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## Exploring the Sexual Development Experiences of Black Bisexual Male Adolescents Over Time

Anthony Morgan<sup>1</sup>, Brianna Saunders<sup>1</sup>, Brian Dodge<sup>2</sup>, Gary Harper<sup>3</sup>, and Renata Arrington Sanders<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 200 North Wolfe Street, 2063, Baltimore, MD 21287, USA

<sup>2</sup>Indiana University School of Public Health, Bloomington, IN, USA

<sup>3</sup>University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

### Abstract

Scant research has sought to explore the development of dimensions of sexual orientation among Black bisexual male adolescents (BBMA). Understanding how sexual attractions, behaviors, and identities evolve among BBMA over time is crucial to understanding the most appropriate support strategies to provide during this developmental period. We sought to understand and describe the sexual orientation development experiences in a sample of BBMA over the course of 1 year. We further sought to understand the sociocontextual factors that may play a role during this development process. Fifteen BBMA, aged 15–19 years, were interviewed about sexual debut experiences (baseline) and were re-interviewed three times over a 1-year period about sexual attractions, behaviors, and identity at each follow-up point. A three-person team used inductive open coding to analyze each participant's data set. The mean Kinsey scale score for the sample was 2.93 (SD = 1.2) most closely translating to "heterosexual/gay-equally." A case study analysis was used to identify themes related to sexual attractions, behavior, and identity over time, within and across participants. Among the sample of young men, two unique groups were identified based on self-reported sexual identity and experiences of same- and other-sex sexual attractions and behaviors over time. The first group consisted of seven young men who consistently described their sexual identity as bisexual from baseline to the final follow-up. These young men also described similar experiences related to same- and other-sex sexual and romantic attractions and more consistently described same- and other-sex sexual behaviors. The second group consisted of eight young men that described changing sexual identity and same- and other-sex sexual romantic attractions overtime. Participants described sociocontextual factors such as religion, masculinity, and homophobia played during their development. Findings from this study underscore the

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✉ Anthony Morgan amorga28@jhu.edu.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Approvals** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

complexity of sexual orientation development and sociocultural factors and expectations that may influence sexual identity and behavior among BBMA.

## Keywords

Adolescents; Black; Bisexual males; Sexual identity; Sexual attractions; Sexual orientation

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## Introduction

Sexual orientation has been conceptualized as a complex multidimensional construct encompassing sexual and romantic attractions, sexual behaviors, and sexual identity (Mustanski, Kuper, & Greene, 2014; Savin-Williams, Cash, McCormack, & Rieger, 2017). The development and exploration of sexual attraction, behavior, and identity are key tasks during adolescence (O'Sullivan & Thompson, 2014). Much of the research exploring sexual development of adolescents has focused on adolescents who identify as heterosexual (Fortenberry et al., 2010). Prior work exploring the sexual identity development experiences of sexual minority adolescents has failed to understand the sexual development of youth who may exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, such as Black and bisexual (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004, 2008; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006; Toomey, Huynh, Jones, Lee, & Revels-Macalinao, 2017; Wade & Harper, 2015). Past work suggests that bisexual youth of color, including Black bisexual male adolescents (BBMA), may have significant and unmet sexual and reproductive as well as mental health needs during sexual development (Chun & Singh, 2010; Dodge et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2014; Saewyc et al., 2009), which are unique and distinct from those adolescents who identify as gay, lesbian or heterosexual (Friedman et al., 2014; Mereish, Katz-Wise, & Woulfe, 2017). Understanding the context of sexual orientation development in BBMA may uncover key insights into opportunities for programmatic intervention in this population.

Prior work focused on the sexual behavior of BBMA overwhelmingly focuses on the sexual risk experiences of these young men (Kipke et al., 2007; Mustanski, Newcomb, Du Bois, Garcia, & Grov, 2011; Wade & Harper, 2015; Young & Meyer, 2005). However, these studies have not elucidated how normative adolescent sexual development and behavior might impact those risks. Further, very few empirical studies have sought to explore sexual development experiences among this population (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2016; Eyre, Milbrath, & Peacock, 2007). Studies that have examined sexual development have tended to combine lesbian, gay, and bisexual (male and female) adolescents into one sample or enroll too few African-American/Black male adolescents necessary to examine this phenomenon in this population.

Recent research examining sexual identity trajectories among Black, White and Latino bisexual men revealed that ethnicity was an important factor in terms of how men organize, interpret and share their sexual identities, as well as sexual behaviors with partners of more than one gender, with others (Baldwin et al., 2015). Wilson (2008) proposed a dynamic ecological model of ethnic, sexual, and masculine identity formation and conflict to

deconstruct bisexual behavior among African-American men. Wilson's dynamic ecological model considers ethnic, masculine, and identity formation as overlapping and intersectional processes which can carry conflicting meanings and expectations contributing to bisexual behaviors. Toomey et al. (2017) suggest that role expectations within racial-ethnic identities and cultural norms (Jamil et al., 2009), as well as expectations of masculinity (Fields, Morgan, & Sanders, 2016; Fields et al., 2015) may play an important role in the development of dimensions of sexual orientation during adolescence.

The process of sexual orientation development among BBMA may differ from that of other sexual minority adolescents due to BBMA existence at the intersection of multiple identities, including two socially marginalized groups, Black males and bisexuals. Marginalization may stem from pervasive stigmas about Black men including stereotypes of hyper-sexuality and hypermasculinity and lived experiences of racism (Fields et al., 2015). Marginalization regarding sexual identity may stem from pervasive expectation and stereotypes of bisexuals, especially bisexual males, as being in a transitional phase (transitional bisexuality), thus eventually identifying exclusively as gay or heterosexual (Dodge et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2014; Saewyc et al., 2009). The theoretical framework intersectionality posits that social identities, including but not limited to, gender, race, and sexual identity intersect exposing deep vulnerabilities and social inequalities (Bowleg, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008; Hill-Collins, 1991). This is an especially useful and under-utilized framework for considering nuances which that may contextualize and even shape the sexual and sexual development experiences of sexual minority males (Bowleg, 2013; Dworkin, 2015), especially those identifying as Black bisexual male adolescents.

Sexual identity formation—awareness, questioning, exploration of sexuality, and integration—may not occur uniformly among young Black bisexual men (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2011). Current work suggests that incongruence among the dimensions of sexual orientation is a normal characteristic of the sexual orientation development process (Brewster & Tillman, 2012; Ott, Corliss, Wypij, Rosario, & Austin, 2011; Priebe & Svedin, 2013). Variation may also result from the fluid nature of sexual identity, where sexual minority youth are less defined by their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2005), combined with interpersonal pressure to conform to community norms and expectations of masculinity and religious morality that Black men experience (Fields et al., 2012). Additionally, the bisexual identity in itself is subjective, as it is up to the individual to understand the degree of his sexual attractions and desires for men and women, as well as potentially individuals who do not fit neatly into a binary notion of gender, and how this identity relates to their sexual actions (Dodge, Reece, & Gebhard, 2008; Dodge et al., 2012a).

Recent work focusing on the sexual development of bisexual men suggests that young men describe a range of sexual development experiences. This ranges from a “post-identity phase” where categories do not resonate with youth, to needing a bisexual category as the best option to describe their sexual desires without stating one's own affiliation (McCormack, Wignall, & Anderson, 2015). Others have suggested that Latino and Black gay-identified youth describe awareness of same-sex attractions through fantasies, “crushes,” emotional attachments or arousal toward other males (Jamil et al., 2009). Yet, given the lack of studies in this area, it is unclear if BBMA may have a similar experience.

The purpose of this study was to describe the progression of sexual orientation development, including descriptions of sexual attractions, behaviors, and identity, in a sample of BBMA over the course of 1 year.

## Method

### Participants

Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained to conduct all research procedures in this study. Potential research participants <18 years were allowed to be approached and provide informed consent for participation in this study if they were seeking information regarding sexual health including testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, or other confidential sexual and reproductive health services covered under the state law. A waiver of parental consent from the IRB of record was obtained for participants <18 years old.

### Procedure

Between February 2013–May 2014, 50 self-identified Black males ages 15–19 years old who reported prior sex with other males provided informed consent to participate in a longitudinal qualitative research study about their first few same-sex sexual relationships. All youth participated in a baseline interview and three follow-up interviews. This article reports findings from analysis of interviews with a subset of those participants.

Fifteen young men who self-reported their sexual identity as bisexual at baseline and completed all three subsequent follow up interviews were drawn from the overall sample. Criterion for eligibility included self-reported engagement in any prior anal or oral sex with another male, willingness to participate in a total of four in-depth interviews conducted every 3 months (T-0 [baseline], T-1, T-2, and T-3) and ability to provide informed consent. All interviews were conducted in private interview rooms above a pediatric and adolescent health clinic on an urban campus of a teaching hospital in the Northeast U.S. Interviews were conducted by three interviewers trained in qualitative methods. Interviewers included two Black gay males (including the first author) and one Black heterosexual female (last author). Participants were provided remuneration of \$40 cash for completion of the baseline interview and \$25 cash for completion of the follow-up interviews. All participants were offered a \$5 food card, refreshments, and bus or subway tokens at each interview.

Participants learned about the study through four recruitment strategies: (1) IRB approved study fliers posted in local adolescent sexual and school-based health centers; (2) modified respondent driven sampling as participants were provided up to six incentivized study coupons valued at \$10 each for distribution to peers within their social and sexual networks); (3) outreach at local social venues and community-based events frequented by gay and bisexual youth (e.g., youth gay pride, house–ball events); (4) IRB approved recruitment fliers converted into pictures to allow for advertisements on social networking Internet sites and smart-phone geo-social networking (GSN) applications (“Apps”) such as Jack’d (18 years).

## Measures

This study used an interview guide grounded in phenomenological and constructivist (Charmaz, 2000; Schutz, 1970) frame-works to provide a structure for discussion while allowing participants to use their own definitions based on life experiences and perceptions. The interview guide was designed to explore the developmental milestones related to the various dimensions of sexual orientation such as attraction, identity, and behavior. The time burden for participants was approximately 90–120 min.

**Baseline Interview Guide**—Using open-ended questions and probes, participants were asked to “tell the story” of the development of their sexual orientation. Sexual attractions were assessed using two items: (1) “Think back to when you first started feeling attracted to other boys or other males. Tell me the story of the first time you were attracted to another male; what about with females?”; and (2) describe your first sexual experience with a male and what attracted you to this person; what about females?”

Sexual identity was assessed using three items: “How do you identify yourself in terms of your sexual orientation/identity?” (2) “How would you rate your sexual orientation identity on the 7-point Kinsey scale, 0 = heterosexual only to 6 = gay only” (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 2003); (3) “for some people, there is a time when they first realize that they are [sexual identity].” “Describe for me when you first realized that you were [sexual identity].”

Sexual behavior was assessed using two items: (1) “Tell me about your first sexual experience with another male in detail.” Participants were also asked to describe their second and most recent same-sex sexual experiences, and (2) “describe your first sexual experience with a female in detail.”

**Social Context**—Participants were asked to describe the context surrounding early sexual attractions, identity development, and sexual experiences with one open-ended item: (1) “Tell me about your family environment? Who had you told about your sexuality? How were you doing in school? Were you getting along with your friends or family?”

**Follow-Up Interview Guide**—Follow-up interviews were conducted over 12 months by the same interviewer who conducted the baseline interview to support the establishment of safety and trust between participant and interviewer. Follow-up interviews were conducted using a slightly modified baseline interview guide and mirrored the baseline interview as participants were asked to describe aspects of sexual orientation (attraction, identity and behavior), recent same-and other-sex sexual behaviors. One distinguishing feature, however, of the follow-up interviews was the use of the timeline follow-back technique (Carey, Carey, Maisto, Gordon, & Weinhardt, 2001; Sobell, Maisto, Sobell, & Cooper, 1979) to assist participants in recalling dates of sexual encounters over the prior 3 months. The timeline follow-back technique has been used in previous work on sexual behaviors as a tool to aid research participants in identifying “landmark events” and activities surrounding those events with the use of a calendar to facilitate recall.

**Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI) Survey**—Participants were asked to complete an anonymous 10-min ACASI survey querying: basic demographics: age, race,

ethnicity, sexual identity (gay, bisexual, heterosexual/straight, other), prior same- and other-sex sexual experiences, partner type, sex partner meeting venues, older sexual partners, and sexually transmitted infection history.

### Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company. In order to understand how bisexually identified young men described their first few, subsequent, and most recent same- and other-sex sexual attractions, identities, and behaviors, transcripts from all four interviews were approached and organized as individual case studies (e.g., participant A: T-0 [baseline], T-1, T-2, and T-3); thus, each case study was comprised of four interview transcripts. We employed a case study analysis in which participants with similar themes across all four time points were grouped, and themes were compared between all groups of cases. This allowed for thematic analysis within each case study and across case studies (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). Guided by categorical and contextualizing approaches (Maxwell & Miller, 2008), the first and second authors independently read and re-read two randomly selected case studies, each consisting of four sequential (T-0-T-3) interviews, and generated "case study notes." Case study notes were used to document emergent patterns, and identify themes and codes related to dimensions of sexual orientation (attraction, identity, behaviors) and the social context surrounding those experiences (e.g., living with family, starting high school) within and across all four interview time points. The first and second authors convened to discuss the transcript examination process and compare case study notes. This process continued for a total of eight randomly selected case studies at which point first, second, and last author convened to compare case study notes and discuss themes and patterns within and across case studies. No new information related to sexual identity, attraction, and behavior was achieved after reviewing eight case studies (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The first and second authors completed examination of and generated case study notes for the remaining case studies, which yielded no new information related to development of sexual identity, attractions or behaviors. Interrater reliability was high (80%). The few disagreements within or across interviews that occurred were discussed with the entire research team and recoded upon consensus (Hruschka et al., 2004). This article presents findings from the in-depth interviews and ACASI across four time points. Pseudonyms are used for all case studies presented.

### Results

Findings from this qualitative analysis are presented as case studies to highlight common and outlier sexual development experiences across the domains of sexual attraction, behavior and identity as described by participants. Table 1 presents individual characteristics of the study participants. All participants self-reported sexual identity as "bisexual"; the mean Kinsey scale score for the sample was 2.93 (SD = 1.2)—most closely translating to "heterosexual/gay—equally."

In examining self-reported sexual identity within the sample across all four interview time points, patterns in how participants described their sexual identity were observed. Table 2

presents self-reported sexual identity across time points. Among the sample of young men, two unique groups were identified based on self-reported sexual identity and experiences of same-and other-sex sexual attractions and behaviors overtime. The first group consisted of seven young men who consistently described their sexual identity as bisexual from baseline to the final follow-up. These young men also described similar experiences related to same-and other-sex sexual and romantic attractions and more consistently described same- and other-sex sexual behaviors. The second group consisted of eight young men that described changing their sexual identity and same- and other-sex sexual romantic attractions over time. While most men in this group described less frequently other-sex sexual behaviors overtime, one young man described bisexual identity at baseline and heterosexual identity at each follow-up time period and only female partners after the first interview.

Fourteen out of the fifteen bisexually identified young men in the sample were able to recall and describe early curiosities and attractions to both same-and other-sex sexual peers. Most of the young men in the sample described an initial attraction to both same-and other-sex sexual peers without a strong preference for one sex over the other. However, when describing their current bisexual attractions, these young men expressed a continued attraction to both males and females, but noted a stronger attraction to males over time. Participants described experiencing a burgeoning attraction to males around the same time they began to experience attractions to females. The rest of the group ( $n=6$ ) described other-sex attractions that were greater than same-sex sexual attractions earlier with variation in attractions over time for males and females. One participant described only other-sex sexual attractions at baseline and across followups interviews; this participant also reported sexual encounters with same-and other-sex sexual partners and a bisexual identity at baseline—an identity which shifted to heterosexual during follow-up.

### Consistent Bisexual Identity Over Time

**Oliver**—The first case study we present is Oliver. Oliver was 17 years old and living with his mother at the time of his baseline interview. Oliver identified his sexual identity as bisexual. Throughout the course of his baseline interview, Oliver was asked to recall his early romantic and sexual attractions to same-and other-sex sexual peers. Like other young men in the sample who described consistent bisexual identity over time, Oliver described always feeling an attraction to both the same-and other-sex sexual during childhood and early adolescence. Oliver describes his same-sex attractions in this manner:

Interviewer: Alright, so I want to start the conversation with the topic of attraction, so I want you to think about yourself on like a timeline. So, for example if you are here, right, at 17 how far back on the timeline would you go to identify when you were first attracted to boys?

Oliver: Always.

Interviewer: Always, ok tell me about a time where you felt it, you knew it inside of you.

Oliver: I'm not really sure.

Interviewer: Ever a first crush?

Oliver: That's what I'm trying to think about, because my first crush ever was a girl, but I'm trying to think about my first male crush—basically I just liked any boy that was pretty. In middle school in seventh grade, there was this boy and when I first got there he was really cute, and I was like, “Whoa, whoa I want me a piece of him.” He wore nice clothes, had a nice butt, he had pretty eyes and he spoke very well.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you tell anyone about this attraction?

Oliver: No <laughs>.

Interviewer: No. Okay, not a friend, a sibling?

Participant: Mm-mm [negative].

Oliver, like other consistently bisexually identified young men in the sample, described female sexual debut prior to male sexual debut.

I was 10 years old when I lost my virginity, the girl that I had sex with was 11, and she was somebody that my aunt used to babysit and my aunt had moved in with me and my mother. So one day when my mother and aunt went grocery shopping, we were sitting in my room watching a movie and then we started touching each other. We were always very attracted to each other because we kind of grew up together so as kids we always used to do little things that kids do, you know, like feeling each other, humping and stuff like that. That day we just kept feeling on each other, and then she had kissed me and then I had kissed her back. It took me a while to actually get erect, and then I got erect and then we did it.

Oliver's first same-sex sexual experience occurred 2 years after his first other sex sexual experience when he was 13 years old. He candidly describes feeling a mix of emotions such as pleasure, pain and confusion during and after his first experience.

Oliver: One day we were just hanging out and we had went into a house that was being built. We went in there, and we were just playing around and running all around the house, and then he was like, “Oh, come inside the closet right here.” And he was like, “Let's play truth or dare, “ and then he was like, “Truth or dare?” And I was like, “dare,” and he was like, “I dare you to suck my d—k.” and I was like, “okay.” and I did it. He didn't say “truth or dare” again, but he was like, “just turn around and let me, you know, f—k you. “ Then I turned around, and then he fucked me for like, basically 30 s and we stopped. I went home, cried, got in the shower, got out and then I went to sleep. I saw him again the next day like nothing ever happened.

Interviewer: Okay, so he put it in for 30 s and then you stopped.

Oliver: He came...it felt good, but then it—actually no, it actually was excruciatingly painful. But afterwards I was like that wasn't that bad. I didn't know how I felt about it, so I just ran home. I was confused.

Oliver would go on across all three follow-up interviews to describe sexual encounters with only male partners. When probed about recent sexual experiences with female partners, he



shared, “surprisingly no, I’m such a lady’s man!” During the course of his interviews, Oliver shared his decision not to disclose his bisexual attractions or identity to his mother or anyone else. He described having no opportunities to talk about his same-sex attractions—even with family members or close friends he perceived to be gay.

Interviewer: Try to think about who was helpful or supportive to you as your attraction to boys was developing.

Oliver: Well no one really. I have two gay male cousins who are both closeted and I had a gay best friend at that time, and that was just about it. And even though we could be in a room by ourselves together, and I could try to have a conversation about a cute boy I saw earlier or something like that, and then they were like just very weird, like they wouldn’t want to talk about it. They’d be like, “Oh, I’m not gay, blah, blah, blah” And they wouldn’t say it in a very funny way, they would say it in a very stern way, as if they were really not gay. And I’m like, “Okay...”

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Oliver: I felt alone, because I basically grew up with nobody to really talk to because my cousins and my best friend never really wanted to talk about things according to boys.

It was common for young men to describe a sense of feeling isolated and alone. Even among family members and friends whom Oliver perceived to be gay, discussing topics related to boys was not an option. Oliver further described never sharing his feelings with his mother. He described feeling concerned that she would think that he was “just gay” and would not marry a woman or have children in his future. He also described uncertainty about his sexual identity, and such incongruence caused him to pause and not attempt to openly share his behavior and attraction with anyone.

Oliver: I’m actually more attracted to girls than guys... if I tell her she’ll probably think I’m going to be with a man for the rest of my life, and I know I’m not going to want that to happen because I don’t even like dating dudes. I know that I want to marry a female, I want to have children and stuff like that, none of my attractions to females have diminished, none whatsoever. And it’s like, even though I’ve always thought boys were cute, I’ve never really fell for a boy only girls. So I’m like probably gonna’ get married any-way, to a woman.

Oliver’s story exemplifies the complexities attending the development of the dimensions of sexual orientation for the young men in this group. He consistently described his sexual identity as bisexual and consistent attractions to same- and other-sex sexual peers. Oliver reported sex with a female around sexual debut, but over time reported only sexual encounters with same-sex partners. Other young men described similar complexities related to their bisexual identity. Young men described that perceptions of what it meant to be bisexual impacted whether they were open about their identity to others. Joshua, a 19-year-old participant, told his interviewer this:

I’ve heard a lot of people to this day always be like oh, you can’t be bisexual, you’re bisexually confused. I was like what? So I was like, are you saying that I’m confused? You telling me that I don’t know what I want? I said you really can’t say

that. I was like...I'm a bisexual. When I see a girl's breasts or touch them or whatever the case may be, I get hard. When I see a boy's dick or ass, or if I kiss him...I get hard, so I have a mutual attraction, a sexual attraction to both sexes, always. So if that's not bisexual-ness, what is it? Because you can't be gay, because everybody knows that if you're gay then you just like boys. You can't be straight because if you're straight then you just like girls, and you can't like boys and girls, then you wouldn't be straight. So I mean bisexual is the best thing at this point, wouldn't you think?

Joshua and Oliver's experiences help to illuminate contexts of sexual orientation development, and specifically showcase the complexities of having to sort through sexual attractions to same- and other-sex sexual partners in the midst of a social context rife with stereotypes regarding the bisexual identity, stigmatized male same-sex sexual attractions and behaviors, and their own family planning aspirations.

### Changing Identity Over Time

**Leon**—Leon was 16 years old at the time of his baseline interview. He described his past and present sexual attractions, actual sexual behaviors and life goals influenced the development of his sexual identity over time. Leon revealed this process in his own words:

**Baseline Interview**—Interviewer: How would you define yourself, gay, straight, bisexual?

Leon: Well, I'm starting to like—well, no, mostly I'm getting more mature, so I will say bisexual. I will say bisexual. I used to be I guess gay because I do like men. I like men more than I do like women, but I never experienced a woman, so I can't really say that I like men more until I've really experienced. I want to have that experience with a woman and then I think about my future. I want kids and I want to get married to a woman. I don't want to come home to a man and raise a child with a man. I can't have a child with a man, so I think about that. I think that has something to do with it now.

**First Follow-Up Interview**—Interviewer: If you were to identify yourself, would you say you're gay, straight, bisexual or questioning or other?

Leon: I would say questioning. Questioning slash bisexual because I mean I do like men. I've always had an attraction, but now I'm starting to look at women and say, "Oh, she's pretty," and I honestly think that later on in life I would marry a woman because I do want kids and I do want I guess you can say Americanized kind of family, like normal family.

**Second Follow-Up Interview**—Interviewer: In your first interview you described your sexual identity as bisexual, right?

Leon: Well, that's complicated, because I am attracted to women. I think women are nice, and I do may be see myself with a woman maybe down the line, but I'm not having sex with both, so I don't really say "bisexual," because I'm not practicing that.

Interviewer: What would you say is your sexual identity?

Leon: I say gay, because I'm having sex with men, so I think that is—you know.

At Leon's final follow-up interview, he described his sexual identity as gay. Leon's quote encapsulates the intrapersonal tension experienced while wrestling with the incongruence of the developing dimensions of his sexual orientation. Like other young men in this sample, Leon's experience best exemplifies how his sexual attractions and sexual behavior relate to his sexual identity. It was common in this sample for young men to describe having same- and other-sex sexual attractions while only engaging in same-sex sexual behaviors. For these young men, reconciling dimensions of their sexual orientation such as attractions and behaviors was a process essential to securing one's sexual identity.

**Anthony**—Anthony was 15 years old at his baseline interview. His experience exemplifies how complex sexual identity formation was for these young men in a larger social context of family unacceptance. While he expressed romantic and sexual attractions to same- and other-sex sexual peers equally and reported same- and other-sex sexual partners following same-sex sexual debut at 13 years old, he wrestled with the identity of bisexual. He described experiencing mixed feelings about being bisexual, largely influenced by the beliefs his mother and sister held about bisexuality as a sexual identity.

Anthony: I mean, at that time I didn't know if I was having feelings for boys or if I really liked it or if it's something I wanted to do. At the time I was having sexual intercourse with a girl, so it was kind of like "Do I like boys, or do I like girls?" And being bisexual wasn't in the midst at that time. It wasn't as open as it is now.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Anthony: Some people don't believe that a boy can be bisexual.

Interviewer: Why not?

Anthony: I don't know. My sister told me that bisexual is like not—like you can't be bisexual. You have to like one or the other. But as I tell many people, if I want to suck a dick and a fuck pussy at the same time or the other way around, then I can do that. I mean I like both. I can't choose between— people tell me to choose between. I'm like no.

By Anthony's first follow-up interview, he described his sexual identity as gay. During this interview, he also described the role his boyfriend played in his coming out to his family as gay and the influence his family's beliefs had on how he described his sexual identity.

**First Follow-Up Interview**—Interviewer: Have you come out to any family members or told anyone that you were bisexual?

Anthony: Well, my boyfriend made me tell them that he and I been together. I told them I had a boyfriend and I told them I loved him and everything. And I came out to my parents as gay.

Interviewer: Okay. That's different. You were bisexual, now you're gay. There's a change...

Anthony: I mean with my family they don't believe in such a thing as bisexual.

Interviewer: They don't?

Anthony: You can't be bisexual. You can't like both which I believe you can because as I told many people before if I want to have sex with a girl while having sex with a guy that's what I want to do.

**Second Follow-Up Interview**—Interviewer: Have you come out or disclosed to any new people that didn't know?

Anthony: No, everybody knows I'm gay. My family wasn't like gay-haters or anything. When I told my mother and when I told my sister, they said, "We love you for who you are, gay, straight or not, but you have to look to one person, God." They said, "We can't judge you, but only God can judge you." So, they were accepting me, but at the same time, they said they like wouldn't condone it. They said I couldn't have a boyfriend.

By Anthony's final follow-up interview, he described his sexual identity as bisexual. Over the course of the follow-up interviews, he only reported sexual encounters with male partners. He consistently described attractions to both same- and other-sex sexual partners and struggled with this as his family did not believe in bisexuality (e.g., either you're gay or not).

Other participants in the sample commonly described hearing gendered messages that "bisexuality" did not exist for males. Participants described a "double standard" that girls can be bisexual, while boys cannot be bisexual. Milton, a 19-year-old participant shared his experience with this phenomenon:

I always have to keep the fact of my being bisexual from the girls. Because the thing about girls, if you tell them you're bisexual they'll just automatically think just like boys, period, or they'll think you're just gay, period. Which is actually something that I've been pretty confused about within the past few years. Like a lot of girls have transitioned into calling themselves bisexual, and start messing with girls and messing with butches. But then when they hear a boy calling himself bisexual, then it's suddenly a problem. And the same, like bi girls, any girl can come out and call herself bi and have a nice time with it. But when you hear about this dude being bi, he a "faggie," you don't like him, you hate him, stuff like that. So it's really confusing to me, and it's like with girls if you tell them you're bisexual, they'll just think, "Oh, your wrist broken, you just like boys."

Milton's quote is an example of the context in which participants considered either to disclose their sexual identity to others or to withhold it. Milton's quote exemplifies participants' experiences of gendered sexuality expectations and limitations which was often described as a "double standard." His experience also echoes how concepts of masculinity were challenged for some young bisexual men in the sample.

**Matthew**—Matthew is 18 years old, self-identified as bisexual at baseline and described only other-sex sexual attractions at each time point. Over the course of the interviews,

Matthew described his sexual identity as heterosexual and consistently described not having sexual attraction toward males. When describing same-sex sexual encounters, Matthew shared the situational context of those encounters.

Interviewer: So I'm going to draw a line on this paper, let's say this is you today at 18 years old, think back—what age would you say you first felt an attraction to someone of the same sex?

Matthew: See now, I never got—I actually haven't been attracted to any type of male. It's just I tried something different just for I'd say a couple of days to see how it goes. I didn't like it. I believe when I was 17.

Interviewer: So 17 and no attraction?

Matthew: No, I wouldn't call it an attraction. I would just say I did something so I could get something.

Interviewer: What's that?

Matthew: Which means that I tried something new to get bread in my pocket.

Interviewer: Okay. So what attracted you to him?

Matthew: The money for me to get home. That's the only thing that I saw at the time. Anything else, I really didn't—I wasn't really down. So I tried something new to get home.

Interviewer: And how did you know that? So you had never done this before, right? How did you know that you were ready to have sex with another guy?

Matthew: I've been to jail before. It's not nothing new to me.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Matthew: I know how men work. I know how girls work. I can read a person very quickly and how they are and how they come off. So I mean being in jail there isn't a lot of things to do. It's nothing but men in there. You're bound to get your dick sucked somehow.

While Matthew's experience was not common among the young men who consistently reported a bisexual identity, it does further represent the complexities of sexuality at the intersections of gender and socioeconomic status. Matthew described engaging in sexual encounters with males in exchange for resources such as money or transportation. Matthew's perspective on same-sex sexual behavior was centered mostly on how different the sex was with males than with females. Particularly, when discussing sex with men he described feelings of disgust.

Matthew: It just felt nasty because—first of all I like women very much. And to see a guy down there just don't seem right to me because we are men. Men shouldn't suck men off but it is what it is when you got to do what get bread in my pocket.

Matthew's second and final follow-up interviews he reported sexual encounters with only females, continued to self-report his sexual identity as bisexual via ACASI and describe his sexual identity as heterosexual during interviews.

## Discussion

This exploratory study sought to describe the development of the dimensions of sexual orientation such as sexual or romantic attractions, sexual behaviors and sexual identity, within a sample BBMA aged 15–19 years old over the course of 1 year. The young men in this sample were able to describe a range of same-and other-sex sexual and romantic attractions and sexual encounters during their development. Among the sample, two groups of young men were identified—those who identified as bisexual across all interview time points and those who identified as bisexual at baseline and experienced changes in their sexual identities over time. Given the development and exploration of romantic and sexual attractions, behaviors and identities are hallmarks of adolescence, sociocontextual factors such as familial and peer beliefs regarding sexuality, gender roles, and expectations and religious ideologies are key to understanding the right mix of support to provide. Prior work among sexual minority adolescents both quantitative and qualitative in nature has demonstrated the complex and often mentally stressing processes of sorting through the many social factors potentially influencing the establishment of a sexual orientation that aligns with how one sees one's self and wants to be seen in the world (Mustanski et al., 2014).

This qualitative inquiry echoes findings from prior research on bisexual behaviors among Black men suggesting a range of bisexual identity and behaviors (Malebranche, 2008). This work illustrates that young men are tasked with experiencing sexual and romantic attractions in a larger heterosexist environment, but are also tasked with simultaneously interpreting what those experiences and attractions mean. Other work has suggested that sexual identity formation—awareness, questioning, exploration of sexuality and integration, may not occur uniformly among young Black bisexual men (Rosario et al., 2011). We found that there was variation in half of the sample, with half of the youth describing consistent sexual identity across all time points. Some youth described using the bisexual category as the best option to describe their sexual attractions and behaviors accounting for incongruence they were experiencing. Prior work has found similar occurrences among young men (McCormack et al., 2015). Others described being less defined by their sexuality, but all described interpersonal pressure to conform to commonly held belief in dichotomous sexuality (e.g., gay or straight) and traditional masculine role expectations (e.g., produce children with a wife). This suggests that to be helpful to young men during this time, adolescent health providers, researchers and public health practitioners will need to take into account potential different trajectories that exist among BBMA as well as develop interventions that account for dimensions of sexual orientation and occurrences when sexual behavior, attraction and identity are not congruent.

Many young men in this sample described desires to develop romantic same-sex relationships rather than other sex ones. One of the key findings from exploring the progression of sexual development among Black bisexual male adolescents was a stable

attraction to women, but a decline in sexual encounters with women over time. Some young men described maintaining bisexual sexual orientation, while others described identifying more as a gay male over the follow-up period. This finding is in line with previous work exploring incongruence of sexual attraction, behavior and identity and the importance of normalizing incongruence during adolescence (Brewster & Tillman, 2012; Friedman et al., 2004; Ott et al., 2011; Priebe & Svedin, 2013). Past work exploring stability and congruence among dimensions of sexual orientation in adolescent populations has found incongruence and instability to be common among sexual minority adolescents (Fasula et al., 2016; Igartua, Thombs, Burgos, & Montoro, 2009; Ott et al., 2011; Priebe & Svedin, 2013; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). Studies have demonstrated, however, that the presence of incongruence among the dimensions of sexual orientation persisting into adulthood may cause psychological tensions (Hu, Xu, & Tornello, 2016). Future longitudinal research studies focused on Black bisexual male adolescents should explore potential mental health impacts associated with dimensional incongruence.

For some participants in this sample, the bisexual identity was important to their overall self-conceptualization and for some was key in the visualization of their future self. Prior work has noted more research is needed to provide new and insightful knowledge on the complex and varied experiences of bisexual adult males specifically to inform the development of comprehensive sexual health frameworks (Dodge et al., 2012b). Findings from this study provide insights into the developmental experiences and sociocontextual factors influencing those experiences among a population of adolescents often under-represented and under-prioritized in sexuality and public health research. This study suggests that particular attention to the developmental experiences of BBMA, a group understudied with significant sexual and reproductive health needs, is needed.

The Black bisexual adolescent males in this qualitative inquiry further demonstrate these complex processes in describing the dynamic and multileveled tensions characterizing their sexual development. At an intrapersonal level, participants acknowledged wrestling and attempting to reconcile their sexual orientation dimensions, while experiencing incongruence. Youth described attempting to reconcile often incongruent sexuality beliefs with personal and familial future orientation expectations. Previous research focused on bisexually identified adults has documented the need to normalize incongruence among the dimensions of sexual orientation (Baldwin et al., 2015, 2017; Rust, 1993). While significant strides have been made to shift away from dichotomous views of sexuality— either straight or gay (Fox, 2013) to more fluid and continuum-based approaches—additional educational efforts may be needed to challenge existing dichotomous sexuality thinking and to dislodge the bisexual orientation from the realm of confusion. In this exploratory study, some young men described not being sexually confused, but rather proud of their bisexual attractions, behaviors and identity. For example, some participants specifically described challenging what was viewed as common notions that bisexuality is merely an indication of sexual confusion rather than an accurate reflection of one's sexual orientation.

We found that for some Black bisexual adolescent males, the context, for example familial and peer beliefs about bisexuality and religious beliefs, influenced the development of the various dimensions of sexual orientation and expression of sexual attraction toward others.

Young men in this sample provided insights into the larger influence of their social environments and the roles they may have played during this developmental period. Case studies presented reveal how larger social factors such as homophobia, bisexual identity stigma and masculine role expectations influenced decisions to share or not share their bisexual identities with others. Participants decisions not to disclose their bisexual identity to parents, partners or peers in an effort to avoid fears and concerns about being labeled gay and seen as not achieving expectations to marry a woman and have children may exemplify masculine role expectations placed upon some young Black males (Fields et al., 2015). Further participant accounts of attempting to discuss same-sex sexual attractions or behaviors with male family members being met with rejection may speak to prevailing stigmas associated with bisexuality and same-sex sexual behaviors generally. Health researchers, including those focused on sexual and racial minority adolescents, have applied a theoretical framework of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) to understand potential implications for negative health outcomes. Some of the young men in this sample described having experienced bisexual identity development, including dimension incongruence, within contexts where familial and support and acceptance were uncommon. This may speak to a need for more widespread and comprehensive sexual orientation (e.g., multidimensional) education efforts. Additionally, multilevel (e.g., community, social and individual level) culturally appropriate interventions that specifically target adolescent familial and peer networks with information to increase awareness of the complexity of sexual orientation and support strategies during sexual development may be needed.

Black bisexual male adolescents experience sexual development at the intersection of multiple stigmatized identities which include the experience of bisexuality as young Black males. Young men in this sample described gender role expectations, disbelief in bisexuality as a sexual orientation and homophobia as contextual features of their adolescent sexual development. The intersectionality framework may be especially useful for racial and sexual minority youth workers and clinicians in considering the experiences at the center of overlapping identities, i.e., Black, bisexual, and male (Fields et al., 2016). This developmental experience which prior work has documented as often occurring within homophobic, sexist and racist social contexts (Friedman et al., 2014; Jamil et al., 2009; Malebranche, 2008) may impact one's ability to articulate and describe one's sexual orientation. This may have important implications because romantic relationships may serve as a buffer against sexual orientation-based discrimination and micro-aggressions for sexual and racial minority youth during this time (Macapagal, Greene, Rivera, & Mustanski, 2015). Therefore, supporting BBMA in the development of their sexual orientation and engagement in healthy romantic relationships post-sexual debut may be a crucial for healthy sexual development.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

While this study adds to the scant literature on sexual development among Black bisexual male adolescents, it must be seen within the context of some limitation. The primary purpose of the parent study was to understand young men's first few same-sex sexual experiences; while we queried participants on sexual experiences with females, it was not the core focus of the interview. The sample was recruited using a plurality of approaches, but these results are not intended to represent the experiences of all BBMA. These results can



inform future qualitative and quantitative work exploring aspects of Black bisexual adolescent men's sexual development experiences.

Despite these limitations, one major strength of this study is the use of a longitudinal qualitative methodology and case study approach to understand aspects of sexual orientation development of Black bisexual adolescent males. The findings from this study have important implications for how racial and sexual minority youth serving professionals might approach the needs of adolescent males who identify as Black and bisexual. The findings particularly call for more work to understand the intersection of race, sexuality, and development in a population particularly impacted by poor health outcomes. It additionally suggests that interventions will need to include concepts of sexual identity, attraction, and behavior development that may be incongruent with one's own stated future goals and the larger heterosexists and homophobic environments in which youth may exist. We may need to reframe our approach to young men to provide a safe space for young men to sort through sexual attractions and relationships without increasing one's personal risk. Interventions for BBMA, including those focused on HIV/STIs, substance use and mental health, will require service providers who work with BBMA to be more aware of and sensitive to the sexual and identity lives of these youth and to create a flexible, accepting environment for them to exist in.

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**Table 1**Characteristics of the study population ( $N = 15$ )

Characteristic	Mean (SD), % (n)
Mean age of participants (in years)	17.4(1.4) (range 15–19)
Mean Kinsey scale score	2.93 (1.2)
Mean number of sexual partners	
Lifetime partners	8.7 (7.3)
Bisexually active at baseline	73.3% (11)
Bisexually active at the final F/U	13.3% (2)
Sexual experience	
Mean age first vaginal penetration	12.8 (2.9)
Mean age first anal penetration	14.4 (2.0)
Mean age at first same-sex sexual experience	14.1 (2.4)

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**Table 2**

Self-reported sexual identity over time

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Baseline</b>	<b>First follow-up</b>	<b>Second follow-up</b>	<b>Third follow-up</b>
Allen	16	Bisexual	Gay	Gay	Gay
Leon	18	Bisexual	Questioning	Gay	Gay
Tucker	19	Bisexual	Gay	Gay	Gay
Arnold	15	Bisexual	Gay	Gay	Gay
Lorenzo	19	Bisexual	Bisexual	Gay	Gay
Raymond	17	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Gay
Oscar	17	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Gay
Anthony	15	Bisexual	Bisexual	Gay	Bisexual
Matthew	18	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual
Travis	18	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual
William	18	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual
Oliver	17	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual
Shawn	19	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual
Michael	19	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual
Andre	16	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual	Bisexual

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