obtained for this measure.

Transphobia

Participants' transphobia was measured using the Transphobia Scale (Nagoshi et al., 2008). The Transphobia scale is a 9-item measure that asks participants to rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) with a series of statements to assess their explicit attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender. Sample items include, "I don't like it when someone is flirting with me, and I can't tell if they are a man or a woman," and "I believe that the male/female dichotomy is natural." A reliability coefficient ω of .930 was obtained for this measure.

Implicit Attitudes Toward Individuals Who Identify as Transgender

Participants' implicit attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender was assessed using an IATgen version of the image transgender Implicit Association Test (Axt et al., 2021; Carpenter et al., 2019). Participants' *d*-scores indicated their implicit bias towards individuals that identify as transgender such that higher scores with any value exceeding |0.65| indicating strong bias indicated a more negative bias towards individuals who identify as transgender ($M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.46$).

Subtle Racism

Participants' subtle racism was measured using the Symbolic Racism 2000 scale (Henry & Sears, 2002). This scale is a 16-item measure that asks participants to rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) their agreement with a series of statements addressing symbolic racism. Sample items include, "Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors," and "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve." A reliability coefficient ω of .789 was obtained for this measure.

Prior Intergroup Contact

In line with previous investigations of intergroup contact (e.g., Rittenour, Baker, et al., 2020; Rittenour, Kromka, et al., 2018) participants' intergroup contact was assessed using a composite variable calculated from four yes/no single-item measures to determine the degree, if at all, of their personal contact with individuals with one or more individuals identifying as transgender, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The items were, "Do you know someone who identifies as transgender?" "Do you know anyone who knows someone who identifies as transgender?" "Do you know someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?" and "Do you know anyone who knows someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual?"

Results

To assess the first three hypotheses, a series of independent samples *t*-tests and a two-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine differences in participants' desired social distance from and social attraction towards the photographed individual based on that individual's race and gender. A series of independent samples *t*-tests confirmed that mean scores significantly differed on measures of both participants' desired social distance between Black men ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.17$) and White men ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.39$) $t(238) = 0.235$, $p < .05$ and social attraction toward between Black men ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.03$) and White men ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.10$) $t(256) = -0.597$, $p < .05$. These scores did not significantly differ between Black and White men (i.e., when data from participants exposed to the two stimuli featuring Black men were combined and the two stimuli featuring White men were combined for analysis). Cohen's $d = .030$ for desired social distance and Cohen's $d = -.074$ for social attraction indicating minimal effect of the photographed individual's race on both desired social distance and social attraction. However, participants' scores on measures of both participants' desired social distance between transgender men ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.29$) and cisgender men ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.11$) $t(256) = -1.737$, $p < .05$ and social attraction towards transgender men ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.11$) and cisgender men ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.00$) $t(256) = -2.063$, $p < .05$ did significantly differ between transgender and cisgender

men (i.e., when data from participants exposed to the two stimuli featuring transgender men were combined and the two stimuli featuring cisgender men were combined for analysis). Cohen's d = -.216 for desired social distance and Cohen's d = -.257 for social attraction indicating small effect sizes of the photographed individual's gender on both desired social distance and social attraction.

The results of the ANOVA did not reveal a statistically significant interaction between factors on desired social distance, $F(1, 254) = 0.125$, $p > .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = 0.00$); nor on social attraction $F(1, 254) = 0.003$, $p > .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = 0.00$). There was, however, evidence of a main effect of the individual's gender identity on social attraction $F(1, 254) = 4.077$, $p < .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = 0.016$) indicating a large effect of the photographed individual's gender identity on participants' social attraction toward the individual such that individuals were rated higher on measures of social attraction when they did not identify as a transgender man. The main effects of gender on desired social distance $F(1, 254) = 3.127$, $p > .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = 0.012$); and race on both desired social distance $F(1, 254) = 1.29$, $p > .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = 0.001$) and social attraction $F(1, 254) = .209$, $p > .05$ ($\eta_p^2 = 0.001$) were not significant. Thus, H2 received mixed support while H1 and H3 were not supported. See Table 1 for group means based on condition for participants' dislike/less social attraction toward and desired distance from the pictured men.

Table 1

Group Means Based on Condition

	Black Transgender Man	Black Cisgender Man	White Transgender Man	White Cisgender Man
1. Desired Social Distance	4.80	5.03	4.69	5.03
2. Social Attraction	5.58	5.84	5.63	5.91

Note. These means were not statistically significantly different from each other.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that there would be a difference between cisgender men and cisgender women's scores on measures of (a) transphobia and (b) implicit attitudes towards individuals who identify as transgender. The result of an independent samples t-test was insignificant $t(269) = 2.189$, $p > .05$, Cohen's d = -.89 and did not support H4a as cisgender men and cisgender women's scores on a measure of transphobia did not significantly differ from each other. The results of an independent samples t-test supported H4b $t(259) = 12.953$, Cohen's d = -.13 (minimal effect size), indicating that cisgender men scored significantly higher on negative implicit bias towards individuals identifying as transgender ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.53$) compared to participating cisgender women ($M = 0.16$, $SD = 0.40$).

Hypothesis 5a predicted a negative relationship between participants' prior intergroup contact with individuals who identify as transgender and other LGB individuals and their scores on a measure of transphobia. Interestingly, a significant positive relationship was revealed $r = .337$, $p < .001$ and thus the hypothesis was not supported. Hypothesis 5b predicted a negative relationship between participants' prior contact with individuals who identify as transgender and other LGB individuals and their scores on a measure of implicit bias towards individuals who identify as transgender as measured via IATgen (Carpenter et al., 2019). Results of a Pearson correlation were nonsignificant and thus did not support this hypothesis $r = 0.03$, $p > .05$. Please see Table 2 for the correlation matrix of variables in this study.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

	M	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Transphobia	3.05	1.57	—		
2. Subtle Racism	1.89	0.76	.574**	—	
3. Prior Intergroup Contact	5.14	1.61	.337**	.202**	—

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p < .001$

Discussion

This study addressed college students' attitudes toward Black and White transgender men and cisgender men. Our empirical interest targets perceptions and social prescriptions contributing to the marginalization of Black transgender men. In experimenting with race and gender identity through photographs and vignettes, we found a main effect of gender of the photographed individual and participants' ratings of their social attractiveness. Additionally, participants desired significantly more social distance from transgender men compared to cisgender men and had significantly greater social attraction toward cisgender men compared to transgender men. We also found that participating cisgender men, compared to participating cisgender women, had higher implicit bias toward individuals identifying as transgender. Finally, we found significant positive associations between transphobia and prior intergroup contact. Implications of these findings as they relate to participant characteristics, prejudicial attitudes, and intergroup contact are first discussed, followed by potential strategies for post-positivist researchers to join others in meaningfully contributing to the body of literature exploring intersectional identities. Limitations and future directions will also be addressed.

Hegemonic Masculinity

In cultural contexts, like the U.S., where masculinity is traditionally narrowly defined (Smiler & Gelman, 2008), gender identities existing outside the male-female binary represent a greater threat to power for cisgender men who inhabit higher placements in social hierarchies. Cisgender men participating in our study had significantly more negative implicit attitudes towards individuals who identify as transgender; but there were no significant differences in explicit, transphobic attitudes based on participants' cisgender identities. In this way, our findings replicated previous moderation effects of gender, for cisgender individuals, on explicit transphobic attitudes and implicit bias (Axt et al., 2021). Heterosexual individuals' negative attitudes towards individuals who identify as transgender has been linked to other problematic ideologies of authoritarianism, binary conceptions of gender, and anti-egalitarian beliefs (Norton & Herek, 2013).

Intergroup Contact

In our investigation, a positive relationship emerged between self-reported transphobia and participants' prior intergroup contact experiences with individuals who identify as transgender and LGB individuals. This finding is in line with previous research investigating attitudes about people who identify as transgender. Specifically, Norton and Herek (2013) found that attitudes toward individuals identifying as transgender are less favorable than those toward other LGB individuals. Knowledge about

individuals who identify as transgender has also demonstrably been associated with more positive attitudes and behaviors towards individuals who identify as transgender which in turn may carry over to other LGB groups or individuals (Flores, 2015; King et al., 2009). We inquired about prior intergroup contact in the context of both direct and extended interpersonal relationships and given the richness of these types of "contact spaces" and their tendency to result in high levels of self-involvement (Harwood, 2010), perhaps these experiences included something negative. Future researchers might deeply investigate the subjective experiences participants have had in instances of intergroup contact.

Somewhat relatedly, no demonstrated richness (i.e., cues, channels, feedback) and self-involvement (Harwood, 2010) in our study may have contributed to the null findings regarding our first and third hypotheses. Nonetheless, we still attempt to answer Worthen's (2013) call to consider all identities which may make an individual a target of prejudice and unpack the unique constructs contributing to the marginalization of Black transgender men. Given that gender has been historically—and may likely still be—less rigid for women than men, especially for Black men (Davis, 2001), and given that Black women have reported in the past that they were more impacted by racist slights than gendered ones (Settles, 2006), it is possible that participants' responses on measures of social attraction and desired social distance may have differed given the persistence of these gendered and racial dynamics in the U.S. Future research might reflect a greater variety of gender identities. Juxtaposed to our post-positivist exploration of identities adjacent to our own White, cisgender female identities, we invite and encourage scholars of diverse positionalities and methodologies to further assess the (mis)treatment of individuals with such unique, intersectional identities as Black transgender men and explore the intersection of race and gender more deeply than as mere category membership.

Outgroup Members' Attitudes toward Intersecting Identities

We join scholars interested in giving voice to the experiences of groups afflicted by multiple systems of oppression, assuming structural, political, and representational dimensions each with distinct, but related, consequences to one's social identity, just as Crenshaw (1991) had revealed in her piece attending to this across empirical and legal realms. SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) allows us to unpack how dominant group members perpetuate, or least make salient, inequities in their intrapersonal and relational communication.

Quick assignment to distinct categories based on social cues influences subsequent communication, which SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) positions as a pivotal process in the enactment of identity. According to SIT, individuals' unique sense of identity is threatened when confronted with negative connotations of the groups to which they are perceived to belong (e.g., gender, race), usually held by dominant group members (e.g., gender essentialism). When confronted with such negative stereotypes, this may lead individuals belonging to marginalized groups to internalize their perceived inferiority and in turn enact certain social mobility strategies, such as individual mobility, which weaken their ties to the group and thus decrease ingroup solidarity. On the other hand, confronting these negative stereotypes may also lead to increased solidarity and encourage social mobility strategies of social creativity and social competition which function to positively reframe group membership and inspire collective action to improve the conditions of existing in that group, respectively.

Importantly, race is more than mere category membership and the combination of traditionally marginalized race and gender identities do not, in and of themselves, equate to intersectionality; our null findings make poignant their socially constructed nature. As discussed above, when gender centrality and masculinity are expressed as part of Black, cis-male identity, it may be a consequence of the marginalization they face due to their race (Davis, 2001; Rogers et al., 2015). Relatedly, scholars like DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz (2014) advocate for use of race-focused (i.e., placing race at the center of analysis) and race-reimaged (i.e., race-influenced perspectives on phenomena) constructs over using race for descriptive, comparative, and explanatory purposes as does the current study. Because group membership must be salient in order to trigger intrapersonal intergroup processes, according to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the meanings around race and gender are cocreated through exchange and

interaction which were not present in this study. Likewise, given that our sample was predominantly educated White women at a predominantly White institution, and that visibility and saliency of gender emerge early in life (Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001), it is possible that gender was more salient than race to our participating college students. Interestingly, both cisgender men and cisgender women hold gender discriminatory behaviors less accountable if the behavior can be attributed to implicit (versus explicit) bias (Daumeyer et al., 2021). Additionally, women hold men—but not women—more accountable after displaying gender discrimination (Daumeyer et al., 2021).

Because our participants were majority dominant group members racially, but not necessarily gendered, SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) might suggest that gender identity was more salient to our participants—due to where their own gender places them in a social hierarchy—and thus was used as the basis for social comparison over race, especially given that "transgender" was the only explicitly named (as opposed to merely appearing in the photograph) social category in the vignettes, possibly contributing to the main effect of gender on social attraction. Furthermore, colorblindness is named as an essential tool in upholding oppression of and violence perpetrated on intersectional gender-nonconforming non-White communities in both dominant media and hegemonic institutions like higher education (Fischer, 2019). Group means for desired social distance and social attraction based on condition did emerge in the expected pattern (i.e., depicted White cisgender men were rated most favorably on both, followed by Black cisgender men, followed by White transgender men, and with Black transgender men being rated the lowest on both), despite the lack of statistical significance. Perhaps these results would reach significance in contexts among a broader age and racial makeup of participants, as well as contexts in which communicatively defined authentic Black masculine identities are more salient (Davis, 2001) or actively endorsed (Rudman et al., 2002). Among Black men, a black sheep effect may occur in which Black transgender men's defiance of traditionally valued masculine norms is viewed as egregious to those holding Black masculinity in high regard (Rogers et al., 2015). This might also lead to increased ingroup derogation, or harsh criticism of members of one's own marginalized group, among Black transgender men as they attempt to reconcile the negative connotations associated with their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

For the broader population, prototypical portrayals of Black people in general reflect only Black cisgender men (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013), so it is also possible that some our participants may have implicitly judged even the transgender Black man in line with the socially constructed stereotypical hypermasculine Black cisgender man, thus potentially contributing to null findings for an interaction effect of race and gender on desired social distance and social attraction. These trends would also be better assessed had we included women in the vignettes, a limitation we accepted to achieve sufficient power (though future scholars might employ Solomon four and other designs for clarification of trends). We acknowledge, though, that Black women's experiences of violent communication transcend the traditionally understood boundaries of race or gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991), and warrant additional interventions.

Practical Implications

Dominant group members may reduce their own prejudice towards individuals who identify as transgender by addressing their explicit prejudicial attitudes (i.e., transphobia) and implicit bias. However, in accordance with Daumeyer and colleagues' (2021) findings, individuals must also be motivated to reduce their implicit biases, not just simply be aware that they exist, for prejudice reduction to effectively occur. College instructors may foster positive intergroup contact opportunities by facilitating cooperative learning activities in classes with diverse students by creating situations conducive to Allport's (1954) four conditions helpful for intergroup contact (i.e., equal status, cooperative tasks, common goal, authority support for egalitarian norms). It is possible that college students may be able to empower each other by embracing a common in-group identity (Dovidio et al., 2004) characterized by the autonomy and self-exploration afforded by a college environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

Apart from aforementioned concerns about the experimental stimuli being vignettes and the demographic characteristics of the sample (and, to a lesser degree, the vignettes), the current study has other limitations worth noting. First of all, it should be noted that the vignettes were not pilot tested prior to this study, nor did we statistically control for potentially confounding variables between conditions so our findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Additionally, when possible, post-positivist researchers should avoid using social category membership, alone, as a predictor on some outcome variable and instead incorporate both race-focused and race-reimaged constructs into their variable analytic research designs (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014). Also, outcome variables of desired social distance and social attraction were employed in this study as potential forms of outgroup derogation, perhaps future studies can consider other, more overt forms of outgroup derogation (e.g., efforts to exclude someone from a group project assigned in a college class). Examining richer (Harwood, 2010) interactions in actual college classrooms or lab spaces will also allow for a complex examination of how competition for—real or perceived—scarce resources in higher education spaces may influence intergroup interactions among students. Somewhat relatedly, we recommend that future researchers employ a measure that assesses degree of intergroup contact (e.g., quantitative dimension of intergroup contact; Islam & Hewstone, 1993) rather than assessing mere knowledge of targeted outgroup members as in the current study. However, the current study yields implications for intergroup contact experiences and prejudicial attitudes among dominant group members that we hope will be heuristic for future scholars who wish to explore (mis)treatment of outgroups from a social identity perspective.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 40–56

"It's Just a Guy Thing": How Young Men Discursively Navigate Hegemonic Masculinity in Hookup Culture

Adam Whiteside

This study draws upon 15 interviews with young men to explore how they discursively navigate hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. The findings revealed three discursive strategies: (a) reinforcing hegemonic masculinity through teasing peers, sexual boasting, and perpetuating sexual preference discourse; (b) reframing hegemonic masculinity by describing hookups as immature and highlighting health risks of hookups; and (c) resisting hegemonic masculinity by expressing desire for emotional connection and encouraging non-aggressive sexual communication. Taken together, these strategies suggest that while young men's discursive constructions of masculinity are increasingly inclusive and productive, young men still reinforce hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, hookup, masculinity, hookup culture

Introduction

Hooking up is often assumed to be a significant aspect of youth culture. This coincides with the proliferation of "hookup apps" like Tinder or Grindr among young people. To clarify, hookups are uncommitted sexual encounters between two strangers or acquaintances and can include many sex acts (e.g., kissing, sexual touching, oral sex, sexual intercourse, etc.; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Holman & Sillars, 2012; Reiber & Garcia, 2010). Relatedly, hookup culture describes a broader context that promotes sexual contact that is free from the binds of emotional intimacy or commitment (Bogle, 2008; Wade, 2017).

Despite some literature suggesting hookups are less common than previously thought (Menegatos et al., 2010; Wade, 2017), there has been much scholarly concern over the potential consequences of hookups. For instance, although many young people report positive feelings after hookups (Lewis et al., 2012; Owen & Fincham, 2011), hookups have also been associated with negative consequences for women and can perpetuate unequal power dynamics that privilege (heterosexual) men (Armstrong et al., 2014; Hess et al., 2015). Compared to men, women exhibit more depressive symptoms and regret after hookups (Campbell, 2008; Fisher et al., 2012), are judged more negatively after hookups (e.g., labeled a slut; Armstrong et al., 2014; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Hess et al., 2015), are much more likely to experience sexual violence during hookups (Ford, 2017), and receive far less sexual pleasure than men during hookups (Armstrong et al., 2012; England et al., 2012).

This severe inequality stems from a hookup culture defined by hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities are those often culturally exalted formulations of masculinity that perpetuate unequal gendered power dynamics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018). Within hookup culture, discourses of hegemonic masculinity label women as "sluts" and men as "players," thus rewarding young men's sexual promiscuity while punishing women for the same behavior (Armstrong et al., 2014; Currier, 2013; Hess et al., 2015; Sweeney, 2014).

However, attitudes regarding hooking up have changed recently as more college programming targets toxic masculinity, sexual violence prevention, sex positivity, and gender norms (Orchowski et al., 2020). For example, programs like the Men's Workshop (Gidycz et al., 2011) and RealConsent (Salazar et al., 2014) try to reduce sexual violence by encouraging men to intervene when they witness sexual violence, practice proper consent, and build empathy for survivors of sexual violence. These programs also urge men to be critical of hegemonic masculine norms (e.g., sexual aggression) and seek to dispel the misconception that the majority of men strictly adhere to these norms (Gidycz et al., 2011; Orchowski et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2014). In fact, universities are also required by law to have comprehensive sexual assault awareness and prevention programs (The Department of Justice, 2018). Furthermore, some

Adam Whiteside (MA, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 2017) is currently a Ph.D. candidate and instructor at Kent State University. Address correspondence to the author at awhites3@kent.edu.

scholars argue as feminist movements make greater strides in gender equality, men are less likely to value hegemonic masculine norms (Anderson, 2010; Thompson & Bennett, 2015). Specifically, current generational cohorts of men may resist discourses of hegemonic masculinity and push back on gender inequalities in the context of hooking up (Kalish, 2013; Lamont et al., 2018; Olmstead et al., 2013). To this end, this study answers calls to explore how diverse constructions of masculinity may impact the sexual decision making of young men within hookup culture (Kalish, 2013; Sweeney, 2014).

Literature Review

Masculinity as a Discursive Construction

This study approaches gender as a socio-cultural construct, an "organization of biology and social life into particular ways of doing, thinking, and experiencing the world" (Rakow, 1986, p. 23). That is, gender is something individuals do or perform based on certain socio-cultural expectations (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). For example, young men are often expected to be highly interested in sex with women, have sexual prowess (i.e., be sexually skilled), be highly sexually active, and more sexually aggressive (e.g., initiate sex, be more sexually dominant; Kimmel, 2008; Platt & Krause, 2022; Wiederman, 2005). One primary way young men perform their masculinity is through casual sex with women (i.e., hooking up; Currier, 2013; Kalish, 2013; Kimmel, 2008).

Masculinity is a discursive construction (i.e., constituted in and through discourse; Connaughton, 2017) or how men position themselves through discursive practices (Mumby, 1998). Discourse can range from more interpersonal interactions (e.g., individual gender performances) to larger, more abstract cultural narratives (e.g., socio-cultural gendered expectations; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003). Young men use various discursive practices to police and maintain hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. For example, young men were often found teasing male peers for lacking sexual prowess, while simultaneously boasting about their own sexual exploits (Currier, 2013; Kalish, 2013; Platt & Krause, 2022; Sweeney, 2014).

Masculinity Construction in Hookup Culture

Peers greatly inform masculinity construction and performance within hookup culture as young men have frequently reported significant peer pressure to engage in heterosexual hookups (Kalish, 2013; Sweeney, 2014). After all, peer approval has been found to have a significant influence on sexual behavior and attitudes (Holman & Sillars, 2012; Menegatos et al., 2010). Some studies even found that young men categorized women with peers, deciding which were suitable for dating and which were only good for hookups (e.g., labeling women as sluts; Kalish, 2013; Sweeney, 2014). These practices helped establish masculine status with male peers, but simultaneously situated women as subordinate and gay or less sexually active heterosexual men as unmasculine. Furthermore, Lamont et al. (2018) found gay men also reinforced hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture through sexual preference discourse. That is, many gay men expressed exclusive sexual desire for men with hegemonic masculine body types (e.g., muscular, tall, hairy) and framed men with less masculine or more feminine bodies as undesirable (Lamont et al., 2018; Robinson, 2015). It is through discursive practices like these that prevailing cultural discourses of gender become intelligible and are reinforced (Butler, 1990).

Shifting Constructions of Masculinity

These constructions of masculinity (e.g., high sexual interest, promiscuity, and aggression) are hegemonic because they perpetuate inequal power dynamics (Messerschmidt, 2018). Despite this, young men have also been found to resist or reframe hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. In fact, some studies found that many young men avoid hooking up as they finish college, instead communicating desires for monogamous romantic relationships (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bogle, 2008;

Dalessandro, 2019). Furthermore, Dalessandro (2019) and Olmstead et al. (2013) found several young men preferred committed romantic relationships and emotional connection during sex over casual, emotionless sexual encounters. Moreover, some recent studies suggested young men are gradually placing less importance on sex as an indicator of masculinity (Iacoviello et al., 2022; Thompson & Bennett, 2015). This is underscored by recent data from the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB) that found a steep decline in sexual activity among young men (i.e., 18-24; Herbenick et al., 2022). Platt and Krause (2022) even found that some men were shamed by male peers for frequent hookups. These preferences conflicted with the hegemonic masculine discourse that young men are expected to be emotionally disconnected, prefer casual sex, and are rewarded for their sexual promiscuity (Kimmel, 2008; Wiederman, 2005). Lamont et al. (2018) also discovered that gay men often resisted discourses within hookup culture that promoted sexual aggression or slut shaming of sexual partners. Taken together, this literature complicates our understanding of how young men discursively construct masculinity and make sense of hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture.

Summary

Male perspectives on hegemonic masculinity are limited within the hookup literature. Although recent research indicates masculinity construction in hookup culture is more nuanced than previously thought (Dalessandro, 2019; Lamont et al., 2018; Olmstead et al., 2013; Platt & Krause, 2022), it is still unclear exactly how young men navigate hegemonic masculine norms within hookup culture (Kalish, 2013; Sweeney, 2014). Additionally, there is a lack of research that explores how queer men experience hookup culture or how they respond to traditional gender norms within hookup culture (Kalish, 2013; Lamont et al., 2018; Pham, 2017; Sweeney, 2014). To this end, this study is guided by the following research question:

RQ1: How do young men discursively navigate hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture?

Method

Participants

Of the 15 young men who participated in this study, 10 identified as heterosexual, four were gay, and one was bisexual. The average age of participants was 23 (range: 21 to 26). Thirteen participants identified as White, one identified as Egyptian, and another identified as mixed (i.e., White and African American). Six participants were undergraduates, two were graduate students, six were recent college graduates, and one had not attended college. The majority of participants identified as coming from middle-class families and only one identified his family as lower class.

Participants were recruited via snowball and convenience sampling. These sampling techniques were utilized to optimize speed and lower cost of data collection (Tracy, 2019). Only individuals between the ages of 18 and 26 who identified as male were recruited. This included both heterosexual and queer men. Participants were primarily recruited with flyers and approached during communication courses (e.g., gender communication, quantitative methods, political communication, mass communication, communication theory). Communication courses were chosen because they were the most accessible and participation would be incentivized by extra credit. After each interview, participants were asked to share contact information of others who would be interested in participating.

Procedures

The method employed in this study was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This procedure was given approval by my university's institutional review board and all participants signed an informed consent form. Interviews ranged from 46 to 105 minutes (M = 73 minutes) and probed (a) constructions

of masculinity and femininity (i.e., how they understand what it means to be a man and a woman); (b) constructions of hookups (i.e., how they define hookups or what constitutes a hookup); (c) constructions of masculinity within hookup culture (i.e., how they understand and enact masculinity within hookup culture). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed (422 double-spaced pages), double-checked to ensure accuracy, and participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Analysis

With my research question in mind and guided by hegemonic masculinity as a conceptual framework, the analytic process for this study was informed by constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). Interview transcripts were examined line-by-line to generate open codes which included, for example, "teasing peers" and "sexual boasting." Second-level coding noted that these were discursive strategies utilized to construct masculinity in hookup culture in a way that reinforced hegemonic masculinity. Given that data collection and analysis occur simultaneous within qualitative research, I engaged in memoing (i.e., systematic note-taking) after each interview and during the coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Tracy, 2019). This iterative process helped to illuminate codes and interrelationships within the data. After analysis and data collection concluded, I engaged in member reflections which involved gathering feedback from participants on findings to enhance the ethical quality and credibility of my results (Tracy, 2019). This process did not change, but merely confirmed the findings that this analysis revealed.

Results

The research question that guided this study asked how young men discursively navigate hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture. This section describes the multiple, sometimes overlapping strategies in which young men discursively navigated hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture: (a) reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (b) reframing hegemonic masculinity (c) resisting hegemonic masculinity. Subsumed under each of these strategies are substrategies that articulate the precise method in which each larger strategy functions.

Reinforcing Hegemonic Masculinity

The first discursive strategy was reinforcing hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. Several men in this study repeated hegemonic masculine discourses. As Dave puts, "Just because it's, you know, you're a dude. You're getting laid. That's what you're supposed to do." This quote reinforced the discourse that men are expected to be sexually active. Other men like John also perpetuated the discourse that young men are expected to be highly sexually active, sexually skilled, and highly interested in sex with women (Kimmel, 2008; Wiederman, 2005; Sweeney, 2014). John added:

> But I feel like the pressures of with others, with friends, and your surrounding of who you are with is a lot of friends and everything. And even girlfriends you'll have. They put that pressure of being sexually active…I feel that girls expect guys to be more experienced in bed than how they are. They expect that because if they are teaching them then they feel like they're not a true—in their eyes I don't feel that they think that we're truly manly then and know what we are doing. And that's why I feel like it is more of a pressure thing of like how sexual activity is being manly.

This discursive strategy addresses how young men reinforced hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. Within the purview of this strategy are three substrategies that involved young men teasing peers, sexual boasting, and perpetuating sexual preference discourse.

Teasing Peers

The first substrategy involves young men teasing their peers to reinforce hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. This discursive strategy was often employed when participants' peers failed to enact hegemonic masculinity (e.g., failing to hookup with women). John explained, "I still have a friend that's 22 and a virgin. It sucks because I would understand what he means because we all rag on him about it because, you know, it's just a guy thing."

Here John admitted to teasing his friend for being a virgin, dismissing it as an innocent behavior that guys just do. The assumption is that this is a common discursive practice among men. Jack also described a situation in which he virgin shamed, constructing it in a similarly playful and dismissive way as John. He declared, "I was hounding my little brother. Because he didn't lose his virginity until he was 18. Which was crazy! I was like, 'Time's a ticking there, buddy' [laughs]." Owen offered another example of teasing when he used to live with a group of guys who would laugh at men who failed at hooking up with women. He said:

> …that person would, they would come downstairs and tell us it [sex] didn't happen, the girl didn't-didn't want to, or she fell asleep or it just didn't work out. So we would just laugh, you know. Just laugh.

He later assured me it was in good fun and not mean-spirited. Regardless of perceived intent, their communication served to police masculinity by reminding their peers of the heteronormative sexual expectations within hookup culture. After all, vaginal intercourse is constitutive of masculinity for young men (Richardson, 2010), so a failure of achieving this signifies a failure of achieving hegemonic masculinity. David reiterated this when he stated:

> The heteronormative way, you know. You get girls and that's key. If you're not doing that you're screwing up. You can have, in the classic masculine sense, you can have the job, the money, success, whatever. But if you suck at talking to girls, guys are gonna make fun of you for it for sure.

Sexual Boasting

The second discursive substrategy utilized to reinforce hegemonic masculinity was boasting about sexual exploits and prowess. For example, John expressed, "I am definitely, out of all my friends, definitely the most sexually active." John frequently mentioned that he was highly sexually active and experienced. He often asserted his high social status at one point even saying his friends considered him "the king of the group." Dave, Jack, and Don told similar stories highlighting their sexual prowess and expertise. Jack recited to me lyrics from a rap song he wrote outlining one such story. He sang:

> I crashed out, woke up in her basement. I don't fuck with her, because she basic. Only hit her up when I'm wasted. Then she got me all on her playlist. All she do is take dick. Say shit. Say I'm never going to make it. I crashed out, woke up in her basement.

Jack reaffirmed his masculinity as this story establishes that he is sexually active and that he sexually objectifies women. Similarly, Dave excitedly shared an unprompted story about one sexual encounter he had saying, "She worked at a car dealership. And she cleaned it out after it closed. Yeah, we went up there and fucked on one of the dude's desks in the middle of her work shift." Sexual boasting seemed to be commonplace among male peers as Joseph elaborated:

> But when it's just guys, it's usually the topic of conversation. Even if it's not very wide open and saying, "Oh, I fucked this girl and she's a 10," it's more... Obviously, it's not as obvious as that, but it's almost a way for a guy to assert their status as a man and as an alpha male within the

> group to say, "Yeah, I was talking to this super hot girl the other day and she came over to my place."

Sexual Preference Discourse

The third substrategy articulates how young men in this study, specifically gay men, reinforced the ideal hegemonic masculine body through sexual preference discourse. With some men, there was a clear preference of more hegemonically masculine hookup partners or those with emphasized gender presentations. Alec noted:

> …when it comes to just sex, to the nitty gritty of it, I think that it is inherently just so masculine and manly to me, and that is kind of within my sexuality. I'm looking for somebody that is as much of a man as I can get because if a person has more effeminate or feminine qualities, I think it reads as just more girly as more feminine to me, and that's not within my sexuality, if that makes sense.

Alec stated at one point that he was open to dating more feminine presenting men. However, he also clarified that he is more sexually attracted to men with more normative masculine physical characteristics. He then described these more "masculine" physical characteristics:

> If I'm looking for someone more masculine, then I do look for those features that I mentioned before. Somebody who has got facial hair, someone who's a maybe got a stronger body type or physique, a deep voice. Kind of all those qualities that we that contribute more to being masculine.

Philip expressed similar sexual interest in men with more "masculine" physical characteristics. He added, "… in terms of sexual attraction, I definitely like the masculine characteristics. I like men with scruff. I like men who are taller than me. I like muscles." Phillip later elaborated what exactly he is attracted to and how his attraction has changed over time. He clarified:

> …speaking of masculinity, something I've learned more as I've gotten older and what I'm attracted to, I've dated trans women or trans men who transitioned from being a woman and they're trans men. I found that even if someone biologically is a woman, but they have more masculine traits and present as masculine and male, I've been finding myself, I'm much more open and attracted to that as I've gotten older. That's just something I thought about. Another thing I've learned about myself and what I'm attracted to, I'm learning that I'm more attracted to masculinity than a man per se.

Phillip divorced biological sex from masculinity in describing his sexual attraction, but still reinforced the hegemonic masculine body. This sexual desire for a "masculine" body, in turn suggests that feminine or less fit bodies are far less desirable as Dillon articulated:

> Being feminine, in of course gay culture, is a lot of times negative. If you are more femme, that's less. It's lesser, I guess. For a lot of people, being femme is negative. A lot of times it can be derogatory. If you're using masc on the other hand, it can be something good, it can be positive. It depends on who you are and what your preference is, I guess. There is a lot of culture that's gay culture, I guess in my aspect, that is definitely. Less desirable, I guess, if that makes sense.

Dillon pointed out that more "femme" gay men are typically lower within the hierarchy of sexual desirability whereas "masc" gay men are highly valued. He alluded to "mascing" which is the practice in which gay men, "reinforce their own masculinity, while also maintaining masculine norms by seeking out masculine partners" (Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 260).

Reframing Hegemonic Masculinity

This discursive strategy considers how young men reframed hegemonic masculinity. Reframing involves restructuring one's viewpoint or how one perceives something (Robson Jr & Troutman-Jordan, 2014). This discursive strategy was identified when participants reevaluated and changed their viewpoints of masculinity in hookup culture through their communication. Participants utilized this discursive strategy by shifting opinions of hooking up from positive to negative without critiquing hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. Under the purview of this strategy are the substrategies of reframing hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture through describing hookups as immature and highlighting the health risks of hookups.

Describing Hookups as Immature

The first substrategy, describing hookups as immature, explores how participants describe how they have shifted away from the hegemonic masculine values within hookup culture as they have gotten older and matured. For example, Steve explained:

> Going back to saying how my worldview kind of evolved going into college, I would say that they're coming from a different worldview still where they still have that mentality of like, Oh, you've got to be good at sex. You've got to have sex. You, be sort of aggressive and macho to be a man.

Jack also expressed, "…I used to think you needed to get all the girls and have sex with a bunch of women, but honestly, I don't think that is important anymore." These men felt as though sexual activity, sexual prowess, and sexual aggression used to be important in defining their masculinity. Several men in this study admitted to engaging in hookups, but the majority of participants, other than two, stated that they currently preferred dating to hookups. Many of them provided similar reasons to that of Dillon who said:

> I've never gone out and think, oh yeah, I just want to hookup with a lot of people. It's more like relationship is bigger, and the older I get, the hooking up is shrinking. It's still there, and not that I've shifted to only wanting a relationship, it's that the older I get, the bigger that grows and the more I think I want a relationship. You're slowly closing yourself off to hooking up. You're looking for more serious connections.

Even though Dillon never actively sought out hookups, as he gets older, he more actively seeks out romantic relationships. Even those participants who were more actively engaged in hookup culture like John also admitted, "I've hooked up for a while. You know, for the past three, four years. And I am more on the lines of like I've done so much of that to where now I just want to settle down." Owen also expressed similar sentiments, detailing how he used to engage in hookup culture, but no longer desires hooking up as time has passed. He added:

> I'm over that whole like come home with me tonight. Completely over. I stopped even having that much interest in going to bars. I can. I'll feel good for a couple of shots and hang out with one of my friends and talk, watch a game. But I just, the whole like go to the bars, look around for girls, look around for groups of girls that are not with guys. I don't know. It's just over for me. But I used to and it was like that. If you'd have asked me that same question two years ago I would have 100% just said hooking up.

He later went on to tell me that actively seeking out hookups was something that he "grew out of." Hooking up is presented as just a phase he and others went through. By expressing how much time has

passed since they valued or engaged in these hegemonic masculine practices, participants create distance from their past selves. They reframe the once valued hegemonic masculinity as immature and frame their distance from it as a sign of maturity or self-growth.

Highlighting Health Risks of Hookups

The second substrategy involves men reframing hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture through highlighting the health risks of hookups. This substrategy describes how young men have come to understand hookups as unhealthy behavior or they discuss how hookups can negatively impact one's health in various ways. For instance, when I asked Jack if he considered sexual activity important when assessing manliness, he responded:

> I used to feel like that, but honestly not anymore. That doesn't really matter. Honestly, I feel like that's just more so like a self-control problem. Like if you're someone who needs to have sex all the time, I feel like that's kind of just a self-control problem.

Jack went on to say that he felt it is necessary for people to masturbate and be sexually active. He also felt too much casual sex might indicate a sex addiction or lack of sexual control. Similarly, Owen also expressed that he no longer values frequent casual sex. Although he went on to discuss how frequent hookups can have a negative impact on one's back and knees.

However, the primary health concern was STDs. Tim used to think frequent casual sex with women was masculine, but when discussing hookups he warned, "you don't know the person, you don't know their background, or you don't know anything that they could potentially give you in terms of diseases." Similarly, Michael also stated, "…if you're having sex a lot with multiple different people, hooking up with different people, there's a higher chance of getting an STD, STI, things like that." Even Don, a proponent for hookups, stated, "You don't want to go sleep around too much or you're going to get an STD."

Sexually transmitted diseases like HIV or AIDS were particularly concerning for gay participants. Philip elaborated, "Especially for me being gay, there's the extra worry in the gay community about AIDS, HIV, all that stuff." Alec echoed this concern:

> I feel more apprehensive when my gay friends are going out and having sex, then when my straight friends are going out and having sex. I feel more apprehensive and nervous for them. Because I just know being within the community that there are so many guys that want unprotected sex that aren't tested."

Reframing hookups as health hazards legitimizes nonparticipation in hookup culture without necessarily calling into question participant's masculine status or the hegemonic masculine discourses within hookup culture.

Resisting Hegemonic Masculinity

This strategy deals with how young men resisted hegemonic masculinity. Resisting was distinct from reframing in that discursive reframing was not necessarily counterhegemonic (Abbott & Geraths, 2021; Messerschmidt, 2018). That is, these strategies did not "critique, challenge, or actually dismantle hegemonic masculinities" (p. 142) or promote more "more egalitarian gender relations" (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 158). Young men who discursively resisted hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture critiqued common hegemonic masculine norms, expressed desires that oppose hegemonic masculine norms, or promoted more egalitarian sexual practices. Under the purview of this strategy are the substrategies of encouraging non-aggressive sexual communication and expressing desires for emotional connection.

Encouraging Non-aggressive Sexual Communication Practices

The first substrategy outlines how young men resisted hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture by encouraging non-aggressive sexual communication. Sexual aggression is often a hegemonic masculine norm among young men (Kimmel, 2008; Wiederman, 2005). That is, young men are often expected to actively seek out casual sex, initiate sex, be sexually dominant, and more sexually coercive. As Steve explained, "You've got to have sex to be sort of aggressive and macho to be a man." John reiterated:

> The whole of masculinity and pressure and everything. It all comes from that basis of that the guy is always told that he has to do everything. And that's what the girl, the woman wants to see. And that's with anything. With hooking up and being a man.

John further specified, "Yeah you are initiating all the contact. You initiate the hooking up. You initiate being the man." Alec echoed this sentiment when he explained how this hegemonic masculine norm impacted his early sexual experiences. He added:

> So when I was younger, I definitely associated sexual activity with something that is kind of male initiated. So that's what I thought I had to do. So when I was first going on dates, I never went in for the kiss. I never did any of those things. I always thought that it had to be initiated by somebody else.

Alec felt as though he was more feminine than masculine, therefore he believed he needed to maintain more of a gatekeeping role or employ more passive behaviors often associated with femininity in sexual situations (Wiederman, 2005). Although he went on to say:

> As I got to college, I started to meet other people who were gay, or girls that were not following that train of thought, because they didn't have to. And kind of hearing from gay men too this idea of, "Oh, no, you don't have to do that. That's like straight people stuff…" I didn't have to follow those rules anymore. And I was kissing guys on first dates, or I was the one texting first, or I was the one initiating stuff. And I was like, "This is amazing!" I just never associated it from then on out as who's being the man and who was initiating it.

Relatedly, Matt also described some specific sexually aggressive behaviors of many heterosexual men and how he avoids them. He declared:

> I think verbal consent and verbal reassurance of interest is the most important thing...I feel a lot of guys think, Oh, she was giving me signs so I might grab her ass or something, just see how it goes. That's the kind of stuff that you should not be doing.

Several other men also described avoiding sexually aggressive practices and highlighted the importance of consent. For instance, Michael stated:

> I definitely check in [chuckles], I feel a lot. Especially if I'm getting to know them like, "Is this okay?" like, "Are you okay with that?" Stuff like that. And obviously consent is incredibly important. You're getting to know somebody and how they kind of do things and operate when you're having sex. You just need to ask and have those check-ins.

However, previous scholarship has found that while many young people, particularly young men, express the importance of verbal consent during casual sex, they often rely heavily on nonverbal communication in practice (Klinger, 2016; Lamont et al., 2018). Therefore, it is hard to know the extent to which these men actually engage in verbal communication during hookups.

Expressing Desire for Emotional Connection

The second substrategy details how young men expressed their desire for emotional connection during sex and, in turn resisted hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. Several men in this study constructed hookups as lacking emotions or emotional connection. For example, Dillon explained, "…hooking up is not a lot of emotional, not having emotion I guess. Like, oh that was just a hookup, it's like being disconnected." In discussing his concern for hookup partner's pleasure, Don suggested that there is even less of an emotional connection for men when he said, "I guess it's easier to please someone you don't know, because there's no emotional connection for you as a guy." Within this quote are two assumptions. One being that because he is a man, there is no emotional connection when he hooks up with someone. The second being that it is easier to please a sexual partner if there are no emotions involved. This reflects the hegemonic masculine discourse in which young men are expected to be more emotionally disconnected during sex (Kimmel, 2008; Wiederman, 2005).

Although Don implied that a lack of emotional connection in hookups was positive, several other men viewed it negatively. It was, at times, cited as the key reason why some men chose to opt out of hookup culture as Tim said, "I never have been the kind of hooking up guy… I have hooked up before, but it doesn't feel as gratifying as being with somebody you actually care about…the emotional connection is more important to me." Some young men in this study believed hookups were defined by emotional detachment as Brendan further elaborated:

> The way that I defined hooking up, I've never just hooked up with somebody. It's not for me, but I don't view it negatively as long as both people are consenting. Any sexual interaction for me is really hard to detach from the emotional aspects. In order to have that you kind of have to have a relationship of some sort with that person. That's not to say that I could never see myself hooking up or that would always be less desirable than being in a relationship. I've just never been in a situation where that has looked appealing to me.

Brendan does not hookup because it is hard for him to detach from the emotional aspect of sexual activity. While he did not directly state that hookups are void of emotion, it is certainly implied in this statement.

Michael and Matt went further to imply that hookups lead to greater emotional detachment over time. Michael declared, "If I hookup enough, I'm training myself to have sex, but to not actually be connected with people." Michael perceived hookups as lacking in emotion connection, therefore he felt frequent hookups will naturally condition someone to be less emotionally connected during sex. Similarly, Matt expressed:

> I think hooking up a lot and hookup culture in general sort of creates this situation where relationships are often less emotionally intimate and they're more just about the physical side of things. I think somebody might have sex with people a lot and feel like physically fulfilled, but on an emotional and mental level, they might not really be getting the care and attention that they need that they might get from being in a long-term relationship.

Once again, the assumption is hookups are detached from emotion; therefore, engaging in hookup culture will negatively impact one's ability to form future emotional connections or healthy romantic relationships. This perception of emotional detachment during hookups is not uncommon as one normative hookup and sexual discourse is that individuals, particularly men, are supposed to be emotionally detached (Epstein et al., 2009; Kimmel, 2008; Wade, 2017; Wiederman, 2005). Michael reiterated this expectation when he said, "…if you're too emotional, that's not very masculine."

Discussion

This study explored how young men discursively navigate masculinity in hookup culture revealing several discursive strategies and substrategies in the process. This study's first theoretical contribution was providing specific strategies for how young men discursively navigate hegemonic masculine discourses within hookup culture. This research revealed three different discursive strategies and seven different substrategies that young men utilize. First, some participants reinforced hegemonic masculinity with hookup culture through teasing peers, sexual boasting, and perpetuating sexual preference discourse. This study supports previous hookup and masculinity literature that suggests young men often boast about sexual exploits and tease peers about sexual failures to police masculinity and reaffirm masculine status (Currier, 2013; Kalish, 2013; Platt & Krause, 2022; Sweeney, 2014). Additionally, this study also coincides with extant literature that has found when it comes to hookups, young men are more concerned with maintaining social status, rather than sexual exploration or their hookup partner's enjoyment (Currier, 2013; Kalish, 2013). This finding is concerning as hookups motivated by elevating social status have been linked to rape myth acceptance (Reling et al., 2018). Although gay participants largely resisted hegemonic and heteronormative discourses, they also engaged in "personal preference discourse" (Robinson, 2015, p. 318). This third discursive substrategy is used to mask how choice of sexual partner can perpetuate stereotypes, create boundaries between groups, and ultimately reinforce inequality. That is, this desire for "masculine" bodies (e.g., muscular, facial hair, taller) in turn places more "feminine" or less physically fit bodies into the lower echelons of the gay body hierarchy (Robinson, 2015; Slevin & Linneman, 2010; Whitesel, 2014). Viewing the male body as constitutive of masculinity is essential in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity which maintains unequal gendered power dynamics (Connell, 2005). These discursive strategies illuminate the persistence and omnipresence of hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2018).

This study also contributes to the hookup literature by illuminating several discursive strategies and substrategies that young men utilize as they abandon or avoid hegemonic masculinity in hookup culture. Hooking up is so normalized among young people that even those who do not endorse or engage in hookups must confront hookup culture at some point (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bogle 2008; Kimmel 2008; Wade 2017). Despite this, not much is known about how or why young men choose to not participate in hookup culture (Olmstead et al., 2013; Pham, 2017; Wade, 2017). The second strategy, reframing hegemonic masculinity, depicts how young men avoid or abandon hookup culture through describing hookups as immature and highlighting health risks of hookups. In describing hookups as immature participants explain how they have "grown out" of hookup culture. Age could be a factor as most participants were upperclassmen in college or recent college graduates. Extant hookup scholarship has found students near the end or after college mostly abandon hookup culture to focus on formal dating and monogamous relationships (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Bogle, 2008; Dalessandro, 2019). Furthermore, masculinity constructions change with maturity, growth, and as context changes (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2008). Dalessandro (2019) found that young men often conflated monogamous relationships with maturity and hookups with immaturity. Although this reframing of hegemonic masculinity might be perceived as personal growth, this discursive framing could be a means to dissociate or excuse previous sexual behavior. This framing also reflects the male privilege of being able to participate and abandon hookup culture without consequence; a privilege women in hookup culture rarely possess (Dalessandro, 2019; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Sweeney, 2014).

Additionally, participants reframed hooking up as unhealthy by highlighting many potential health risks related to hookups. Several men indicated STDs as a primary concern. This conflicts with previous studies that suggest young people, particularly men, often do not perceive STDs as a serious implication of casual sex and frequently do not use condoms (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Maas et al., 2015). In fact, many young men perceive condom use as a greater threat because condoms can hinder sexual performance which threatens masculine status (Davis, et al., 2014; Fleming et al., 2016). This fear of STDs could be explained by the age of my participants. After all, men have been found to increasingly value their health and devalue sexual prowess as they age (Kimmel,

2008; Springer & Mouzon, 2011). These strategies support previous theorizing that masculinity constructions shift as men age (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2008).

The third discursive substrategy involved young men resisting hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture through expressing desire for emotional connection and encouraging non-aggressive sexual communication practices. These substrategies can be partially explained by research on hookups and gendered sexual discourses. One implicit rule within hookup culture is that hookups should be emotionally detached (Epstein et al., 2009; Wade, 2017, 2021). Additionally, young men are often expected to be more sexually aggressive and emotionally callous in sexual situations (Kimmel, 2008; Wiederman, 2005). However, Wade (2021) points out, young adults "do" sexual casualness within hookup culture; therefore, sexual casualness can also be undone. Despite this, Wade (2021) notes many negative social repercussions can come from a failure to follow the implicit rules of hookup culture. This could explain why participants chose not to participate in hookup culture, rather than expressing emotions within hookup culture.

Regardless, these substrategies highlight ways that young men discursively resist and even potentially undo gendered sexual scripts. This adds to the growing body of masculinity and hookup literature that suggests young men are increasing resisting hegemonic masculine expectations (i.e., sexual aggression and emotional callousness; Anderson, 2010; Dalessandro, 2019; Epstein et al., 2009; Harris & Harper, 2014; Lamont et al., 2018; Olmstead et al., 2013). This study builds on more recent masculinity theorizing by finding further evidence for masculinities shifting to be more "productive" and "inclusive" (Anderson, 2010; Harris & Harper, 2014). In doing so, this study helps articulate the subtle changes in masculinity construction and performance.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study provided meaningful contributions to the masculinity and hookup literature, it also had some limitations. First, this study lacked diversity along race and class lines. These findings do not capture the experiences of those who do not have race and class privileges. Additionally, the experiences of trans men were not captured. These factors play a profound role in how young men conceptualize and, in turn, enact masculinity (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Lamont et al., 2018; Ray & Rosow, 2010). These young men are underrepresented within the hookup literature and future research should adopt more intersectional and inclusive approaches to capture their experiences. Second, the use of interviews could have also been a limitation. Masculinity is performative and shifts based on the audience and nature of the interaction (Iacoviello et al., 2022; Montemurro & Riehman-Murphy, 2019; Sweeney, 2014). Young men express more private masculinities in intimate settings where they are less likely to be policed by peers (Montemurro & Riehman-Murphy, 2019). How participants enact masculinity in a naturalistic social setting is likely different than how they would during an interview. To capture this, there is a need for future work to employ more observational methods to understand masculinity within hookup culture.

Conclusion

Overall, this study discovered that young men employ various, at times conflicting, strategies when discursively navigating hegemonic masculinity within hookup culture. While this study found increasing evidence for more productive and inclusive masculinities, it also found hegemonic masculinity is still persistent within hookup culture. Gender unequal power dynamics still persist within hookup culture making gender research within this context increasingly vital. By exposing the masculinity constructions that help to perpetuate these unequal power dynamics, this research can help guide what issues educational programming should focus on. Furthermore, men often misperceive the extent to which other men actually endorse or enact hegemonic masculine norms (Iacoviello et al., 2022; Munsch et al., 2018). Research shows men are more likely to endorse and enact masculinity constructions that they perceive to be consistent with their peers (Currier, 2013; Kalish, 2013; Sweeney, 2014) or the

social norms of the given context (Iacoviello et al., 2022; Munsch et al., 2018). By highlighting how hegemonic masculinity is steadily becoming less of the social norm amongst their peers, this work could help inspire young men to reevaluate their ideas of masculinity and potentially shift away from construction of masculinity that perpetuate unequal power dynamics.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 57–67

Sponsoring Support: Community Colleges Influencing Returning Citizens

Heidi L. Arnold

Community colleges are gateways to employment for many students, including underrepresented populations. One group who has received little to no attention in the community college research literature is the formerly incarcerated, known as returning citizens—one of the most marginalized and yet motivated groups of students. Robust social support is needed for returning citizens to manage the re-entry process. This literature review gives an overview of the importance of social support for ex-offenders. By examining literature from three disciplines—criminal justice, sociology, and communication as well as experiences from formerly incarcerated students—this article summarizes the needs of returning citizens students and specifically identifies the community college campus and resources as a solution. This article concludes that community colleges are one of the most sensible organizations to assist returning citizens pursuing success. Offering classes and advising is not enough; social support is critical to the re-entry process. Community colleges collaborating with government agencies and non-profit organizations will support completing students, lowering recidivism rates, and fostering civically responsible communities.

Keywords: social support, returning citizens, community college

Introduction

As an African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." A significant portion of any community college mission is to support the community, which requires collaboration and clear communication. Any endeavor done well unites parties who share the same purpose. Today, more than 600,000 people are released from prison and jails each year in the United States, and the chances of them returning to prison are up to 40% within three years if they are without appropriate housing, sufficient employment, and a steady support network (Carson et al., 2018). Community resources and a returning citizen's family and friends *might* be enough to keep some of them thriving. However, many of these motivated women and men are without those resources and, most importantly, without a social support system that allows them to move forward in ways most take for granted. Joan Petersilia (2003), a leader in the discussion of criminal justice since the 60s, substantial social support is one of the determining factors in lowering recidivism rates. Since education and employment are powerful factors for success as well, returning citizens are likely to need community colleges. Returning citizens are generally first-generation, low-income students facing high rates of illiteracy, mental and emotional disorders, and learning challenges (2003). Health scholars concur that "support, validation, and assistance we receive from our social network members can have considerable influence on our mental and physical health" (Wright et al., 2014, p. 82). As such, educational institutions may find additional opportunities to serve the community by building a strong, qualified and healthy workforce of returning citizens.

Literature Review

Challenges Facing Returning Citizens

The challenges for a person re-entering society from prison are many, and success is not the norm. Therefore, dodging recidivism is the first hardship for an ex-offender. An unfortunate truth in almost any city in the United States is that the justice system and the societal counterparts are not collaborating (Valera et al., 2017). The most important predictors of recidivism are employment, age, and education level (Nally & Lockwood, 2012). Many resources report the asset of education for an inmate

Heidi L. Arnold (MA, Ohio University, 1997) is a Professor of Communication at Sinclair Community College. Address correspondence to the author at heidi.arnold@sinclair.edu.

while incarcerated; those who participate lower their odds of recidivism by 43% less than those who do not participate in education (Chen, 2015; Irving, 2016; Mastrorilli et al., 2016). In addition to housing and employment, statistics of education and skill levels report that both men and women need educational services upon release.

Offenders usually enter prisons from toxic social networks, so most ex-offenders need to create a new support system that allows them to gain social capital by utilizing networks of people and agencies (Opsal & Foley, 2013). "Social capital reflects the depth and extent of social bonds, connections and ties as well as the embeddedness of individuals in relationships of trust and their integration into the participatory structures of civil society" (Brown & Ross, 2010, p. 220). Studies link desistance of crime with positive family relationships, but all relationships matter, not just family. And given these stable relationships, returning citizens tend to make good or better choices when a negative behavior might threaten the strength of the supportive relationship (Jardine, 2017).

Because so many ex-offenders leave prison without support networks, public policies and systems are overwhelming and can lead to immediate failure. Without proper housing, transportation and supportive people helping through these challenges, failure can happen within the first few weeks because of the difficulty completing tasks for survival—things like acquiring identification or a visit to the probation office or food shopping (Denney et al., 2014). The most trying task is to gain employment with wages substantial enough to provide safe housing and basic needs. The label of felon and possible lack of skills make employment difficult at best.

Opsal & Foley (2013). Also found many women, more than men, do not return to their families or secure housing due to previous victimization and substance abuse; therefore, women experience more frequent homelessness. Additionally, women tend to be less educated and with fewer employable skills than men and make lower wages In addition, invisible costs like depression and anxiety, loneliness, unhealthy relationships, and low self-esteem exist as the returning citizen struggles to subsist (Denney et al., 2014).

During incarceration, an inmate's dignity is stripped, and normal interactions are removed. Therefore, the damage to a person's sense of self is in need of repair as well as the ability to build and maintain relationships (Middlemass, 2017). Women, especially, often leave prison without any relationships intact (Jardine, 2017). Relationships, according to scholars across multiple disciplines, (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Brown & Ross, 2010; Marcus, 2014; O'Brien, 2001) may be the best source of life fulfillment at all ages and stages of life. In studying the imbalance of needs to resources, experts find inmates are "developmentally frozen" and lose their identification with normal ways of living because of identifying with a subculture (Helfgott, 1997, p. 21). Consequently, the pathways most citizens find simple are much more taxing for those after incarceration.

Social Support Up Close

Researchers in criminal justice as well as sociology have recognized the importance of social support. The communication field defines social support as conduct used for the purpose of aiding others who need help (Webb et al., 2015). Social support includes having a neighbor who greets over the fence or family members who help with babysitting or a teacher who offers advice. These supportive resources also include companionship or a person offering financial assistance. Cullen (1999) believes anyone with high levels of social support will be at lower risk for engaging in unruly behavior. Bazemore and Erbe (2003), criminal justice scholars, having strong social relationships can be an incentive for returning citizens to maintain continued support, asset building, and aptitude over situations. Communication scholars also long believe the benefits of social support, trusting that it "enables people to manage the uncertainty associated with stress and to increase a sense of personal control over their environments" (Albrecht et al., 1992, p. 149).

While many factors contribute to recidivism, my experience and research suggests that family and related social support are the most important determinants for successful reentry. "Social support is linked to multiple positive health, mental health, and behavioral outcomes in populations of interest to many

disciplines" (Pettus-Davis et al., 2014, p. 4). Additionally, "positive family support was the top reason for not re-offending" (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009, p. 326) was stated in a study of gender differences and offender reentry. Hiram (2014) found that stable, supportive family interactions were most associated with successful reintegration and is the strongest predictor of success for both men and women. Social support improves relationships, reduces stress, maintains mental health—all things lacking in a newly released ex-offender's life. Important in the life of a person recovering from incarceration and other traumas, communication scholars endorse social support in this recovery both mentally and physically (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). In addition, a strong social support system provides social capital.

Process of Understanding

Because I have been teaching interpersonal communication inside of a women's prison since 2011, I have heard countless stories of both hope and tragedy. I often note some of the most striking, unsolicited remarks and accounts. After only a short time of interacting with these women, I began writing about my experiences. I also wrote about my impressions of the prison staff and the facility itself. From my experiences of knowing these women through listening in class and reading their assigned coursework, I began to understand more about the plight of the nation's prison system. I began to build relationships with some of the women after their release from prison, and I was stirred to make a difference in helping people understand who these women really are—not just a statistic or a bad person to avoid. I wrote more essays and poems to describe how they came to be behind bars and the effects it had on them. In an effort to share my perspective with those not associated with someone in prison, I created a piece of art so that audiences who were interested in hearing could view the art and understand without listening to a lecture or reading a series of written pages. I asked the women for permission to use words I had written about them, and all of them were eager for me to share with others. In fact, the incarcerated women I interacted with were my most fierce supporters.

Then, I asked formerly incarcerated women who were back in society and leading successful lives to share some of their own words with me. I sent a request through social media to the women I have kept in contact with outside of prison. After someone expressed an interest, I sent a set of question prompts for use in responding. Some of these stories were captured face-to-face and some were shared electronically. I edited the audio to eliminate dead space and phrases causing confusion and tightened the stories' content through editing. Eventually, I was able to incorporate the voices into the art, titled *Revealing Panes, Reflecting Pain* using audio clips loaded onto an iPod Touch which was available next to the visual art piece. These stories and voices have left powerful impressions on audiences including faculty and staff of colleges, church members, community activists and even on the women themselves. When possible, I invite a woman or two to attend speaking engagements with me. Encounters with audiences of all backgrounds are usually met with tears and dropped stereotypes and attentive listening ears. Knowing a story, and more importantly knowing a woman, changes how we understand the world and how we behave.

Returning Citizens Speak

Interviews of ex-offenders provided insight about the need for social support. Ex-offenders said what they desired most was a mentor "to guide them to make everyday decisions, peers with whom to share struggles, and a support system to hold them accountable for their lifestyle and behavior" (Denney et al., 2014, p. 47). Fitting back into society, alone without a friend or two, after years of institutionalization is difficult if not impossible. When I ask returning citizens who have been recently released from prison about the role of family, they report reintegration to only be possible with family assistance. Even those with family by their side say reintegrating is a battle that feels impossible to win (Arnold, 2017).

Prison is a highly-structured system, and civilization outside of the barbed wire fence is not naturally organized. I hear examples of this regularly as I interact with women who have been released

and are struggling to meet all of the obligations of success. For example, Jasmine had been out of prison for several years and was gainfully employed, living in an apartment, and close to finishing a college degree. She stumbled down old paths of negative people and behaviors. Because of this, she quit school, quit her job, and quit making good decisions. One phone call to the right person secured a counseling appointment and the encouragement she needed to get back in school, secure a new job and let go of the negative people and behaviors in her life (Arnold, 2017).

Because of addiction and dysfunction and incarceration, "bridges with family members have often been burned" (Heidemann et al., 2014, p. 537). Lashay's dysfunctional family disengaged after her sentencing because she was no longer valuable to them in providing money. Five years later and upon her release, she opted to live in an unfamiliar city to protect herself from her toxic family. She says without the help of a professor and the family of a friend she met in prison, she would never have managed reentry. Similarly, Linda says: "After being incarcerated for five and a half years, I received no support or encouragement from my family because they were embarrassed of me going to prison." Linda's best friend drove from Florida to Ohio to pick her up from prison and eventually invited her to live in her home. "Without her love and support, I would've been homeless and destitute. When I left prison, I had very little self-esteem and was afraid of everything: every phone call, every decision, every noise, and every knock on the door. I couldn't hold my head up anymore," Linda said (Arnold, 2017).

Filling the Need

Community colleges provide not only education but holistic resources: counseling and accessibility services, tutoring, a variety of clubs to join, veteran services, career counseling, services for the LGBTQ community and some provide an early childhood education center. Community colleges have the potential to fulfill many of the needs of students who are leaving prisons with and without support systems.

Education and Job Placement

Limited or no educational background impedes employment for a returning citizen; therefore, a community college is a welcomed service. Returning citizens must have jobs, and community colleges specialize in educating for the jobs that are available in the local region. Community colleges are in the business of decreasing unemployment and raising earning potential (Middlemass, 2017). Not only do classes, counselors, and job fairs assist in finding jobs, but the social network a student can grow while on campus can help him or her secure a job. Anita, who is incarcerated and enrolled in college classes, has realized she can be a student and learn just like everyone else. After years of prostituting and catering to others she said, "I was a hood rat and now I'm a scholar" (Arnold, 2017).

Social Capital

The student body as well as faculty, staff and administrators offer a built-in social network for returning citizens who are so often in need of the network that exists within any community college (Middlemass, 2017). "The three most important words for ex-offenders are relationships, relationships, relationships," says Krannich (2015, p. 19) who specializes in advising people on career choices. Because of previous dysfunctional and unhealthy relationships, returning citizens need to not only learn how to build trust but to build good connections for resources. "Creating a web of social relations is intrinsic to developing an enabling environment niche for women in transition from prison" (O'Brien, 2001, p. 64). Long-standing communication research views relational support as "critical to handling life stress, crisis, transition," and more (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984, p. 3). Community colleges bring a variety of people together with a common goal; the student intending to cultivate social capital can build relationships on campus. And therefore, create a network which may allow them to find jobs (Krannich, 2015).

Building Self-Esteem

Ex-offenders need a way to raise their self-esteem and realize their own abilities. Interviews with inmates tell of "how a teacher in the prison influenced them, gave them confidence, and encouraged them to obtain an academic degree upon release. They also related how their educational success contributed significantly to their self-esteem and hope for themselves" (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013, p. 142). An example is Amy who realized after taking a few classes while she was incarcerated that she had no idea who she was; she spent her life up to that point pleasing others and changing who she was to meet every occasion. Upon release, she valued herself more than ever before and knew she could conquer the reentry process with her newfound confidence (Arnold, 2017).

A lack of connection with key individuals who are valuable sources of information and support may negatively impact a student's ability to remain enrolled in college. For instance, Kayla left prison and immediately enrolled at the local community college. She enjoyed classes and the normalcy of the structure the college offered. However, outside issues arose, and she found herself homeless and unable to attend class for several weeks. If she had utilized campus resources, she might have been able to avoid absences. Furthermore, research shows that community college leaders recognize that the resulting sense of shame a student feels may lead to isolation, which further discourages students from seeking out relationships with peers and instructors (McNair et al., 2018). Therefore, those campus connections can be life changing.

Faith-Based Support

With religious initiatives and offices of faith becoming more popular on community college campuses, college chaplains and campus ministries should not be left out of this conversation. Communities across the globe utilize faith-based organizations to assist with the reentry process. Interviewed inmates and released offenders tell how faith-based ministries can help with the emotional upset of being without family support (Denney et al., 2014). A study conducted at Wheaton College, providing full tuition for returning citizens, expressed the importance of faith in the students' success at transitioning back into society. Students believed faith balanced perceived liabilities and to allow persistence (Leary, 2018). Knowing how clergy who visit prisons become valuable to inmates, I can attest to the frequent result of assistance for the offender on the "outside." Clergy and their staff provide social relationships and advice to returning citizens and often help after release with housing and employment and social support through people of faith (Arnold, 2017). This strong connection can be mirrored on most community college campuses that provide an office of faith. Mentors and a support system give returning citizens a sense of what is normal and speak a story of survival and hope (O'Brien, 2001).

Place of Inclusion and Safe Space

A sense of belonging is fundamental to a human's existence. College students seek belonging on college campuses in a variety of ways, especially if the students are in transition (Strayhorn, 2023). Community college research reveals when students feel a sense of belonging, then students feel a greater commitment to the institution and persistence to completion (Tovar, 2013). One returning citizen interviewed said a supportive community builds a sense of inclusion, which in turns builds self-perception (Hartnett et al., 2013). Other interviewees reported wanting to be loved and respected and free to spend time in a place with positive vibes. Those interviewed enjoyed professors and others who came into the prison to make connections and talk to them about something other than their criminal issues (Denney et al., 2014). Community colleges with opportunity to teach classes inside the prison can provide a sense of belonging to a campus before the student even reaches the campus outside the prison.

In my own experience with ex-offenders, one woman released from prison found a "home" in attending college. Though not the strongest student, Zaphora found satisfaction in navigating the campus and having a place where others knew her name (Arnold, 2017). This sense of autonomy is a necessary skill

for returning citizens (Burch 2016), the ability to be in control and make a route of action. Returning citizens need a safe space to make decisions and successfully navigate a system; community colleges can provide that space for healing from the trauma of incarceration and violence at home.

Service Learning and Volunteering Opportunities

Much of the literature suggests that formerly incarcerated people can combat the stigma and stereotypes of being labeled a felon by giving back to the community (Hartnett et al., 2013; Hinck et al., 2007). In addition to work and family, an area of identity transformation for returning prisoners is that of a responsible citizen which includes civic participation like voting, volunteer work, giving back, and neighborhood involvement (Fisher & Travis, 2003). Colleges that provide co-curricular activities, whether an honor society or a chess club, furnish occasions for giving back to a community. An opportunity for community-based service which reduces stereotypes of returning citizens is a college offering a service learning component as part of the learning experience while advancing curriculum.

Peer Support

Work in criminal justice research reports the best support peers for returning citizens are those who have experienced similar issues (Denney et al., 2014). Research that evaluates mentoring programs relates most failures to matching mentors with those who were not natural friends and could not understand a person's background and situation. Returning citizens prefer to be mentored by someone who has been in prison himself/herself (Brown & Ross, 2010). "Formerly incarcerated women's peers provide a great amount of support in the form of encouragement to keep going, a listening ear, and being there when they are in need" (Heidemann et al., 2014, p. 535). They welcome one another when entering a new program and establish a sense of camaraderie. This mutual understanding and sense of co-recovery means restoration may be more helpful to women than the support their family members and pre-prison friends are able to offer (Heidemann et al., 2014). Community colleges can connect people being released with those who have learned to live well after release as a way to inspire and stop recidivism. Decision makers and policy changers must believe that ex-offenders know how best to help. Research indicates that peers mentoring peers in prison is one of the most effective ways of offering support. In addition, recidivism who were involved in peer mentoring were less likely to recidivate (Walby, 2021). Mentoring does work to reduce recidivism and enable fruitful reintegration if ex-offenders are allowed to tell what is needed (Koschmann & Peterson, 2013).

What is Happening in Community Colleges Now?

Every person released from prison needs assistance, indifferent of the crime committed or the number of years served or the color of the skin or net worth. With more state and national funding, colleges are making strides to provide classes inside of prisons which *is* reducing recidivism. But more funding is needed. "As the U.S. labor force requires more people with college degrees and certificates, some colleges and states consider incarcerated people a largely untapped work-force resource that could help increase educational attainment rates overall" (Smith, 2018, para. 26). Currently, community college websites offer little to no evident of social support services for formerly incarcerated students. Most community colleges are open to ex-offenders registering as a student, but lack resources of social support for the often unidentified, returning citizen population.

A few community colleges are attempting to create programs that offer stable social support for returning citizens. In email responses from the 19 League for Innovations Board Colleges, two colleges are providing social support to returning citizens. Seattle Central College finds success in a mentoring program between ex-offenders and work-study students, while San Diego City College incorporates a learning community to build trust and support as well as co-curricular activities for returning citizens. Mentoring continuously shows positive relational benefits like assistance with references, government

paperwork, housing, court hearings, and similar processes (Leverentz, 2016). Most colleges provide assistance in the college application and financial aid processes as well as access to direct and indirect support services, specifically targeting returning citizens. Kansas City Kansas Community College is learning that re-entry is not an easy process and is participating in a role-playing simulation in the hope of making an effort to ease the process for returning citizens. Metropolitan Community College in Nebraska provides mentors, a clothing and food pantry and a job center. The state of Washington offers help with housing, groceries, daycare, and mentoring (Affordable Colleges Online, 2019). But more community colleges need to direct efforts toward this population. The Lumina Foundation interviewed Dennis Littky, a nationally known educator, who said, "Everyone says we have to be college ready. What we're saying is that colleges need to be student-ready" (as cited in Focus, 2016, p. 4).

Community Colleges Are the Answer

Community colleges serve at multiple levels in every state in the nation—training the workforce, preparing students for college, educating for careers, grooming students to transfer to four-year universities, and providing community enrichment programs. According to the Community College Resource Center (2019), 5.8 million students were enrolled in public community colleges in the fall of 2017. Millions of citizens are being shaped by the critical functions of a community college. In times of economic downturn, Americans have looked to community colleges for help. The purpose of community colleges has evolved through the years, and they should reflect the changes needed as our society continues to transform.

In addition to enrolling returning citizens and advising them through the college processes, the community college must provide strategies of social support to retain students and guarantee completion as well as productivity in society. Research of social support abounds and so do approaches; colleges must find the right fit for its students and their needs. Non-profit organizations and counties cannot bear all the burdens of reintegrating all of the 10,000 people released from prison each week (United States Department of Justice, 2019). Community colleges have systems in place and educated employees and wide-spread networks that enable them to assist the returning citizen population. Because the community college is approachable to both traditional and nontraditional students and boasts of low cost and flexibility, returning citizens fit well into the community college profile. The returning citizen population needs a welcoming entity that can assist with an economic payoff but also a positive appreciation for the desire to work and to move our communities forward.

Consequences

Without forward motion, communities suffer consequences. Communities across the continent face continued negative outcomes if agencies and institutions do not develop programs to assist formerly incarcerated individuals. The recidivism rates will persist, and communities will be filled with more and more underemployed and unemployable people. Crime of all kinds and drug use will continue, and the cycle will remain unbroken. The childhood traumas—substance abuse, neglect, and transient caregivers—causing many of the poor habits of today's inmates—will continue to infect our neighborhoods, schools, employment rates, and productivity. Failure of agencies to collaborate and exist only in silos will make it difficult or near impossible for returning citizens to participate fully in what is offered. "A felony conviction restricts social interactions and hinders felons' efforts to reintegrate into society because there is no equivalent curb ramp" (Middlemass, 2017, p. 2).

Considering all of the barriers, returning citizens need multiple arms of support in order to overcome those challenges and policies keeping them in failure. Employment helps develop life skills, strengthens self-esteem and makes social connections (Middlemass, 2017). Re-creating the support system to replace the toxic living situations from which men and particularly women come. "Support systems can function as a cushion to assist former felons in coping with the challenges that arise as they reintegrate into their communities and in developing the human capital that is necessary to overcome

adverse situations" (Opsal & Foley, 2013, p. 271). With the release of thousands of people in each state every year, communities can benefit by providing second-chance employment and avoiding the stereotypes and stigmas to provide a productive and positive society. Financially, it is more beneficial to help rather than hinder progress. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy reports for every one dollar spent on correctional education, the state of Washington saved $20 (Schaffhauser, 2017). All areas of incarceration need reform; however, Petersilia suggests needed changes in not only the in-prison education and release practices but also collaborations within the community after prisoners are released (2003).

Conclusion

Investing effort into future research focusing on how community colleges can best support returning citizens, thereby reducing recidivism and lowering unemployment rates, should be a goal of a community college. Community college staff should investigate strategies for creating those curb ramps—entry points at agencies and in communities—for returning citizens. Much research exists on what is good and what is possible, but little effort is being exerted on the practice of these methods on a community college campus. Communication, social work, and criminal justice disciplines point to the same basic principles of support—most of which are effective tools for retaining students of all identities. Mentoring programs work to retain African American men. Support groups aid students challenged by addiction. And social and educational programs aim to reduce bullying and violence in the LGBTQ community. Given all of the options of supporting returning citizens, none of them produce any negative outcomes—only positive ones in addition to *possible* success in completing degrees, staying out of prison, and communities filled with productive employees and civically responsible neighbors.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 68–71

Fostering a Sense of Belonging and Connection in the Classroom: Addressing Student Engagement Post-COVID-19

Andrea L. Meluch

The COVID-19 pandemic created a variety of challenges in terms of teaching and learning in the university classroom. Post-COVID-19 instructors are being confronted with disengaged students who have experienced a significant disruption in their learning process. This article examines the ways in which instructors can enhance engagement in their courses to foster connection and belonging. Strategies to enhance connection in the classroom include committing to the use of active learning, inviting students to connect with their learning through the use of personal narratives, and ensuring that classes are accessible and inclusive to all students.

Keywords: *student engagement, belonging, connection, personal narratives*

Introduction

In Spring 2022, I taught an in-person crisis communication seminar course for graduating seniors. It was my second time teaching an in-person course since March 2020 when all of my courses were moved online for about a year, but my first time teaching a smaller class size (about 17 students) in-person since the pandemic began. At the beginning of the semester the campus had a mask mandate in place and we were in the middle of the cold, dreary winter months in Northeast Ohio. I noticed in the first few weeks of the semester that the class was a quiet group and not eager to engage in class discussions. At first, I attributed their subdued attitudes to the masks and the fact that it was still early in the semester. However, as the weeks advanced on and, despite my best efforts, their muted attitude remained, I began to wonder what was going on with my students.

Around mid-semester I read an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that discussed the "stunning" disengagement faculty were witnessing in their in-person classes all around the country (McMurtie, 2022). The article noted that many faculty were observing students who seemed zoned out in class, missing class, and missing assignments. I went into class the following day and began the class by introducing the article and its claims. I then asked the class if they felt like it was hard to be engaged in their learning. All of the students (at least all who were in attendance that day) unanimously agreed that they were struggling to stay engaged. They said that it was hard to find the motivation to be interested in their schoolwork two years into the pandemic or to find the motivation to even come to class. It was a frank conversation in which I reflected on about my own pandemic struggles and trauma. It also left me grappling with the question of how as a communication professor am I uniquely situated to address student disengagement in my classes.

The COVID-19 pandemic created immense challenges for university faculty, administrators, staff, and, of course, students. As we move forward into a post-pandemic future, many faculty members are navigating teaching students who have had a significant and prolonged disruption to their educational experience and social life. For instructors, post-COVID-19 provides an opportunity to reflect on and even reevaluate how we approach our courses (both in-person and online) and engage our students. Although fostering student engagement presented challenges pre-COVID-19, the pandemic left the majority of college students struggling with poorer mental health and well-being (Bonsakesen et al., 2022) and academic setbacks (Lederer et al., 2021). Today college instructors are dealing with the lasting impacts of the pandemic on student engagement, learning, and mental health. To help combat student disengagement, instructors should find ways to foster connection and belonging among our students who for so long have felt isolated and overburdened.

Andrea L. Meluch (PhD, Kent State University, 2016) is an Assistant Professor of Business and Organizational Communication in the School of Communication and Department of Management at The University of Akron. Address correspondence to the author at alm133@uakron.edu.

Feeling a sense of belonging and connection in the classroom has long been shown to help students succeed academically and personally (Battistich et al. 1991, 1995; Dwyer et al. 2004; Sidelinger et al., 2010, 2011; Sollitto et al., 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the ability of faculty members to connect with students as many courses moved online, social distancing practices were instituted, and social life was altered significantly. There was a, perhaps, naïve assumption among university administrators and faculty that when life got "back to normal" without masks and online learning, that everything would be fine. However, post-pandemic we are finding that the scars and losses are not easily forgotten. A key challenge now is how do we rebuild connection and a sense of belonging among students who have had a disjointed educational experience for several years. Importantly, we must also consider how we can more purposefully foster connection and belonging among our students so that we are able to motivate and engage students to meet the challenges that higher education is facing writ large (e.g., declining enrollments). As such, the remainder of this essay will focus on specific strategies instructors can use to help engage students by fostering connection and belonging in their courses. Specifically, communication instructors can help create better connections in their courses by committing to the use of active learning, inviting students to connect with their learning through the use of personal narratives, and ensuring that classes are accessible and inclusive to all students.

Strategies for Engaging Students

When instructors notice disengagement in their courses, active learning is a tried and true technique that has been shown to help get students involved in the learning process (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Think-pair-share exercises, small group conversations, games, and class activities are all examples of active learning strategies. Through these active learning opportunities, instructors can facilitate interactions among students that can help them to feel more connected to their peers and their learning process. Active learning can be quickly integrated into classes to help engage students. For example, in my crisis communication seminar course, I added review games in preparation for the final exam to increase interactions and reinforce content. While many active learning strategies may work better in courses that meet face-to-face, there are ways to incorporate some active learning strategies in online courses as well. For example, online courses can include class polls, discussion forums, social media engagement, and games that can help students to feel connected to the course and the instructor even in an online setting.

Next, communication faculty are particularly well-situated to foster connection and belonging in our courses through providing students with opportunities to share personal narratives that connect with course content. Since many communication courses (e.g., interpersonal communication, family communication, health communication) examine issues innate to the human experience, communication instructors can create opportunities for students to share personal stories that are relevant to the content being discussed. Research on instructor narratives indicates that student learning can be enhanced when instructors share stories that are relevant to the content (Bolkan et al., 2020). Although the role of student narratives in shaping student learning and building classroom community remains an understudied area of instructional communication research, communication instructors are in a position to use both their own and students' personal narratives as a pathway to foster connection and belonging in the classroom.

Instructors can use a variety of techniques to invite students to share their personal narratives that are connected to learning in the classroom. Journaling, reflection essays, class discussion prompts, and icebreakers are all opportunities to integrate student narratives into teaching. In Summer 2022, I taught a business communication course as part of a program designed to help recent high school graduates transition to college by focusing on enhancing student knowledge of study skills, academic culture, and campus life. Throughout this summer course, I provided my students with weekly check-in opportunities to share their goals for the course and the upcoming school year. I also encouraged students to share the steps they were taking to achieve their goals. I asked students why the goals they set were important to them and invited them to share their stories (e.g., struggles in high school, being a first-generation college student) so that they could see how their peers were facing the same challenges going into their first-year

of college. Through these conversations, which were admittedly time-consuming, I found that I was able to better understand what my students were going through, they were able to better understand their classmates, and they were clearly identifying the steps needed to achieve their goals in the current course and the upcoming semester. Thus, taking the time to invite and allow students to share personal narratives can help instructors to create a sense of community in their classroom.

Although instructors can actively work to boost students' sense of belonging and connection through in-class and virtual interactions, post-pandemic many instructors must now continue to work to be more aware of the many barriers students face in terms of accessibility and inclusion in college settings. Student disengagement may be a side effect of the pandemic, but instructors now have learned more about the realities of students who are often left behind because of socioeconomic challenges, learning disabilities, and racist, patriarchal structures that still exist in many institutions. Post-COVID-19 college instructors, especially those teaching online courses, need to find ways to make our courses more accessible and inclusive to students from all different backgrounds and abilities.

Examining our course delivery and the ways in which we can foster inclusion starts with inviting students to share their needs early in the semester to begin an open conversation about how instructors can help students have the best experience possible. For several years now I have used a "getting to know you" survey in the first week of class and a "check-in survey" at midterms to learn more about student needs and concerns. One of my survey questions asks students to share any "specific suggestions for the format or structure of this course" that could be incorporated to meet their learning needs. In past semesters, students have requested reminder emails for upcoming deadlines and information about tutoring services. When reviewing my "getting to know you" surveys for the Fall 2022 semester, I came across a student who noted that it was the first time an instructor had ever asked about their learning needs and expressed appreciation for even asking the question. Thus, while it is impossible to restructure our courses to meet the needs of every student, we can sometimes make minor augmentations to the course, which can increase accessibility and inclusivity.

Concluding Thoughts

The crisis communication literature teaches us that crises often create opportunities to reevaluate our practices (Coombs, 2019). Post-COVID-19 it is incredibly important for faculty members to acknowledge the challenges in teaching and learning that COVID-19 created and also recognize that there are opportunities to improve moving forward. If a major challenge on our campuses and in our classrooms is students feeling disengaged, then we have the opportunity to reimagine our courses in ways that enhance belonging and connection moving forward.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 72–75

Voicing a New/uanced Classroom

Karly Poyner-Smith

Teaching within a "post-pandemic" classroom requires me to reexamine my role as an educator. My teaching philosophy, personal definition of student engagement, and pedagogical purposes have shifted as I experience the classroom as both new and nuanced and cultivate a risky environment that relies on classroom impurities. In this essay, I provide an example of how I engage with the classroom as a risky and nuanced space by which the students become the instructor and disassemble the "purity" of the classroom.

Keywords: *pedagogy, COVID-19, voice, social media communication*

Acknowledging New/uance in the Communication Classroom

Today's lesson in COMM2381-Oral Communication is Voice. Borrowing from hooks (1994), I write in my teaching philosophy that education takes shape in a space of struggle. The activities today display this phenomenon thoroughly, as both the students and I struggle together to conceptualize "voice," its attributes, and why it feels so nebulous.

At each yearly graduate teaching assistant training for my university's general communication course, graduate instructors tend to grow bored when the topic of "social mediated communication" comes into play. This is due to a mixture of a lack of engagement with this topic, assigned readings that fail to shake up students' perceptions, and overall graduate instructors' personal frustration with such dry material. At the last meeting, a colleague commented that students are "tired" of talking about social media after having to do everything through social media since the spring of 2020. In this essay, I provide a glimpse into how I respond to facilitating social mediated communication in a "post-pandemic" classroom. I use a lesson focusing on voice to encourage students to take the lead in the classroom. In doing so, I recognize this lesson as reorienting my idea of voice and the ways by which COVID-19 has impacted features of the class and my own pedagogy.

After several semesters of hearing these complaints, I began wondering how to facilitate a more engaged "social media" week, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic shifted undergraduate students to use social media for both academic and non-academic social purposes (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020; Makki & Bali, 2021) and has ultimately disrupted teaching patterns (Berry, 2020; Schwartzman, 2020). Additionally, in effort to engage with this material at deeper levels with my students, I reassessed how I could explore this discussion within the setting of the "new normal" of a "post-pandemic" classroom. The week prior to our discussion of social mediated communication, I asked the students to list their personal reasons for using various social media platforms. We wrote those reasons on the board and thematically analyzed them in an effort to locate broad communicative needs that students have and use social media to meet. One of the communicative needs was a blending of "needing to be heard" and "exercising voice." From this exercise I revisited my original social mediated communication lesson plan and renamed the lesson to display the particular communicative tension the students seem to struggle with and long to discuss: Voice.

As the students and I began our lesson on "voice," I reminded them to think of their answers within the context of their pandemic and "post-pandemic" experiences. I started the lesson by posing four questions on the board: "What is voice," "What can you voice," "What do you struggle to voice," and "What are the parts that make up 'Voice'?" Students were then encouraged to journal their answers to the questions. Once students spent time processing and writing their own answers to these questions, they worked in groups to share and combine their reflective answers to form a collective group argument. While this form of think, pair, share (Lightner & Tomaswick, 2017; Lyman, 1981) and collective work is

Karly Poyner-Smith (MA, Ball State University, 2020) is a graduate candidate at University of Memphis' Communication and Film department. Address correspondence to the author at klpoyner@memphis.edu.

not new to the students in my class, I reminded them to think about their answers in context with how the COVID-19 pandemic situates us within a "new normal."

The New/uanced Classroom as Risky

The white board stretches from one side of the room to the next and judging by the smudges left from other classes hosted in this space, the entirety of the white space has not been used. I give each group a dry erase marker and ask them to step up to the board and fill it out with their group's answers to my questions. I step aside and give them free reign. The board becomes their terrain, and I am their audience. They work together to curate how their groups', or classroom "neighborhoods'" (McKinney et al., 2006), answers reflect their conversation.

I watch their words—punctuated through the students' various handwriting styles, misspelled words, oddly spaced sentences, hand-erased attempts to fix mistakes—map a class conversation. The edges of the board frame words structured with critical and interrogative potential (Block, 2020). Some students write and talk, engage and listen, laugh and stay seated, interrupt and apologize with a mask on. Some do this all without a mask worn. I find myself not worried as much as I used to when it came to the potentiality of masks being left at home. Instead, I watch the students interact and use the space of the board to visualize their answers. I wonder, could this "new normal" be a returning-to, and a re-voicing?

Upon reflection of this post-pandemic voice activity as substitute for social mediated communication, I realize I am taking a risk. I am acknowledging that my time of "teaching" and using the board is done for the day, and like Dutch educator, Gert Biesta (2022) writes, I "allow reality to take [my] place" (p. ix). When training to teach a similar course at my alma mater, I was nervous to let go of the shaky authority my role gave me. While the pandemic ushered new pedagogical panics as I reexamined my role as an educator in a hybrid synchronous-asynchronous classroom, it also forced me to take a step back. I reengaged with my teaching philosophy, rewired the way in which I define student engagement, and further solidified my pedagogical longing to care for students by cultivating a risky environment.

This post-pandemic classroom allows me to develop such a risk. Without stating so, I ask my students to take the lead, to become the instructor, and wreak havoc on the largely clean dry erase board. I tell them, "make it messy and work together in your 'neighborhoods' to teach us about voice." Therefore, the writing on the board is done by the students' hands, not mine. The words are born from their discussions.

The New/uanced Classroom as Impure

Once the board is full of their answers, we partake in an activity in which we locate "saturated" words (words of complexity, nuance, and interpretive value). The term "saturated" is a helpful term I employ in many class discussions and activities as it helps the students visualize the nuance of language. I first ask my students to tell me which words or phrases on the board seem saturated. As these terms are listed out loud by the class, I take my own marker and add new markings, swirls, additional text, and symbols. With the class's comments made as a group, I underline words and add contextual meanings. To add context, we simply discuss these saturated terms. As I further pronounce their words with my own marker, I ask the class to provide additional phrases and/or meanings that flesh out the saturated terms. According to the class, "under-pendings" comes to mean "layered," "rhythm" expands to "style," and "word choice" implies "positionality" and "access."

From their ponderings of voice in a "post-pandemic" world, the concept of voice becomes a living, breathing term—recognizable to each pupil—with its multiple meanings. Voice is power, to give expression, to be projected. We find it easier to share our voice when we are part of what holds power, and more challenging to do so in isolation. We use our Voice to dream of an inclusive, open, and radical Public. Our voice both recognizes this and is an instrument to qualify this. By focusing on the concept of voice, the arguments, examples, and questions the students work together to compile allow us to think about voice and platform. Since the students use terms such as "public," "power," and raise issues of

inclusivity/exclusivity, I introduce them to Warner's (2005) theory of publics and counterpublics and Hill's (2018) case study exemplifying Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic. I draw a diagram to help us visualize the idea of publics and counterpublics amongst the students' words on the whiteboard. I invite questions and in turn, I ask them to think of ways by which they use their voice on social media as both a public and a counterpublic. I then ask the class to ponder aloud how this may have shifted—and continues to shift—in the face of a global pandemic.

The class is dismissed, the room empties, and I take off my mask. I walk to the back wall of the classroom and visually take in the chaos of the board. The dry erase board's clean, white space is gone and replaced by a tapestry of sentences, words, smudge marks, and even a smiley face one student left as a surprise. I take a moment to celebrate how the purity of the board transformed into an impurity (Shotwell, 2016) that tells a grander story of students interrogating the concept of voice. They marry the old idea of voice, to the often isolated and mediated voice of the pandemic, to this "new" and "post-pandemic" voice. We come to understand from the textual and visual display of the board that Voice remains tricky, and it remains needed—post-pandemic or not.

The "post-pandemic" and "new normal" world of teaching requires us to confront classroom tools (such as technology and group discussions) we assumed held novelty (Edwards, 2021). Following both Edwards' and Schwartzman's (2020) call to recognize ways by which a post-pandemic classroom provides opportunities to build community, I register with the reality of our world, I ask my students to rely on their classroom "neighborhoods," give them space on the board to messily formulate their arguments, and let the impurities of this process be what teaches us. The dichotomy of "good" and "bad" social media usage no longer influences our discussion of technologically housed communication and the physical setting of classroom "neighborhoods" provides students with a visual example of classroom community-building.

While this is a single activity in response to one issue with the oral communication course, I see its fingerprints in other lessons I facilitate in this class and other classes I have taught. Additionally, this "post-pandemic" lesson—whilst experiential and often part of the communication classroom planning process—requires us to problematize the purity of social media communication. Instead of facilitating discussion on the boundaries built into mediated communication, as the professor (and a graduate student charting my own pedagogical practices), I embrace the impurities of voice heavily built into the undergraduate students' concept and practice of social media. By doing so, the students are re-centered in the story of the classroom. We first ask them what it is they communicatively need. Second, we encourage them to frame these needs through the process of think, pair, share. Third, in the act of sharing, we prompt them to make the whiteboard messy. They see the visual role they play in messing up the order of normative education, and more importantly, through their "neighborhood's" wording. Fourth, we help them understand how their words and experiences form theories. Therefore, we see the students not as objects within the classroom, but as theorists themselves (Lechuga, 2020), embodying the theories by which we critically engage. Being guided by these steps as I prepare lessons for a post-pandemic classroom allows me to capture a more culturally centered pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), think more critically about what type of education is needed in the "post-pandemic" classroom (Hill et al., 2020; Schwartzman, 2020), and continue pressing into issues of socio-emotional needs with the students (Mello & Grobmeier, 2021).

The New/uanced Classroom Offering Voice

Like the students argued in relation to social mediated platforms, voice in a "post-pandemic" classroom is risky, encouraging, mystifies purity, and ever full of nuance. From a lens which sees voice being operative in a world that cannot decide if we are in a headspace to reflect on the pandemic just yet, the students helped me understand that voice is in the act of being heard, as much as it is in the act of hearing. Voice is mediated through virtual platforms, physical platforms, relational platforms, platforms of hope—all of which have been refined through definition and longing during the COVID-19 pandemic and its continuing ripple effects in our new/uanced classroom.

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Ohio Communication Journal
Volume 61 – 2023 pp. 76–80

In Defense of the Gray Squares: The Benefits of the Chat Function in the Online Classroom

Carlos Cruz

This article examines the ongoing debate regarding participation in online classrooms. This conversation often centers on how to replicate best the nature of a face-to-face classroom in an online environment. However, recent scholarly work has highlighted various barriers to students turning their cameras on during class sessions. Beyond examining these barriers, this article highlights the flexibility of online chat as a teaching tool. Online chat provides students with two different ways to communicate with their professors and peers. The chat function also alleviates some students' concerns regarding their technology's effectiveness or accents. Being the only face and voice in the online classroom may be a jarring experience for instructors, but it may best fit some of our students.

Keywords: online pedagogy, online chat, class participation

Introduction

In March 2020, the world of higher education changed overnight as lockdowns took effect in the United States. Depending on their institution, faculty may have received a short adjustment period that ostensibly afforded professors enough time to prepare their content for online dissemination. However, this transition likely represented many faculty members' first online teaching experience. A 2019 survey of faculty conducted by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup found that only 46% of their sample had experience with teaching an online course (Lederman, 2019). Beyond being neophytes to online teaching, some faculty likely experienced a classroom environment unlike any they had ever encountered. Potentially gone were nonverbal markers of the traditional classroom, such as students quickly jotting down notes or quizzical looks after a difficult term was first introduced. These nonverbal markers and our students were replaced by a panel of semi-anonymous gray squares. Moreover, not only were the visages of the students gone but, in some cases, their voices were supplanted largely by messages in the online chat. While initially jarring, this nontraditional classroom has been an excellent fit for my students throughout the pandemic. The online classroom does not have to mirror the face-to-face classroom, as it has unique strengths that can address different student concerns.

Literature Review

Unsurprisingly, the number of scholarly studies examining online classroom management has increased dramatically since the onset of the pandemic. This work has been especially interested in investigating why students do not turn their cameras on and different techniques that could encourage, if not mandate, students to turn their cameras on. Finders and Muñoz (2021, para. 6) argue that both approaches implemented by professors, encouraging and requiring students to have their cameras on, can be classified as "an attempt to exert control over the bodies of their students." The authors (Finders & Muñoz, 2021) list several arguments against turning on cameras, including eye contact is not a universal norm across cultures; students may not have access to the technology needed for video conferencing, and students' concerns about being camera ready.

In addition to the arguments regarding control propounded by Finders and Muñoz (2021), other scholarly studies have yielded several explanations for student reluctance to keep their cameras on. A survey conducted by Castelli and Sarvary (2020) found that students turned their cameras off most frequently due to the following three concerns: their appearance, a person being seen in their background, and internet connectivity issues. Gherhes et al. (2021) found that students do not keep their cameras on

Carlos Cruz (PhD, The Ohio State University, 2015) is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Arts and Sciences department at Bronx Community College. Address correspondence to the author at Carlos.cruz03@bcc.cuny.edu.

for various reasons, including fear of being exposed/shyness, because other students do not have their cameras on, and a desire to preserve the privacy of their homes. Of course, one cannot examine why individuals do not have cameras on without discussing the ubiquitous Zoom fatigue. Researchers Toney et al. (2021) highlighted ways to combat Zoom fatigue, such as asynchronous lectures and small group activities. While this list of reasons for students not turning their cameras on is extensive, it is certainly not exhaustive. One can imagine students attending lectures from their workplaces or while completing errands. Some professors may not be thrilled about the prospect of their students engaging in multitasking. Nevertheless, it may be unavoidable as society attempts to develop a new normal following the recent lockdowns.

While students may opt to keep their cameras off for various reasons, that does not undercut their ability to participate or the importance of participation during online lectures. Rocca's (2010) literature review showcased studies that demonstrated several positive effects of participation, including increased motivation, improved communication skills, and higher grades. Another literature review completed by Czekanski and Wolf (2013) revealed that some scholars consider participation an indicator of active learning. Czekanski and Wolf's (2013) summary of the literature links active learning to a host of positive outcomes, including improved writing ability and learning. A recent study by Kim et al. (2020) found that student participation is a significant mediator in the relationship between attendance and academic performance. Kim et al. (2020) observed that the direct relationship between attendance and academic performance was no longer significant once student participation had been accounted for. While participation in the online classroom may take different forms when contrasted to the face-to-face classroom, scholarly work indicates that seeking participation in the online classroom is a worthy endeavor for faculty.

The Benefits of Online Chat for Students

As previously mentioned, participation in online classrooms may represent a stark departure from face-to-face environments. This is certainly evident in my classes, as maybe half of the students will ever unmute their microphones to participate. Most student comments, inquiries, and asides are written in the class chat. Hadi Mogavi et al.'s (2021) typology delineates three barriers to active learning in online environments: human-side concerns such as shyness, environmental concerns such as overcrowding in the student's workspace, and technological concerns such as internet bandwidth. The previously listed barriers represent some hurdles that make my students reluctant to engage in vocal participation. Fortunately, Ganeser (2020) argues that the affordances of online classes can provide shy students with convenient ways to participate in conversations.

While human-side concerns are common, technological barriers were significant at my institution. During the Spring 2020 semester, the Bronx Community College (BCC) Office of Institutional Research conducted a survey that found 22% of students had trouble accessing online courses (C. Efthimiou, personal communication, September 6, 2022). The same technological barriers that prevent students from turning their cameras on during class will likely impact their ability to speak on the microphone. However, the digital divide is one of many reasons students may opt to type instead of speaking their thoughts.

Every semester I have a few students that are reluctant to speak in the classroom. However, for some of these students, their reluctance is not indicative of public speaking anxiety. Instead, these students occasionally confide that they do not participate because they are worried about being judged because of their accents or concerned about their ability to articulate their thoughts in English. Bista (2011, para. 3), in discussing his experience as an international student, admitted, "I did not join class discussion out of fear that I would be unable to deal with the possible conflicts or misunderstandings." Some scholarly work (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Tatar, 2005) has found that students who did not speak English as their first language were less likely to participate in classroom discussions.

Data from the BCC Office of Institutional Research found that 17% of all students enrolled in the Fall 2021 semester were more comfortable with a language other than English (C. Efthimiou, personal

communication, September 6, 2022). Concerns about accents are relatively common, so I address this issue early in the semester. I tell my students that an accent may mean they know two languages and that being bilingual is often a highly sought-after skill in the job market. Furthermore, I let students know that accents do not affect my performance evaluation. Despite my appeals, it is difficult for one argument to counter their lived experiences. In a face-to-face classroom, these students may be seen as "wallflowers" who would prefer to do anything other than participate in class.

However, the online classroom has three unique participation methods: vocal participation, typing in the public chat, and a direct message to the professor. For the moment, let us examine the latter two options. Typing, both publicly and privately, circumvents the previously described concern regarding accents. Typing gives these students a more straightforward method of engaging with the material and the professor. Campbell (2007) found that ESL students that were largely quiet during in-class discussions became more active participants when completing group activities on the discussion board. While the asynchronous nature of the discussion board affords students more time to compose their thoughts, there is still significant value in the chat function during a synchronous class session. A typed question may not pose the same level of "risk" for students whose concerns are primarily linked to their pronunciation.

In addition to bypassing concerns regarding pronunciation, the private chat function allows students to submit questions without worrying about the validity of their questions. The idea that "there are no bad questions" is undoubtedly a teaching cliché, but it is one that I wholeheartedly embrace. Nevertheless, some students may not want to attach their names to particular questions, especially if the rest of their peers presumably understand the material. If a privately submitted inquiry is connected to the lecture, I will read the question to the class without referencing the student's name. This integration of privately submitted questions into the lecture serves a bevy of functions: it provides immediate feedback to the student, demonstrates to other students the appeal of a privately raised question, and reinforces the concept for students with a firm grasp of the material. Of course, not all private messages are integrated into the lecture. For example, some students use the channel to notify me that they must temporarily step away from the computer or miss a future class session. The chat function lets me handle academic and personal concerns in real time.

Applications for Professors

Thus far, we have examined how online chat can be used to mitigate some student concerns regarding pronunciation and the validity of their questions. However, online chat provides faculty with options during their lectures. First, professors can use the chat to write down definitions, important upcoming dates, and to check in with students. Using the chat to list definitions is a great way to account for language barriers and the presence of specialized terminology. Furthermore, using the chat to record critical ideas addresses a few common technical issues such as audio interference in the student's background or internet stability.

Beyond listing definitions, providing students with important dates verbally and in the chat can help assuage some student stress. I use the first five to ten minutes of a class session for announcements. The announcements can refer to reminders for homework assignments, changes in an assignment's due date, or discussion of an important date for all students, such as the last day to withdraw from a course with a "W" grade. No matter the announcement, providing students with a written copy of information facilitates note-taking.

Significantly, these chat conversations can be aggregated and accounted for in Blackboard Collaborate using Session Engagement Insights. These insights provide hosts with valuable information, including how many hands were raised during the session, the total number of chat messages, and what percentage of attendees contributed to the discussion in the chat (Anthology Inc., n.d.). Professors can use these insights to reflect on lesson plans or activities that successfully capture student interest. These engagement insights can complement polls during the class session as unique ways to capture student participation. According to the engagement insights and polling data, professors can use the private chat

function to reach out to students that do not appear to be engaging with the course. These conversations can build student relationships integral to teaching effectiveness (Reynolds, 2022).

Conclusion

O'Conaill et al. (1993) once found that participants preferred video over audio conferences because audio-only can produce the sensation of "talking into a void" (419). For some professors talking to a virtual wall of gray squares may elicit a similar feeling. However, a change in perspective will allow faculty members to appreciate the richness of this online environment. Online classes may not have the same nonverbal signifiers of student interest and behavior, but this environment is replete with ways for students to express their ideas and concerns. In addition, this online classroom provides all students with participation opportunities instead of the conversation being dominated by those comfortable with public speaking. For these reasons, faculty should resist the urge to create a facsimile of the face-to-face classroom. Instead, they should continue to examine how to best use the affordances of online environments to teach their students.

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