Dual identity among gay Asian Pacific Islander men

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Abstract
This paper examines the complexity associated with having two potentially conflicting social identities in the USA: being Asian Pacific Islander and being gay. Twenty-five gay Asian Pacific Islander men completed individual interviews regarding their racial and sexual identities and the intersection between the two. Data analysis revealed diversity in ways by which individuals integrated their dual identities and expressed themselves to others; pathways by which individuals combined their race and sexuality into a coherent self-concept; and strategies for maintaining harmony and balance in self understanding. Findings emphasized the role of situational factors in determining the salience and relevance of each component of identity. Their experiences are discussed in the light of theoretical models of psychosocial development and frameworks for understanding self-concept complexity.

Résumé
Cet article examine la complexité associée à la possession de deux identités sociales potentiellement conflictuelles aux USA: être océanien et être gay. Vingt-cinq hommes gays, originaires des îles du Pacifique, ont été interrogés individuellement sur leurs identités sexuelle et ethnique, et sur le croisement de ces deux identités. L'analyse des données a révélé la diversité des approches par lesquelles ces hommes intégraient leur double identité et s'exprimaient envers les autres; les voies choisies par eux pour combiner leur appartenance ethnique et leur sexualité en un concept de soi cohérent; et des stratégies de maintien de l’harmonie et de l’équilibre dans la compréhension de soi. Les résultats mettent l'accent sur le rôle des facteurs situationnels dans la détermination de la saillance et de la pertinence de chacune des composantes de l’identité. Les expériences de ces hommes sont discutées à la lumière de modèles théoriques du développement psychosocial et de cadres de compréhension de la complexité du concept de soi.

Resumen
En este artículo examinamos la complejidad de tener dos identidades sociales potencialmente conflictivas en los EE.UU.: proceder de las islas del Pacífico y ser homosexual. Veinticinco homosexuales originariamente de las islas del Pacífico participaron en entrevistas individuales sobre sus identidades raciales y sexuales, y la intersección entre las dos. Los análisis de los datos revelaron una diversidad en cuanto a cómo los entrevistados compaginaban sus identidades duales y el modo en el que se expresaban con los demás; las vías que utilizaban para combinar su raza y sexualidad en un autoconcepto coherente y sus estrategias para mantener la armonía y el equilibrio para comprenderse ellos mismos. Los resultados recalcaron el rol de los factores de situación a la hora de determinar la prominencia y relevancia de cada componente de identidad. Sus experiencias se evalúan en vistas a los
models teóricos del desarrollo psicosocial y las estructuras para entender la complejidad del autoconcepto.

**Keywords:** identity, Asian Pacific Islander, gay men

## Introduction

Although researchers have long been interested in the development and structure of ethnic identity (Helms 1990, Phinney 1990, Oyserman and Sakamoto 1997) and sexual identity (Troiden 1989, Garnets and Kimmel 1993, Bem 2000), few studies have examined the intersection between the two. While scholars within humanities have begun to examine gay Asian male identities through the analysis of fiction written by gay Asian Pacific Islander men, there have only been a handful of attempts in the social sciences to explore the development of gay Asian Pacific Islander men’s identities in any serious way (Chan 1989, Kumashiro 1999, Manalansan 2003, Mao et al. 2004). In fact, Takagi’s (1996: 31) contention that ‘what we do know about Asian American gays and lesbians must be gleaned from personal narratives, literature, poetry, short stories and essays’, written more than a decade earlier, still rings true today.

Several models of identity development have outlined pathways by which individuals integrate their group memberships into their identity. Erikson’s (1963, 1968) work on socio-emotional identity development has provided a foundation for many of these models. Eriksonian theory posits a stage-wise course from infancy to older adulthood, whereby individuals mature psychologically and emotionally by completing a series of developmental tasks and adapting to increasingly complex psychosocial environments throughout their life. Each stage in this theory is characterized by a unique crisis, representing a process of thoughtful exploration around a developmentally specific theme. When each crisis is resolved, individuals gain more advanced self-knowledge and skills for subsequent life functioning. According to this framework, one critical developmental task involves the creation of an identity – that is, a clear understanding of self, a committed answer to the question: ‘Who am I?’ The process of answering this question has been called the identity crisis.

Marcia (1966) elaborated on Erikson’s model by identifying four potential outcomes of identity crisis. Identity achievement is a state characterized by a period of personal exploration that yields a strong understanding of self and commitment to one’s identity. Identity moratorium is characterized by having had a period of personal exploration that does not result in a well-articulated self-identity; instead, the individual remains in continued identity negotiation and decision making about the question ‘Who am I?’ Identity foreclosure reflects a state of having a strong self-identity without having undergone thoughtful exploration leading to that identity; here, people’s identities conform to categories and traits ingrained through socialization. Identity diffusion is an outcome in which the individual does not undergo personal exploration about identity and, consequently, lacks a clear sense of self.

According to multicultural psychologists (Atkinson et al. 1989, Parham 1989, Phinney 1989, Helms 1990), racial identity development for members of minority groups parallels the processes described by Erikson and Marcia. During the beginning stages of development, minority individuals usually do not examine, or question, what it means to be of a particular race or to belong to an ethnic group. Social or interpersonal cues, such as entering a more racially heterogeneous environment than
one is used to or experiencing discrimination for the first time, impel individuals to think more critically about their own race. Such reflection can lead to a period of racial ‘immersion’ whereby minority individuals engross their lives with information, symbols and people that reflect their race, often accompanied by distancing themselves from the dominant culture. The period of exploration can increase individuals’ value for their racial group and result in a more coherent self-concept in which race is a defining feature. According to this framework, race becomes transformed from an unexamined abstraction to a core component of identity. Parham (1989) has argued that this process of racial identity development continues throughout the lifespan, a process he referred to as ‘cycling.’

Specifically for Asian Pacific Islanders residing in the USA, scholars hypothesize that there is an internal conflict between the collective nature of Asian Pacific Islanders’ identities and the individual nature of western identities. As Asian Pacific Islanders living in a western society, individuals tend either to assimilate into having an individualistic outlook or maintain a collective outlook (Oyserman and Sakamoto 1997). This is thought to be achieved through a process that involves a period of actively denying the importance of race in an attempt to conform to the dominant group, followed by a period of dissonance when the individual feels ambivalent or confused about identifying with others of a similar heritage. This can then lead to a period of immersion when the individual rejects all things ‘white’ in favour of things that are Asian Pacific Islander, until the individual finally achieves a period of integrative awareness (Alvarez and Helms 2001).

Models of homosexual identity development offer a similar perspective to racial identity frameworks. Cass (1984) and Troiden (1989), for example, have argued that individuals often begin their homosexual identity exploration without having ever before considered the possibility of being gay or lesbian. Feelings of same-sex attraction might lead to confusion and questioning in a manner similar to Erikson’s (1968) concept of identity crisis. Some cope with this process by immersing themselves in gay/homosexual settings or social networks in order to integrate the idea of homosexuality into their sense of identity. At the more advanced stages of homosexual identity development, gay- and lesbian-identified individuals feel committed and comfortable with this component of their identity. Marked by the act of ‘coming out’, the last stage is thought of as a period when the individual not only publicly acknowledges his/her sexuality but also his/her positive appraisal and commitment to the identity of being gay in a heterosexual society (Dube 2000).

Although these models are widely accepted, Garnets (2002) has argued that developmental models of sexual identity formation must account for components of identity, such as race, that can interact or conflict with sexual identity. Indeed, recent studies examining non-white gay experiences demonstrate the difficulty of understanding the experience of all same sex attracted people in terms of gayness and ‘coming out’. For example, in his study of Filipino gay men in New York, Manalansan noted that for many gay Filipino men, coming out is seen as a ‘particularly American idea and behaviour’ (2003: 27) that has little relevance to their everyday experiences. Asthana and Oostvogels (2001) also noted that in some Asian cultures, sexuality is often not central to the ways by which people identify themselves.

A recent theoretical framework on social identity complexity developed by Roccas and Brewer (2002) attempts to describe the psychological aspects of having multiple social identities and is useful for this analysis. Their framework postulates that people organize dual identities through four typical combinations: intersection, dominance, compartmen-
talization and merger. Intersection reflects individuals identifying themselves according to the overlap between their two identities, such as men who are both homosexual and Asian Pacific Islander who see themselves in terms of the single ‘hyphenated category’ – gay-Asian Pacific Islander – and who prioritize this more specific identity over their more general racial and sexual identities. Dominance refers to the tendency for some individuals to prioritize one group membership over the other. Compartmentalization denotes a separation of identities according to context or situation, such as when individuals keep their homosexuality hidden from family or work networks. Merger represents the combination of both group identities into a larger and more inclusive and holistic identity, such as a global citizen or a multicultural identity, and within which both racial and sexual identities reside.

To date, research on gay and lesbian people of colour has focused on the tension associated with being both gay and a racial minority, often portraying this as a source of psychological vulnerability and risk for negative health behaviours such as unprotected sex and drug use (Diaz 1998, Stokes and Peterson 1998). This has been argued to be the case for many gay Asian Pacific Islander men in the USA, for whom same-sex attraction and ethnic heritage appear to clash (Chung and Katayama 1999, Kanuha 2000). Studies have suggested that some gay Asian Pacific Islander men experience high levels of psychological tension between their different group identities (Choi et al. 1998, Sanitioso 1999). Three factors contributing to this tension have been identified. First, sexuality is a taboo topic in many Asian Pacific Islander cultures and overtly homosexual behaviours and identities are not typically accepted within Asian Pacific Islander communities. Second, family networks are strongly valued among members of Asian Pacific Islander cultures, so gay men risk violating family and cultural expectations regarding marriage and having children. Third, gay Asian Pacific Islander men report feeling stigmatized and discriminated against within the larger gay community due to stereotyping and prejudice (Nemoto et al. 2003).

Psychological tension associated with the conflict between racial identity and same-sex attraction may escalate the tendency for some gay Asian Pacific Islander men to engage in HIV-related risk behaviours (Sanitioso 1999, Nemoto et al. 2003). Interviews with gay Asian Pacific Islander men in San Francisco (Choi et al. 1998) and Hawaii (Kanuha 2000), for example, have shown that men who experience difficulty reconciling their racial and sexual identity may be prone to depression, have low self-efficacy to engage in safer sex negotiation and be less likely to utilize HIV-prevention services. It has been hypothesized that individuals who are both gay and of minority ethnic status can overcome the stresses associated with conflicting components of identity by creating harmony among these seemingly opposing components (Crawford et al. 2002).

One model of identity development for gay Asian Pacific Islander men proposed by Gock (1992) addresses how individuals can resolve the conflict between race and sexuality. The first stage of this model is called status quo, representing a period of accepting cultural and familial values about race, gender and sexuality without exploring alternatives. The second stage is called identity awareness, in which individuals first become aware of having a sexual identity in addition to a racial/ethnic identity; it is assumed that individuals’ awareness of being Asian Pacific Islander precedes their awareness of homosexuality. Third, a dilemma of allegiance stage occurs whereby individuals experience personal conflict between their racial and sexual identities. A fourth stage is called selective allegiance, reflecting the tendency for individuals to more closely identify and prioritize one group identity over the other. Finally, a fifth stage is
called identity integration and signifies a hypothetical state of harmony between both facets of the individual’s self-concept. To date, there is little empirical evidence to support the assertions of this framework. In this paper, therefore, we examine whether and how gay Asian Pacific Islander men accommodate both their ethnicity and sexuality within their personal identity.

The paper focuses on the following questions: do the experiences of gay Asian Pacific Islander men correspond with Gock’s (1992) theoretical model of social identity complexity; and how do gay Asian Pacific Islander men accommodate both race and sexuality in their identity?

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling methods in San Francisco. Men were eligible to participate if they were of Asian or Pacific Islander heritage, had a history of sex with another man, were able to communicate in English and were aged 18 years or older. Twenty-five men who satisfied these criteria agreed to participate in a one-hour, semi-structured interview. Before the interview, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, which was unlinked to the tape-recorded and transcribed interview. Participants were primarily ethnic Filipino (36%), Chinese or Taiwanese (28%) and Vietnamese (12%). Ages ranged from 18 to 39 years (M=28 years), with 16% being below 24 years, 48% being between 25 and 29 years and 36% being between 30 and 39 years. Participants were well-educated: 12% had completed high school, 24% had attended some college and 64% had a college degree. Seventy-five percent of the sample was born outside the continental USA. The average length of residence in the USA among non-US-born participants was 16 years.

**Procedures**

Interviews were conducted by a gay, Vietnamese American, male research associate. After screening for eligibility by phone, participants met individually with the interviewer at a private office space. At the beginning of the meeting, the interviewer handed out an information sheet describing the purpose of the study, confidentiality of data and risks and benefits of participation. The interviewer also explained the interview would be tape-recorded and that tapes would be transcribed and analyzed for research purposes. After answering participants’ questions about the study, the interviewer obtained informed consent.

The facilitator used a semi-structured, qualitative interview protocol covering topics including identity, identity conflict, coming out and sexual behaviour. Interview questions included the following: is your sexuality an important part of who you are; is your race an important part of who you are; what is a more important part of who you are – being Asian or being gay; is it harder to be gay if you’re Asian; and is it harder to be Asian if you’re gay? In addition to these main questions, interviewers used probes to facilitate discussion and elaboration. Participants were assured of confidentiality and that there were not any right or wrong answers. At the end of the interview they were reimbursed financially US$ 10 for their time.

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Committee on Human Research at the University of California San Francisco.
Analysis

Data were entered into NUD*IST, a software programme for organizing data and conducting text searches and were analyzed using standard techniques for qualitative data including coding, marginal remarks and memo writing (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Coding was conducted by two independent readers who conducted a line-by-line analysis of the text data. Each reader developed a list of key categories to represent the phenomena and stories described in the data. The readers then met to finalize a comprehensive list of coding categories and then assigned codes to each line of text using NUD*IST. Discrepancies in developing the coding categories and labeling the text were resolved through discussion with an independent third coder.

After identifying the research questions for this paper, an independent reader examined the transcribed data by searching on relevant coding categories using the NUD*IST programme. Marginal remarks were written to elaborate on the coding categories documenting ongoing reflective thoughts and insights on the data. Finally, memos were developed for the purpose of theorizing and making sense of the marginal remarks. Memos represent the researchers’ abstract thinking and interpretation of the data and involved making interconnections between coding categories based on the marginal remarks, raw data and discussions between coders (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Results

We identified two major themes related to the research questions. First, findings generally corroborated Gock’s (1992) framework showing a stage-wise trend in how gay Asian Pacific Islander men developed and integrated their identities. Second, we found that some amount of tension was associated with the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality, but that participants found strategies to achieve balance in their complex social identities, corresponding to predictions based on Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) model.

Development of dual Asian Pacific Islander-gay identity

Participants’ narratives on dual identity development adhered to the principles articulated in Gock’s (1992) theoretical model of Asian Pacific Islander-gay identity and integration. Generally speaking, men initially saw themselves as having a foundational ethnic identity, which preceded sexual identity awareness. For example, one respondent put it succinctly when he stated: ‘I was Asian first and then gay. That was the process.’ However, there was diversity among respondents in how they arrived at their ethnic identity. While some participants had accepted their ethnicity unquestioningly, similar to Marcia’s (1966) concept of identity foreclosure and Gock’s (1992) concept of status quo identity, others underwent a deeper psychological process of examining and questioning their ethnic identity. For example, according to one respondent: ‘Being Filipino is a given. Your ethnicity is a given. It’s without a question, accepting. Sexuality is not a given.’ (Manny, Filipino American)

In contrast, other respondents struggled with what it meant to be an ethnic minority. Rather than simply accept ethnicity as a status quo, they undertook a more critical examination of race. For example:
‘As a child, my experiences were being “Why am I different?” That was the key question. Why have I been picked on? Why can I not live a normal life? I realized that I was not an isolated case, that basically, all the other Chinese Americans faced the same feelings. Then that all gelled and I basically had a lot of pride in who I was and I realized the advantages of my background and how it actually set me apart from mainstream America. So in fact, I find it now to be an advantage.’ (Lee, Chinese American)

Whether an individual simply accepted their racial identity as a given or reached it through a more thoughtful process, being Asian Pacific Islander formed a foundation for most participants’ identity prior to their growing awareness of being gay. As such, dual identity development meant integrating homosexual identity into a pre-existing consciousness of being Asian Pacific Islander, as would be characterized by Gock’s identity awareness stage or by Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) concept of moving from lower to higher social identity complexity.

The attempt to incorporate their gay identity with their existing Asian Pacific Islander identity was a source of conflict for many participants. One respondent who readily accepted his ethnic identity stated:

‘Being Asian, it’s almost like you’re, I mean you’re born into it and it’s not something that you question. And being gay has been both very difficult and, and something you have to kind of learn – I mean the [gay] culture anyway. Sometimes I wonder if the culture fits who I, my values are.’ (Ming, Chinese/Taiwanese American)

Most participants, whether they unquestioningly accepted their ethnic identity or had worked hard to establish an ethnic identity, experienced some amount of conflict between their Asian Pacific Islander cultural values and their growing gay awareness as they developed increasing identity awareness. For example, one respondent noted:

‘To be gay almost means that you have to reject that part of culture that’s kind of been ingrained. We’re told not to make as much noise, not to rock the boat. And being gay, you need to stand up for yourself a lot of times in the world. And sort of being Asian and gay, you’re less, you feel like it’s that much harder.’ (Ming, Chinese/Taiwanese American)

As such, we found that for most respondents, Gock’s (1992) dilemma of allegiance stage, which was originally hypothesized as following identity awareness, preceded it rather than followed it. That is, respondents experienced a dilemma associated with acknowledging and identifying as homosexual prior to any dilemma associated with balancing sexual and racial identity.

We also found that the awareness of being both gay and Asian Pacific Islander appeared less conflicted for men who had already critically examined their racial identity. Accordingly, developing a more sophisticated race consciousness facilitated the gay coming out process by providing learned skills in identity formation and integration, such as knowing how to develop a sense of community with one’s group and using existing resources to connect with others:

‘It was very systematic. I turned 24, went out, got literature. I knew where gay people congregated. I knew where to find publications. And then I went out on dates … I was equipped to come out. And it was because I came out as an Asian-American during college, (that was) where I formed those coming out skills.’ (Lee, Chinese American)
Prior development of an Asian Pacific Islander identity also helped to lessen the psychological impact of having to incorporate a gay identity. Many gay Asian Pacific Islander men talked about the importance of developing a strong Asian Pacific Islander identity before coming out and noted that lacking a racial or ethnic identity could have detrimental consequences for gay Asian Pacific Islander men in a predominantly white gay community. As one informant noted:

‘I’m sure there’s a lot of people like me out there who are very comfortable with it [being gay and Asian Pacific Islander] but I think there’s also a lot of people out there who aren’t comfortable with it, being Asian and gay at the same time … Like I said, when Asian gays try to come out in the gay community, and he sees a lot of imagery of white people, that could be very hard if they’re not really into themselves, or very sure of themselves to begin with … Let’s say if I was coming out and I wasn’t really sure how I was, my self-esteem is saying, oh well, or just very unsure generally, and I start seeing imagery of white people in the media, as far as being gay, it would be very hard for me to accept that.’ (Michael, Filipino American)

Participants who experienced internal tension between the two identities accommodated this tension by prioritizing one identity over the other, as postulated in Gock’s (1992) selective allegiance stage or by Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) representation of social identity dominance, whereby one identity subsumes another:

‘For a long, long time being gay was supremely important … It was to the exclusion of my Vietnamese identity as well. I felt like I needed to put the one on the side.’ (Jack, Vietnamese American)

Resolution of this identity conflict came through an effort to question and learn from the meanings of race and sexuality. For example, one man reflected on how being gay had informed his assumptions about race:

‘I see so many theoretical parallels between ethnicity and sexuality just around through defining ethnicity and what ethnicity means and what sexuality means and what gender means. I think each of these informs the others. That’s why I was talking before about how nothing can separate them because they’re all very related and work on very similar, so much more ways.’ (Edward, Chinese American)

Arriving at Gock’s (1992) fifth stage of identity integration, or Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) representation of merger between two social identities, involved being able to weave facets of their gay identity with their ethnic identity and arrive at a rationale that explained how the two identities could operate together. For example, one participant stated:

‘They’re [ethnic and sexual identity] part of my make-up, they’re part of what makes me who I am. And, you know, they’re both imbued with like, I don’t know, you know, I mean they’re just part of who I am.’ (Carlos, Filipino American)

Even among men who expressed comfort with both social identities, episodes of identity-related discomfort or tension often arose. However, consistent with Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) emphasis on situational determinants of identity comfort, participants stated that the conflict and discomfort around dual identities was a consequence of situational pressures, usually reflecting others’ discomfort around sexuality or others’ racial prejudices, rather than reflecting internalized states. For example, participants recognized that whereas
gay identity was concealable, ethnic identity was not: ‘My ethnicity shows on my face, my sexuality doesn’t.’ (David, Japanese American)

Consequently, discomfort around sexuality was associated with the consequences of disclosure or coming out to others, whereas discomfort around ethnicity was associated with others’ pre-existing stereotypes and attitudes towards Asian Pacific Islanders.

**Shifting and compartmentalizing identities**

Although there was consistent evidence that most participants had developed a dual Asian Pacific Islander and gay identity, participants’ identities shifted and became compartmentalized according to the social context. Thus, dual identity did not appear to operate in a fixed and unified manner. When asked to describe the importance of his Asian Pacific Islander identity as opposed to his sexual identity, one respondent stated:

‘I’m sure both are equally important but it also depends on the situation and what I should be feeling more defensive about at the time. Meaning, if I’m in a room with white men, I immediately acknowledge to myself that I’m the only person of colour in the room and I think the difference is also marked in their eyes. And the same thing with walking through Chinatown here, or the San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles with queer friends.’ (Stanley, Chinese American)

Here, we see evidence supporting self-categorization theory (Turner *et al.* 1987), which postulates that social context can determine how individuals define the social categories to which they belong, depending on the relevance of category membership. This notion of shifting identities also reflects Parham’s (1989) concept of ‘recycling,’ such that participants’ core identities were not static but changed over time with new experiences and insights on race and sexuality, producing even more sophisticated self-understanding. Social context appeared to determine participants’ comfort with their dual identity by rendering one identity more immediately salient and, at times, vulnerable, than the other. Homogenous gay/white settings tended to contribute to feelings of race discomfort and family or cultural settings made some men feel anxious about being gay.

There was also a tendency for participants to compartmentalize their identities when the situation warranted compartmentalization. The dominant pattern was for men to conceal being gay from family and other members of the Asian Pacific Islander community, a behaviour motivated by cultural norms and familial obligations around gender roles, the importance of perpetuating the family name and taboos against open discussions of sexuality, rather than reflecting internalized conflict about being gay. One participant stated:

‘In Chinese culture we are very conservative. Especially parents. So like myself, I’m gay, a gay man, but my family doesn’t know about it. And of course I’m not going to tell them … Our kind of culture, we don’t talk a lot of our private life with families. Especially [being] gay.’ (Jeffrey, Chinese American)

Whereas some men mentioned keeping their sexuality concealed from friendship acquaintances or work colleagues, all participants consistently acknowledged experiences of stigma against homosexuality within traditional Asian Pacific Islander cultures and most adapted their self-expression to fit those parameters. As such, compartmentalization of homosexual identity in the family context was common. However, respondents did not view compartmentalizing their sexual identity from their ethnic identity to be ‘closeting’ themselves. They viewed the action as protecting family members from having to confront the taboo subject of sexuality. For example, one participant described how everyone in his
family implicitly knew that he was gay, but he was not ‘openly gay’ in the family environment:

‘My definition of out is, you don’t have to send a decree or proclamation or slap anyone in the face or spit it out. It’s like, and I don’t want to say, don’t ask, don’t tell either. I put an emphasis on being gay as an identity … [But] just because I’m gay and it’s important to me … it doesn’t have to be important to my parents or to my siblings.’ (Manny, Filipino American)

As such, gay Asian Pacific Islander men who were not openly out to family did not necessarily see themselves as being closeted. Rather, they viewed their compartmentalization of their gay identity, in the presence of family members, as being compatible with their family values.

**Balancing Asian Pacific Islander-gay identity**

Although participants described the tension between race and sexuality in the course of their identity development, they also reported strategies to accommodate and find harmony in their duality. This was particularly true for men who perceived their race and sexuality as intimately interconnected and inseparable, that is, for men who have achieved identity merger in Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) framework. For this sub-group of men, being both Asian Pacific Islander and gay defined their sense of self and jointly shaped their social networks and interpersonal relationships, and they were less likely to compartmentalize their sexuality away from family or cultural contexts.

A common theme found among this sub-group of men was the recognition that the tension between being Asian Pacific Islander and gay emerged from vulnerable situations, rather than inherent incompatibility between the two. Consequently, participants attributed feelings of tension to their environments rather than internalized psychological adversity. About the gay community, one participant stated:

‘The gay community has stereotypes of the Asian community, which reflects on the gay Asian community. And your Asian background also has stereotypes about the gay community. So it’s like, who can you turn to? Except people who are both gay and Asian.’ (Ming, Chinese/Taiwanese American)

Rather than compartmentalizing their identities, men who had merged their racial and sexual identity appeared to do so by creating an accepting and supportive community that accommodated their complex social identities. Having a social environment and support system where participants’ race and sexuality were mutually affirmed appeared vital to a feeling of security and integration:

‘I’ve chosen places specifically where I know I would feel comfortable in. In terms of community, work, I’ve chosen to work in fields or be with people that I feel would be open to who I am.’ (Charles, Chinese American)

Yet another participant stated:

‘I’m more interested in developing and strengthening a queer Asian Pacific Islander community than I am in mainstreaming myself or coalition building with the majority community.’ (Adam, Chinese/Taiwanese American)
Another strategy for alleviating potential identity challenges was by viewing the universal difficulty in having a dual racial-gay identity and, in a sense, de-personalizing the potential conflicts between the two:

‘It’s hard to be gay no matter who you are, whether you’re Asian or not, those cultural baggages exist, whether you’re Asian, or whether you’re white, or whether you’re Latino, or whether you’re black. Homophobia and heterosexism is not limited to the Asian community.’ (Carlos, Filipino American)

A few men turned to cultural writings for viewing dual identity within a larger context and providing insight into achieving internal harmony:

‘I found comfort reading the mystics, the Mung masters of Asian philosophy, especially from India, where they talk about universal experience. I found comfort in all this, it was providing me some answers about racial identity and how I had to find a balance in that. And also it was beginning to give me some knowledge about myself sexually, and especially in regards to the conflict I had with my religion.’ (Victor, Filipino American)

For some men, the complexity associated with having dual identities led to extended periods of introspection and self-evaluation, which then facilitated increased opportunities for self-acceptance. Another way by which some men achieved balance between complex identities was by identifying lessons to learn from being both gay and Asian Pacific Islander, as well as ways to contribute to the community. Through identifying a larger purpose associated with their identities, these participants felt personally and socially empowered. One man described how a dual identity had raised his political awareness:

‘There’s a constant struggle fighting phobias, cultural and sexual phobias, racism, homophobia, challenging the norms or challenging the majority or those in the privileged, powerful.’ (Manny, Filipino American)

Whether participants affiliated with primarily Asian Pacific Islander networks, gay networks, Asian Pacific Islander-gay networks or multicultural-queer networks, social support appeared key to self-acceptance of their complex identities. Several men expressed appreciation for having both a strong sense of culture and sexuality, as in this comment:

‘I know a lot of gay white men who feel like they don’t have a community … I think there are advantages. It’s nice to have a community.’ (David, Japanese American)

Having a social environment where participants’ race and sexuality were mutually affirmed was central to this feeling of integration and contributed to feelings of self-acceptance even outside of the safe environment. One participant reflected on this feeling of psychological harmony in diverse settings:

‘I can be sort of comfortable in the Vietnamese community and at the same time be comfortable in the gay community, in the gay Vietnamese community or just the American community and the gay subculture as well. It’s all a measure of how you deal with certain situations and I’ve learned to deal with them pretty substantially.’ (Khahn, Vietnamese American)
Discussion

In this paper, we have sought to provide insights into the subjective experiences associated with dual identity for gay Asian Pacific Islander men, characteristics of the development of dual identity and some of the consequences associated with this complexity. We found diversity in ways by which gay Asian Pacific Islander men prioritized and organized their dual identities and in the ways they expressed their identities in family and social circumstances; no simple profile emerged. Within this diversity, there was consistent evidence of the ability to balance both identities and maintain personal satisfaction and comfort with being both Asian Pacific Islander and gay.

Our analysis supported principles from the developmental model advanced by Gock (1992) and other models of ethnic and sexual identity development (Cass 1984, Helms 1990, Parham 1989, Troiden 1989, Phinney 1990) by demonstrating a general trajectory by which men’s identities changed from having a single social identity based on race to a more complex and nuanced identity incorporating both sexuality and racial dimensions together. Our analysis has also provided some verification for each of the categories described in Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) taxonomy of social identity complexity.

However, the work described here builds on these models in important ways. First, with regard to developmental models, narratives revealed that dual identity development might not occur in a uniformly linear, stage-wise process. Narratives also indicated that men have different reference points regarding their initial comfort with racial and/or sexual identity. For many of the men in this study, awareness of race and ethnicity were ingrained to some extent prior to realizing their sexuality. And depending on the level of critical analysis they had previously experienced with regard to their racial identity, men appeared to vary in skills for dealing with tensions associated with sexual identity development. Some men coped with this conflict by prioritizing one component of self (usually sexuality) over the other, others selectively chose social niches to affiliate with and others engaged in critical thinking about the personal meanings about an integrated Asian Pacific Islander gay identity. For some men, there appeared no single endpoint in this dual identity development process, as participants’ consciousness of their race and sexuality seemed to remain in constant growth and evolution (Parham 1989).

A second way in which findings build on previous models is by depicting the categories described by Roccas and Brewer (2002) as fluid rather than static dispositions. Situational context determined whether and the extent to which identities were salient and in need of shifting. Indeed, gay Asian Pacific Islander men we interviewed reorganized their identities and shaped their presentation of self according to contextual factors and situational demands. Roccas and Brewer (2002) hypothesized that these different prototypes of dual identity are associated with unique personality attributes and ways in which individuals relate to one another. Notably, they argued that identity merger represents the most sophisticated form of identity integration and is associated with cognitive complexity, egalitarian values, tolerance of outgroup members and adaptive coping with stress. Our qualitative data precluded direct examination of these compelling hypotheses. However, our data do suggest that the complex social identities are not fixed entities but, instead, are malleable and responsive to social context.

The ability to reorganize and adapt one’s identity to fit situational boundaries emerged as an important feature of the gay Asian Pacific Islander men we interviewed. Although this idea dates to classic works on personality and the self-concept (James 1890, Mead 1934) and self-presentation (Goffman 1959), there appeared important cultural underpinnings to
this malleability in participants’ dual identity. According to Doi’s (1985) analysis of Asian psychology, the distinction between the personal-self versus the public-self is a cultural phenomenon and value unique to non-western cultures. Personal values, preferences and motivations in Asian cultures are often restrained in social settings, where the needs of the group are given precedence. This might account for participants’ tendency toward compartmentalization of their gay identity in family or cultural gatherings. Western thinkers might view this as lacking personal integrity or conviction. But Doi (1985) has argued that the ability to compromise the needs of the self with the needs of the group can actually engender a sense of internal harmony, because the individual can maintain a complex and fluid network of self-identifications rather than being forced to have a singular, static identity. This complexity necessitates skills to co-exist with others by adapting to situations. Thus, for the men in our study, being gay did not need to override being Asian Pacific Islander because they possessed skills to assess situational parameters that shaped who they are ‘in the moment’ and express themselves accordingly.

There are important limitations to this study. First, our sample may not be representative of the larger gay Asian Pacific Islander community in several ways. The men we interviewed tended to be middle-class, fluent in English, highly educated, well acculturated to the USA and comfortable communicating about their sexuality. Second, our sample did not include all subgroup Asian Pacific Islander ethnicities; Filipino, Chinese and Vietnamese men were dominant ethnic groups in our sample and it is unclear why men from other Asian Pacific Islander ethnicities were not well represented. Third, all men were gay-identified; none expressed ambivalence about their sexual attraction to other men. Thus, the findings may not generalize to non-middle class gay Asian Pacific Islander men who are less acculturated to life in the USA, less educated, non-English speaking and at early developmental stages or ambivalent about their sexuality. Fourth, participants may have censored their comments to fit social desirability demands of the interview. Fifth, because of the limitations of the interview protocol we may not have seen deeper levels of conflict that might be associated with dual identity and we did not ask men to define and problematize notions of race and sexuality (e.g. the socially constructed or performative nature of race, gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990)). Future research can provide more sophisticated insights into how men accept race and sexuality as fundamental truths, versus constructed or scripted social roles. Finally, because of the nature of qualitative data, we are unable to infer statistical associations between conceptual variables (such as levels of gay identity awareness and self-esteem).

Despite limitations, our findings can guide development of future studies on racial identity, sexual identity and psychological and health outcomes. For example, future research can build on this study by examining the strength of association between racial and sexual identity among gay Asian Pacific Islander individuals, as well as within individuals across situations, and determine the antecedents and psychological consequences of this association. The development of valid and reliable measures of dual identity are important for understanding the relationship between how racial and sexual identity can predict depression, self-esteem and risk behaviours, such as unprotected sex and drug use. Group comparisons (e.g. comparisons of American versus non-American gay Asian Pacific Islanders and comparisons of gay men across minority ethnic groups) can also provide compelling insights into cultural and developmental processes that contribute to negative psychological consequences for gay men of colour, mechanisms for resolving psychological tension and interventions for mitigating the psychological and health disparities associated with being a member of both a racial and a sexual minority group.
References


