Exploring the Meaning-Making Process of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Students of Color and Faith

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
In the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2013

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Abstract

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. A primary aim of the study, consistent with its methodology, was to capture and describe this process in the words and experiences of the participants themselves. Three research questions guided the study:

a. How do LGBQ college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple social identities?

b. What identities, if any, seem to become more or less salient for these students in the meaning-making process?

c. What role, if any, does meaning making play in the development of their sense of belonging on campus?

Semi-structured interviews with eight LGBQ college students of color and faith at a large, predominantly White institution in the Midwest revealed that, as participants made meaning of the relationship between their sexual orientation, faith, and race/ethnicity, all of the participants described a contention between their sexual orientation and faith identities that challenged them to (re)frame faith in a way that would allow them to integrate their faith and sexual orientation. Faith was framed for the participants by external factors, such as churches, parents, and schools. In making
meaning of the contention that these external factors set up for the navigation of their multiple identities, LGBQ students of color and faith must (re)frame faith in a way that matches their beliefs, opinions, and commitments around their sexual orientation and faith identities. This emerging theory provides an often-untold narrative that LGBTQ people of color can also identify with their faith identities. Furthermore, the way that these participants made meaning of their various experiences and (re)framed faith resists the common discourse around faith and sexual orientation.
Acknowledgements

I distinctly remember my faculty meeting with Dr. Terrell Strayhorn during my interview weekend two years ago. In that half hour I felt an immediate connection as I had a chance to discuss my research interests around the experiences of LGBTQ people of color and faith, discuss transnational queerness, and admire his amazingly extensive shoe collection. I have been blessed to have Dr. Strayhorn serve as my advisor during my time in the Master’s program at Ohio State University. I will forever be grateful for your support and encouragement in completing this thesis, presenting nationally on our research, and the many challenges I have experienced in my time at Ohio State.

I would like to thank Dr. Susan Jones for agreeing to be a part of my thesis committee. Although I may have cried many times after receiving your very detailed and meticulous edits to my work these past two years, it has only made me a stronger writer and researcher. Your classes have challenged me to think more critically about college student identity development, as well as the qualitative approaches and theoretical frameworks that guide research on these topics. I have the utmost respect for your research and am inspired by the work you have done and continue to do around college student identity development.

John, Zeek, Mike, Dynea, Raj, Christopher, Kevin, and Nick—Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and trusting me enough to share your stories. Your lived experiences navigating the complexities of your faith, sexual orientation, and
race/ethnicity have illuminated themes that I hope can help shed light on the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith. The ways that you conceptualize your multiple, intersecting identities have also challenged me to think differently about my own identities and experiences. I greatly value your stories and the relationships we have built as a result of your participation.

Although my thesis committee and participants have been integral to my success in completing this thesis, I could never have completed this study without the support of the people I have come to trust and care about the most. I want to thank my supervisors Paul Wojdacz and Angie Wellman for supporting me through this process and during my time at Ohio State. You both inspire me to be a better social justice educator and student affairs professional.

Rachel Weber, my dearest friend at Ohio State, thank you so much for being my strongest support system these past two years. You have motivated me to push forward with this thesis when I was ready to quit. Thank you for believing in me constantly, taking time to study with me, editing my work, caring about me selflessly, and loving me unconditionally.

I want to thank my mother Elena Gonzalez. Words cannot begin to describe how much I appreciate you. Not only does your strength, humility, and selflessness inspire me, but you have served as a role model who has fostered my passion for social justice. The way that you value all people, regardless of their social standing, and the manner in which you have dedicated your life to the field of social work inspires me daily to advocate for and empower marginalized peoples. Thank you for instilling within me a faith in God. Although I have come to self-author my faith in ways that differentiate
from your beliefs, you continue to support me in every aspect of my identities and have allowed me to feel whole. Finally, without God, none of this would be possible.
Vita

June 2007………………………Mount Saint Michael Academy for Boys; Bronx, NY


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education

Specialization: Higher Education and Student Affairs
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning (LGBQ) college students of color and faith struggle to make meaning of the messages they were socialized into about their faith, gender, sexual orientation, and race. However, through their college experiences, these students are able to (re)define the messages they received from forces external to them and begin to find ways to ease or eliminate the contradictions of identifying simultaneously as an LGBQ person of color and faith. This study examines how LGBQ college students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple and intersecting identities.

Love, Bock, Jannarone and Richardson (2005) described the difficulty that nonheterosexual individuals face in developing their LGBTQ identities, because they have no “role models and visible socializing experiences” to help them define their identities as LGBTQ (p. 194). Therefore, nonheterosexual individuals navigate the world without positive role models with which they can identify and who can help guide their meaning-making process. For many of the studies about LGBQ people of color, faith and religion simultaneously served as a point of contention with their LGBQ identity, a source of internal support, and an internal meaning making filter for their experiences as LGBQ people of color (Bhattar & Victoria, 2007; Jeffries IV, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008; Pitt, 2010; Stewart, 2010; Strayhorn, 2011). Several studies in student affairs have looked at the intersections of racial identity and sexual orientation (Patton & Simmons,
2009; Patton, 2011), racial identity and spirituality (Stewart, 2002; Strayhorn, 2011), and sexual orientation and spirituality (Abes, 2011; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). Although many of these studies allude to the intersections of these identities, few studies in student affairs research examine the intersections of sexual orientation, spirituality and racial identity (e.g. Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011).

Literature from related fields, such as counseling, sociology, and queer studies, explicitly looked at the intersections of racial identity, sexual orientation, and faith identity. De La Torre, Castuera, and Rivera (2012) expressed the ways that the Latina/o Christian community has strong ties of family, racial identity, religion, culture, and ultimately identity. Family for this particular population includes biological family and spiritual brothers and sisters in church congregations they attend. The intersections of faith and race are intrinsically understood together.

In order to frame the interconnectedness of social identity that is being undertaken in this study, the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) are the primary theoretical frameworks for this study. Baxter Magolda (2001) described meaning making as a process of external to internal self-definition, students creating their own knowledge, and developing a sense of self. This process of meaning making integrates Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship, which is the process of developing an understanding of oneself that is no longer mediated solely by outside influences but how one chooses to interpret or make meaning of those messages into self-definition. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of the Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) is a conceptual model that frames identity as occurring within varying degrees of salience with a personal identity core.
Depending on how one makes meaning of one’s context (e.g. family, peers, church, school), context can influence how a person identifies and to what degree they think about their identities. Salience can also change over time and through different experiences throughout the life span. For the purpose of examining the intersections of the multiple identities of LGBQ students of color and faith, intersectionality is also described as a theoretical framework that situates the intersections of these identities within larger structures of power, privilege and oppression that is involved in how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013).

As LGBQ college students of color and faith navigate the complexities of their multiple and intersecting social identities, they must make meaning of the various messages they have received about their multiple social identities. LGBQ college students of color and faith must decipher through these messages and decide how to make meaning of these messages. Furthermore, their meaning making impacts their sense of belonging on campus and the choices they make in finding community that aligns with the qualities they seek in a community that reflects their interests (Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn; 2012; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011). There are not spaces for LGBQ college students of color and faith to integrate in a way that is affirming and validating to all of those social identities and experiences, resulting in these students having to pick and choose what they share in constituency based spaces.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

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The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning (LGBQ) college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. A primary aim of the study, consistent with its methodology, was to capture and describe this process in the words and experiences of the participants themselves. Three research questions guided the study:

d. How do LGBQ college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple social identities?

e. What identities, if any, seem to become more or less salient for these students in the meaning making process?

f. What role, if any, does meaning making play in the development of their sense of belonging on campus?

Significance of the Study

Although the results of this study will benefit the support services offered by student affairs professionals working with LGBQ students of color and faith or students with any of these identities, there are some specific constituencies that may benefit from this study. Most multicultural student services, race/ethnic-based cultural houses, campus faith organizations, and LGBTQ student services currently function under a model where they serve their specific constituency groups. Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) stated that “every person has many social identities that are influenced by race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, to name a few identities. If we see individuals in terms of only one identity, we minimize the complexity of who they are” (p. 23). For this
reason, Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity frames how college students understand all of their identities as aspects to their whole understanding of self. When student affairs offices or organizations on college and university campuses program or coordinate outreach to students with a singular lens about identity, they minimize the complexity of their students and create spaces where students cannot make meaning of all of their identities simultaneously.

Love et al. (2005) posited that many LGBT organizations on college campuses need to address this topic because religious and church-based groups are often not friendly places for LGBTQ students to explore their LGBTQ and faith identities. The implication of this statement is that LGBTQ students of faith find a greater sense of belonging with the LGBTQ community on their college campus over their faith/spiritual community on campus or at home because of this lack of support. Therefore, LGBTQ student services professionals on college and university campuses would benefit from being made more of aware of the needs of LGBQ students of color and faith that they serve. Since LGBQ students may find predominantly LGBTQ spaces more supportive for their identity development and sense of belonging, the results of this study could enhance the practice of student affairs professionals and encourage these professionals to develop spaces that encourage dialogue around the intersections of racial identity, sexual orientation, and faith.

Some LGBQ students of color choose to find community in campus faith-based organizations. The results of this research, as well as the literature review on the topic, examines how spirituality can serve as a coping mechanism for their religious condemnation, struggles with sexual orientation and other struggles they face as they
make meaning of their multiple identities (Jeffries IV, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008). Love et al. (2005) explained that faith can simultaneously serve as a site of contention between lesbian and gay students’ sexual orientation and faith, while also being a source of meaning making for these students and their experiences. LGBQ people face difficulty in developing their faith identities, because they often feel rejected by the structures and institutions (i.e. churches) where most people develop their spiritual identity. These campus faith-based organizations could benefit from this study by identifying opportunities to welcome and affirm LGBQ college students in a way that they feel welcome and safe to experience their faith as LGBQ people.

For people of color, faith is not only a source of meaning making but an aspect of building community and sense of belonging that can integrate one’s racial and faith identities (Stayhorn, 2011). Multicultural affairs or cultural centers dedicated to specific racial/ethnic groups may be aware of the connections between one’s racial and faith identity, because of the ways that faith and racial identity are often intrinsically connected for communities of color. However, LGBQ students of color face the challenges of developing a sense of belonging and community that affirms their multiple and intersecting social identities, as well as struggle to exist in a campus environment where they feel like a double or triple minority (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010). Student affairs professionals can create safer spaces that are primarily utilized by students of color to be inclusive of LGBQ students of color and faith, instead of creating a dynamic of feeling further marginalized for identifying outside of the norms of sexual orientation and gender.
A primary aim of this study is to connect the current research on the intersections of faith and sexual orientation, racial identity and faith, and sexual orientation and racial identity. This study is aimed at developing a theory grounded in the words and experiences of LGBQ college students of color and faith that will provide better insight into how they make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. This theory can inform the work of the aforementioned student affairs professionals.

**Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study consider the lack of existing research on how lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning (LGBQ) college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. As demonstrated in a review of the existing literature on the topic, there is little research in student affairs that has looked at this topic, although the intersections of pairings of these identities have been considered. The specificity of the topic allows for an in depth analysis of the experiences of this population of college students. However, the experiences of various racial/ethnic groups who have their own differences are being generalized as a phenomenon that all students of color who are LGBQ and a person of faith experience. Furthermore, faith constitutes a plethora of possibilities for participants to identify and therefore, generalizes the experiences of these LGBQ students of color and their various faith communities.

The literature around the intersections of racial identity and sexual orientation, faith and sexual orientation, and racial identity and faith focuses on these intersections. Any conversation about gender identity in this context is related to the ways in which
LGBQ students of color and faith express their gender in a way that is not the traditional
gender norms (e.g. heterosexual relationships and sex). The decision was made to not
include transgender students as a part of the explicit outreach being done for this study, in
order to draw the distinction between sexual orientation (LGBQ) and gender identity.
However, students who are transgender who also identify as an LGBQ student of color
and faith did not emerge from the recruitment for this study.

Despite these delimitations, this topic deserves to be researched. In the context of
the college student experience, the knowledge and research about the experiences of
LGBQ students of color and faith is limited. Because of their multiple and intersecting
identities, they face additional challenges of finding spaces that they can incorporate their
identities in a safe and affirming way. The literature review in chapter two sets the
context for the many challenges they face in identifying as LGBQ, a student of color, and
a person of faith.

Conclusion

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter one introduces the research
topic, the purpose and significance of the study, and the delimitations of the research.
Chapter two includes a review of literature that is relevant to the study. The theoretical
framework that guides the literature review and frames the study is discussed in detail.
The literature review focuses on the intersections of racial identity and faith, sexual
orientation and faith, racial identity and sexual orientation. The intersection of sexual
orientation, faith, and racial identity is explored using literature from fields related to
higher education and student affairs, in order to provide context for the study. Chapter
three details the methodological underpinnings of the study and methods used to collect and analyze data. Chapter four presents findings about how LGBQ college students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple identities. These findings emerged from interviews with eight participants. Chapter five concludes the thesis with a discussion of the findings that incorporate the literature review and theoretical frameworks, as well as implications for future practice, research, and theory and the limitations of the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter two provides a discussion of existing literature relevant to the study. It begins with an in-depth look at the theoretical frameworks that guide the review of the literature and the methodological approaches discussed in chapter three. Framed by the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and college students’ meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b), the studies that emerged from a review of the literature addresses the following: the intersections of race/ethnicity and faith identity; the intersections of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation; the intersections of sexual orientation and faith identity; and, the intersections of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and faith identity. For the purpose of examining the intersections of multiple identities, intersectionality is described as a theoretical framework that situates the intersections of these identities within larger structures of power, privilege and oppression that is involved in how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013). The chapter considers these studies separately and then together in order to highlight the complexities of these multiple identities and to better understand the meaning making process that occurs for these students as they negotiate these multiple identities. In this chapter, I demonstrate the need for intersectional approaches to identity in the student affairs literature, specifically related to the intersections of race, sexual orientation, and
faith. The chapter concludes with discussion of the literature review, including the overarching themes that emerged across the literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to approach the topic of how lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple identities, theoretical frameworks guide the types of literature that has been used to support this study, as well as frame the methodological choices for the study. Students belong to multiple social identities that impact how they make meaning of the world and their experiences. Though some identities are more salient for students than others, every identity of a person intersects and encompasses their whole person. Theoretical frameworks have been developed that examine intersectional approaches to identity and identity formation, such as the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), college students’ meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b), and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013).

Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of the Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) evolved from their grounded theory study on 10 college women of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds in order to better understand how these women develop their identity and what it means to them. The MMDI is a conceptual model that frames social identity as occurring within varying degrees of salience. At the core of the MMDI is one’s core sense of self, which is impacted by one’s social context. The characteristics at the core are one’s personal identity, or the identities that are not subject to outside influence. Surrounding the core sense of self are social identities (e.g. race, sexual
orientation, religion, gender) that as a whole make up an individual’s self-identity. The
social identities exist in various proximities to the core sense of self. How close a social
identity is to the core sense of self relates to how salient that identity is to the individual.
Depending on how one makes meaning of one’s context (e.g. family, peers, church,
school), context can influence how a person identifies and to what degree they think
about their identities. Salience can also change over time and through different
experiences throughout the life span.

While Jones and McEwen’s (2000) MMDI provides a framework that describes
how multiple identities come together to create a holistic understanding of self, Baxter
Magolda’s (2001) theory of meaning making provides a framework for how individuals
come to understand what they know about their identities and their relationship to the
world around them. Baxter Magolda described meaning making as a process of external
to internal self-definition, students creating their own knowledge, and developing a sense
of self. This process of meaning making integrates Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-
authorship, which is the process of developing an understanding of oneself that is no
longer mediated solely by outside influences but how one chooses to interpret or make
meaning of those messages into self-definition.

Baxter Magolda (2008) described three elements that are integral to the
development of self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal
foundation, and securing internal commitments. The process of trusting the internal
voice first involves recognizing that external authorities cannot always be trusted and
therefore, a person must develop and trust their internal voice. Trusting the internal voice
requires “cultivating it, questioning it and refining it” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 275).
This process of cultivating, questioning and refining is integral for students of color who are trying to make meaning of their sexual orientation and/or faith identity. Building an internal foundation involves creating a framework for one’s life that reflects the meaning being made about one’s identity and internal voice. Building an internal foundation also involves constructing an external environment that reflects one’s internal identity.

Building one’s internal foundation is an opportunity to develop a structure that can freeing, because it is guided by one’s internal voice and an openness to finding meaning in one’s life. Securing internal commitments involves integrating one’s identity with one’s involvement, daily experiences, choices and practices. Securing internal commitments also involves implementing decisions about one’s life that reflect one’s internal foundation and lead to commitments about what one’s identities mean for them.

For example, this may be a decision for an LGBQ person choosing to attend a more LGBQ affirming congregation or perhaps choosing relationships that will allow the LGBQ person of color and faith to bring all of their identities into the spaces they inhabit.

For LGBQ students of color and faith, self-authorship is key to securing the ability to make meaning of their multiple identities.

Coming to college is a unique opportunity for students to enter an adult role that allows them to renegotiate the relationship between external forces and their internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2009b). Prior to entering college, the way that students understand their identities and the world around them is through external forces, such as their parents, family, school, place of worship, the media and other influential forces. College experiences provide moments where the student discovers that what they have been taught by external forces does not always work and that external authority cannot
always be depended on for answers. Baxter Magolda (2009b) called these experiences moments of cognitive dissonance, or “crossroads” (p. 629). These “crossroads” require that students self author a new meaning making process that is internally developed. In the context of this research topic, college may be the first opportunity for students of color to come to an alternative understanding of their sexual orientation and/or faith identity that veers from what external forces have told them. These experiences of cognitive dissonance can be quite jarring, especially in the context of LGBQ students of color and faith, because they must construct meaning on their own, which is the process of self-authoring how they understand their multiple identities.

In recent years, researchers have explored the relationship between multiple identity theory and meaning making. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) reconceptualized the MMDI and integrated the role of meaning making in the construction of identity. In their reconceptualization, they framed identity as socially constructed and a process of socialization. As a process of socialization, identity development is mediated by external influences and becomes self-authored over time as students make meaning of their identities and what they have learned about these identities in the college environment. Their model displays that contextual and external influences enter a meaning making filter that, depending on one’s meaning making capacity, allows contextual influences to pass through and become a part of how one perceives their multiple identities on the MMDI. This particular model that Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) developed is the core theoretical framework that integrates Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008, 2009a; 2009b) work on meaning making and self-authorship and Jones and McEwen’s (2000) work around multiple identities.
Intersectionality

Although Jones and McEwen’s (2000) MMDI and Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) R-MMDI considers the role of context, their models do not intentionally capture the ways that intersecting identities interplay with systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Therefore, the theoretical framework of intersectionality also informs my work. Intersectionality was coined in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against of Women of Color.” Intersectionality emerged as a result of Crenshaw’s insight about the ways that narratives about women who experience violence failed to capture the experiences of women of color. Instead of considering identities in separate bubbles, Crenshaw challenged that people consider multiple identities simultaneously and the ways that multiple identities interact with systems of power, privilege, and oppression to create the society in which we live. Shields (2008) articulated how “there is no single identity category that satisfactorily describes how we respond to our social environment or are responded to by others” (p. 304). When considering the experiences of LGBQ college students of color and faith, it is important to recognize that their multiple and intersecting identities simultaneously inform the way they make meaning of the world around them.

Dill and Zambrana (2008) proposed four theoretical interventions that should be considered when utilizing intersectionality as a framework: centering the experiences of people of color at the core of the work; exploring the complexities of lived experiences and challenging the tendency to essentialize group identities; unveiling power in interconnected structures of inequality; and promoting social justice and social change as
a result of using intersectionality (p. 5). Intersectionality as a framework challenges researchers to center their research around people of color in order to create a counter narrative to the dominant [White] discourse in higher education and student affairs. This study is focused on the experiences of people of color and adding to that counter narrative by presenting the narratives of LGBQ college students of color and faith, which has not been a story that is told very often in the field higher education and student affairs. By considering identities simultaneously and constantly interacting with one another, intersectionality challenges researchers to rethink essentializing groups of people by not acknowledging the intragroup differences that exist because of the various other intersecting identities that are also at play when considering any group of people. Intersectionality also challenges researchers to acknowledge the various structures of inequality that are at play as people are navigating their identities. Finally, using intersectionality as framework also challenges all researchers to acknowledge that it is everyone’s job to promote social justice by presenting these counter narratives.

Jones’s (2009) autoethnographic work allowed her to draw connections between intersectionality and self-authorship that is especially helpful to consider in relation to this study.

What intersectionality allowed for Jones to do in her study was to place a more explicit emphasis on social identities and highlight the challenges that come with securing an internal identity when contextual influences of power, privilege, and oppression come into play. In her section called “Inside Out and Outside In: Managing Perceptions and Negotiating Identities,” she described the struggles her participants faced in the process of identity construction when those identities were conflicting and also fluid in relation to
balancing that the participants had to make between the perceptions that other people had about her participants and what they believed about themselves. Therefore, identity development is a process of managing self-perception and how that relates to or is affected by how other people perceive you.

Jones and Abes (2013) reconceptualized the original MMDI in order to provide a more accurate representation of the MMDI that would consider various critical theories, including critical race theory, queer theory and intersectionality. In Jones and Abes’s (2013) Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (I-MMDI), the core continues to lie at the center of the model with the orbiting rings that highlight various social identities. The dots on these rings in various proximities to the core relate to the degree of saliency for the person. Surrounding what looks like the original MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) is a meaning-making filter. The meaning-making capacity of the individual determines how much the rings surrounding the filter, which represents intersecting systems of power such as sexism, racism, heterosexism, impacts how the individual makes meaning of their multiple identities. The I-MMDI provides a new way of looking at multiple, intersecting identities as not only inseparable but also as a product of how one makes meaning of experiences of oppression and privilege that are a part of the systems of power in society that privileges some people and oppresses other people on the basis of identity. This becomes especially important when considering participants who experience multiple conflicting identities and oppressions that will influence their identity development depending on their meaning making capacity.

For the purpose of examining the intersections of the multiple identities of LGBQ students of color and faith, intersectionality is also described as a theoretical framework...
that situates the intersections of these identities within larger structures of power, privilege and oppression that is involved in how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013). Intersectionality frames the rest of the literature in the idea that identities are inextricable from larger contexts of power. Furthermore, a limitation of the literature in higher education and students affairs around LGBQ people of color and faith is that the research is focused on one identity (e.g. social identity development theories), two identities, or rarely all three identities simultaneously. Although the literature is separated into categories for organization, the literature is connected and overlaps. Ultimately, using intersectionality as a theoretical framework provides an opportunity to promote social justice and social change by considering the experiences of LGBQ college students of color and faith and giving voice to their narratives where there is currently a gap. With these theoretical frameworks in mind, the chapter provides a review of the literature related to the meaning making and multiple identity development of LGBQ students of color and faith.

**Intersections of Race/Ethnicity and Faith Identity**

Studies addressing the intersection of race and faith provide context about the importance of faith and spirituality in the lives of communities of color. Stewart (2010) distinguished between spirituality and religion in order to frame how Black students use spirituality as they navigate the college environment. Religion refers to the “organizational and doctrinal dogma,” while spirituality engages people in a journey to discover “meaning, purpose, belonging and values” (Stewart, 2010, p. 10). Where
religion is strict and structured, spirituality lends more room for growth, development, and exploration into the meaning that comes from one’s experiences. Spirituality can but does not have to include connection to a particular religion. Spirituality, for African Americans in particular, is an essential aspect of one’s life that allows these students to draw meaning and purpose from their everyday experiences but to also find a sense of belonging in one’s faith community and Black community (Stewart, 2010). Spirituality can be an aspect of identity and a meaning making filter to construct one’s identity.

Stewart (2002) utilized an Afrocentric phenomenological and portraiture study to explore the role of faith in the integrated identity development of five Black students at a predominantly White institution. Aside from using a unique methodology, her study looked at how Black students negotiate various social identities in their self-image, which integrated theory around multiple identities and how students make meaning of these multiple identities. In the process of completing interviews, Stewart (2002) hoped to focus on the ways that students’ understanding of their spirituality impacted how they viewed their multiple identities. She found that negative experiences with religion led these students to resist organized forms of faith and spirituality in college. The strictures of religion did not provide the flexibility needed for the less spiritually mature participants to make meaning of their multiple identities. One of the more spiritually mature participants was able to integrate and negotiate the relationship between their faith identity and religious expression. With this in mind, Stewart (2002) interpreted that these findings suggest that a higher level of spiritual maturity is required to be able to integrate multiple identities.
For people of color, faith is not only a source of meaning making but an aspect of building community and sense of belonging that can integrate one’s racial and faith identities. Strayhorn (2011) explored the impact of gospel choir participation and involvement on the success of Black Christian students at predominantly White institutions. Through interviews with 21 African American undergraduate gospel choir members, Strayhorn (2011) discovered that gospel participation produces the following benefits for African American students at PWIs: establishing a sense of belonging, developing ethnic identity, and nurturing resilience. The students in Strayhorn’s study stated that they often felt alienated in their PWI context, but the gospel provides a sense of community and belonging. Participation in the gospel choir also helps develop a sense of ethnic identity in multiple ways. Their participation allows them to develop ethnic pride and understanding about Black culture and community on campus. It is also an opportunity for them to present that culture to their White peers, which further enhances pride and knowledge about one’s ethnic heritage. The songs they sing reflect Afrocentric music and performance, and also reflect struggles for freedom and justice. These songs create a connection to a shared history, and therefore, build community in one’s racial/ethnic identity. Finally, participation in the gospel choir nurtures resilience for these students because the songs inspire connection to a higher being for support and helps them locate inner strength and peace. Their participation in the gospel choir served as a site of spiritual and racial/ethnic community on a campus where they identify within the racial/ethnic minority and supported their success in college.

Furthermore, Black college students use spirituality to resist isolation and racial hostility on college campuses. Spirituality provides an opportunity for these students to
make meaning of their negative experiences and how they choose to develop their identities, relationships, and commitments. Watt (2003) discussed the role that spirituality plays in the lives of African American college women. She found that spirituality serves as a site for coping from the negative messages these women receive everyday about their multiple identities, specifically related to their race and gender. Engaging in spiritual rituals may help these women connect to a higher being and with their inner voice. Watt’s (2003) study brings together theoretical frameworks around faith, spirituality and religion. Watt (2003) and Stewart’s (2002, 2010) use of Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith development in their studies on people of color and their relationship to spirituality prompted my use of the term “faith.”

In this thesis, I use the term “faith” for multiple reasons, as derived from aspects of Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith identity formation. His use of the term faith best describes the relationship between meaning making and spiritual identity that occurs for LGBQ students of color. Faith is a more inclusive way to integrate varying levels of belief in something that connects an individual to other people and to a belief system. The use of the term faith can make sense for students who strongly identify with a specific religion, to students who have a personal relationship with a higher being but not mediated through an organized religion, to students who are questioning the existence of a higher power, and every identification in between. Fowler’s understanding of faith allows one to make meaning of the world and one’s life. It also serves as an “ultimate support when other things they depend on in their lives collapse around them” (Stewart, 2002, p. 581).
These moments where “their lives collapse around them” is reminiscent of Baxter Magolda’s (2009b) use of the term “crossroads” to describe the moment where the external forces we once trusted as sources of knowledge and meaning are proven to not always be right, and therefore, we must develop our own meaning of our experiences and knowledge. In Fowler’s (1981) theory, this “crossroads” would be the moment that leads an individual to proceed to stage three where individuals begin to make meaning of faith identity from various external sources. By stage four, an individual begins to define what their faith means to them and they make self-authored meaning of their faith. Fowler believes this stage to occur between the ages of 30-40, but the studies presented thus far have shown that people of color develop self-authorship and make meaning of their faith earlier, as they negotiate and navigate the complexities of their multiple identities in the college context. Fowler describes faith as shaping who people are, how they identify, and how they understand themselves.

A review of this area of literature in student affairs revealed that much research that has been done about the intersections of race and faith identity is oriented around the relationship of faith to Black individuals and communities. However, what can be drawn from the literature on the intersection of race and faith is that faith and how it develops can be an integral aspect of the meaning making filter through which students of color understand their multiple identities. Not only is faith integral to one’s identity formation, but also guides one’s ability to cope with stresses and pressures. It could specifically assist LGBQ students of color as they negotiate the complexities and socially constructed conflicts their identities pose to them. However, one’s faith identity is often put in conflict with one’s sexual orientation because of larger socially constructed issues related
to religious dogma around sexuality and sexual orientation that is deeply rooted in heteronormative systems of oppression that marginalize sexual minorities as incapable of identifying both as an LGBQ person and a person of faith.

**Intersections of Sexual Orientation and Faith Identity**

Although faith identity is an integral aspect of the meaning making process for students of color, this connection does not exist as easily for LGBQ students of faith. People often see issues of sexual orientation and faith as conflicting entities. Most LGBQ identified individuals are rejected by most religious denominations, therefore creating a challenge for LGBQ individuals to make meaning of their faith identity. Although it is easy to identify the deficits and struggles LGBQ people face identifying with a particular faith identity, Love, Bock, Jannarone and Richardson (2005) developed a simultaneous faith and sexual orientation identity development model in their study about the spiritual experiences of lesbian and gay college students, which challenges the commonly held belief that lesbian and gay identified people cannot be people of faith. Before discussing Love et al.’s (2005) study, a review of how faith identity and sexual orientation identity development models were previously considered is important to better understand the foundations of more contemporary work that develops identity development models that account for the interaction of multiple identities.

Prior to Love et al.’s (2005) study, theorists looked at the identity development of sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Fassinger, 1998) and the identity development of faith (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000) separately. In the same way that Fowler (1981) serves as the identity development model that is used in this thesis to
explain the role of faith in the meaning making process, D’Augelli (1994) developed an LGBQ identity development model that explores how LGBQ people come to identify in the ways that they do with their sexual orientation. D’Augelli (1994) emphasized the impact of environment, history and context in his Model of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Development. He developed six interactive processes: exiting heterosexual identity; developing a personal LGB identity status; developing an LGB social identity; becoming an LGB offspring; developing an LGB intimacy status; and, entering an LGB community. Each of these processes can happen at any point in the lifespan and is contingent on the experiences and meaning making hat the individual makes out of these experiences.

This model is in alignment with Baxter Magolda’s (2001; 2008) theory of self-authorship as it involves a process of trusting the internal voice enough to develop commitments, building LGB community and relationships, and building an internal foundation to begin to personally identify as LGB. Since the individual holds the most agency in D’Augelli’s (1994) model, their multiple identities also can impact how they approach and navigate the six interactive processes. For example, an LGBQ person of color and faith may not exit their heterosexual identity in faith-based spaces because of feelings of stigmatization but may identify personally with an LGB identity and have LGB intimacy status and community. For the purposes of this thesis, D’Augelli’s Model of LGB Development (1994) integrates environment and context in a way that suites the theoretical frameworks of meaning making theory (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008) and the MMDI (Jones and McEwen, 2000) most appropriately. Love et al. (2005) utilized
D’Augelli’s model as a framework for their integrated faith and sexual orientation identity development model.

Love et al.’s (2005) study consisted of five gay male and seven lesbian college students at two public universities in the Midwest. All of the participants identified as “out” as LGBQ to their communities. Through a constructivist grounded theory study with semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection, they developed a theory that describes various degrees of reconciliation with relation to their participants’ sexual orientation and spiritual identity. Love et al. (2005) described the difficulty that nonheterosexual individuals face in developing their LGBTQ identities, because they have no “role models and visible socializing experiences” to help them define their identities as LGBTQ (p. 194). Therefore, nonheterosexual individuals must navigate the world without positive role models they can identify with that could help guide their meaning making process. LGBQ people also face difficulty in developing their faith identities, because they often feel rejected by the structures and institutions (i.e. churches) where most people develop their spiritual identity.

The degrees of reconciliation that Love et al. (2005) identified is the ability of the participants to reconcile their spirituality with their sexual identities, the inability of the participants to reconcile these identities, and participants choosing to not develop their spiritual identity. Of the twelve participants, five were identified as having reconciled their spiritual and sexual identities. These participants had made meaning of the relationship between their sexual orientation and faith identities by reflecting, questioning, and accepting, much akin to the cultivating, questioning and refining that occurs when trusting one’s internal voice in order to develop self-authorship (Baxter
Magolda, 2008, p. 275). One of the major themes that emerged from the stories is that coming out is a process that stimulates the spiritual development of lesbian and gay students by presenting the “crossroads” moment that leads to the meaning making necessary to reconcile one’s sexual and spiritual identities. Some of the other major themes that emerged for the reconciled participants is that they drew strength from their spiritual lives, they had a strong relationship with God or a higher power, they were out as gay and lesbian, as well as spiritual, and they had integrated two aspects of their identities in order to encompass the whole person. It was also important for them to make a distinction between spirituality and religion, specifically for the reason that religious communities have often not been welcoming to them, but their spiritual identity is internally developed and far more personal.

Five of the participants had not reconciled their sexual and spiritual identities, four of which were aware that they were nonreconciled and one who was unaware that they were nonreconciled. These participants were working towards reconciliation and could articulate that they sought to integrate their sexual and spiritual identities. Love et al. (2005) were able to identify some of the negative effects that nonreconciliation has on these students. One of those negative effects is not being open about one aspect or another of one’s life depending on the context. Furthermore, LGB students of faith do not feel appreciated for their spiritual identity in LGB spaces and do not feel accepted in religious/spiritual spaces. Finally, the inability to reconcile their spiritual and sexual identity led some to compartmentalize the conflicting aspects of their identity. Two students were identified as undeveloped, one who rejected spirituality passively and one who rejected spirituality actively. These students did not know how to approach
spirituality. They avoided addressing the topic of spirituality and making commitments about specific beliefs. Their belief system was not grounded in a particular faith or spiritual background but rather a conglomeration of various beliefs rooted in the meaning they have made of their experiences.

For all students in Love et al.’s (2005) study, the reconciliation process was neither static nor linear, and many of the reconciled students had periods of lesser degrees of reconciliation depending on context, time and environment. The degrees of reconciliation were also related to experiences of the individuals with spirituality and sexuality, such as prior religious involvement, having a religious foundation as children, having an open and loving religious environment, and developing an intimate relationship through a religious experience. Love et al. (2005) posited that many LGBT organizations on college campuses need to address this topic because religious and church-based groups are often not friendly places for LGBTQ students to explore their LGBTQ and faith identities. The implication of this statement is that LGBTQ students of faith find a greater sense of belonging with the LGBTQ community on their college campus over their faith/spiritual community on campus or at home because of this lack of support.

Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) described the role that faith plays in the psychological health of White LGB people. Lease et al. surveyed 583 LGB individuals who affiliate with a specific faith group in order to gauge the role of affirming faith group experiences on the spirituality and mental health of LGB people. Furthermore, they described the relationship of LGB faith groups and the impact on internalized homonegativity, or the perceived negative feelings that LGB identified
people have about their same-sex desires and the desire to be heterosexual. Internalized homonegativity is often associated with the impact that nonaffirming faith communities and beliefs can have on LGB people. Lease et al. identified that the negative and nonaffirming faith experiences of LGB people are more apparent but the emergence of LGB affirming faith communities open up the possibilities for LGB people to engage with their faith identity. They found that current faith involvement was indirectly related to the psychological health of LGB individuals by lessening the endorsement of internalized homonegativity, developing positive self-image, and enhancing spirituality in LGB individuals. Presenting LGB individuals with a positive and affirming faith experience challenges what LGB individuals previously associated with faith and their beliefs, which can alter the negative correlation they make between their faith and sexual orientation.

Abes (2011) explored the relationship between the sexual orientation and religious identity of Jewish lesbian college students through a longitudinal, constructivist narrative inquiry study of two students. Abes (2011) used Baxter Magolda’s (2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) theory of meaning making and self-authorship, as well as Jones and McEwen’s (2000) MMDI to frame her study. Abes situated the experiences of these students with identity around intersectionality, or the idea that one’s multiple identities cannot be thought about separately but as integral aspects of one’s whole self. She sought to discover the perceived relationship between their faith and sexual orientation, as well as the significance of context in these perceptions. Abes (2011) asked questions of the participants that would gauge the salience of their sexual orientation and faith
identities, the meaning they made of each identity separately, and the meaning they made of these identities simultaneously.

The two participants, Leah and Beth, were interviewed in three phases over the course of 4-5 years to track the relationship of their sexual orientation and their faith identity to their overall identity formation and meaning making process. In the first phase, Leah wanted to integrate her religious identity with her lesbian identity. Her experiences of being different from the norm as a Jewish person made it easier to be different as a lesbian. She saw the development of her sexual orientation and faith identity as parallel processes that coexist peacefully. Her identification with Reform Judaism, a more liberal and LGBTQ affirming movement of Judaism, also made it easier for her sexual orientation and faith identity to coexist. When interviewed a year later, Leah desired to be a whole person, rather than combination of identities that define her self-identity. After reflecting on the past year, she discovered that as she outwardly practiced her faith identity less, the more she developed a deeper, internal relationship with her faith identity. When interviewed two years after this, she considered the relationship between her Jewish and lesbian identities as most salient but also considered how her other identities as White and upper middle class impact her experiences with privilege and reflection. Over the course of time and different contexts (upbringing, undergraduate, graduate school), she shifted identities from a more religiously grounded faith identity to a more self-authored, spiritual identity.

In Beth’s first interview, she explained that she had to reexamine her relationship to Conservative Judaism and identify with the Reform Judaism in order to accept her lesbian identity fully. Conservative Judaism did not allow her to identify as lesbian
simultaneously with Judaism so she had to realign her belief systems to fit a more liberal Jewish movement that would allow her to integrate her sexual orientation and faith identity. Like Leah, she also felt that identifying as Jewish made it easier for her identify as lesbian. One year later, she had integrated aspects of herself with “each identity connected to others for its meaning” (Abes, 2011, pp. 218-219). This particular example of integrating her multiple identities that depend on one another for their meaning shows the relationship between the theoretical frameworks of the MMDI and meaning making. Over the year, her religious identity has become far less defined and is more fluid, as she navigates the meaning making process. In her interview a few years later later, Beth had identified internal commitments related to her identities as she sought to pursue a law degree in order to advocate for LGBTQ equality. Not only is Beth engaging with aspects of self-authorship as she develops those internal commitments, but she develops a career path that reflects her LGBTQ personal and social identity (D’Augelli, 1994). One area of struggle over the years is how to incorporate her Jewish identity.

Love et al. (2005) identified some of the ways in which LGBTQ people navigate their faith experiences in varying degrees of reconciliation with these two identities. The reconciliation of these identities involve the complex relationship between personal identification with sexual orientation and faith and identifying a community that fosters and values how one makes meaning of one’s sexual orientation and faith. Finding LGBTQ affirming faith communities can be integral to the psychological health of LGB people (Lease et al., 2005). Abes (2011) highlighted the impact that context and time have on the identity formation and meaning making process of Jewish lesbians’ multiple identities. The experiences of
the two women in her study display how faith identity becomes more fluid and self-authored over time and context, specifically as their lesbian identity becomes more integrated into their other multiple identities. As Abes (2011) pointed out, Jewish identity encompasses the intersection of religion, ethnicity and culture, so it holds large stakes as a significant aspect of Jewish students’ multiple identity development. In a similar way, the racial identity of students of color encompasses the intersections of ethnicity, culture, and oftentimes religion. However, the intersection of race and sexual orientation is not one that is often considered when thinking about the racial identity development of students of color.

**Intersections of Race/Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation**

Several studies in student affairs have looked at the challenges LGBQ students of color face in their racial/ethnic communities for identifying as nonheterosexual (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Patton 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011). In one study by Patton (2011), she met with six African American men at an HBCU to explore how they made meaning of their gay/bisexual identities, made decisions about disclosure of their sexual identity, and how experiences with sexual identity were mediated by the context of the environment on campus. These students found that their Black identity was most salient and their nonheterosexual identity was not a public but a personal process. They were generally discrete about their sexual orientation, which led many of them to feel lonely and isolated by not being able to express their sexual orientation, and therefore, other aspects of themselves. Strayhorn and Scott (2011) also found that Black gay men at HBCUs also faced overt homophobia in the form of verbal insults and/or threats of
physical violence, which highlights the dangers that these students face because of their nonheterosexual identities. Overall, they felt support in their racial/ethnic identity at this particular HBCU but experienced many challenges of publicly expressing their sexual identity, including not wanting to be essentialized or stereotyped for their sexual identity, not having positive role models for their multiple identities, threat of verbal or physical assault, lack of familial support, and tradition that is rooted in heteronormativity, gender norms, and Christian values that do not affirm nonheterosexual identities (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011).

Patton and Simmons (2008) conducted a phenomenological study of five Black lesbian first year students at a religiously affiliated HBCU where they discovered similar themes of the Black lesbian students feeling accepted in their Black identity but not in their lesbian identity. These students are able to personally identify and accept their lesbian identity. This lack of acceptance of lesbian identity resulted in many challenges, including feeling the need to downplay or lessen the perception or attention to their lesbian identity; developing a sense of triple consciousness where they are oppressed in their multiple identities as lesbian, Black and woman; conforming to gender roles for more masculine presenting women and unacknowledged lesbian identity for more feminine presenting people; and, navigating the expectations that external influences present to them about their identities. These two studies revealed that there is contention for LGBQ students of color in their racial/ethnic communities about their sexual orientation, specifically related to struggles with cultural expectations about race, sexual orientation, gender, and religion.
Racial/ethnic minority serving institutions provide support one’s racial/ethnic minority identity, but not necessarily for one’s nonheterosexual identity. LGBQ students of color at predominantly White institutions face similar challenges to their peers at HBCUs around their LGBQ identities, as well as in their racial/ethnic identity. Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2010) identified seven African American gay men at a PWI to explore the challenges that these students face in the PWI setting. Some of these challenges included finding a sense of belonging on campus, a desire to come out in college, depression, and experiencing a double minority status as Black and gay. As Black and gay, the students struggled to develop meaningful relationships that affirmed their multiple identities, which forced some of them to play down their gay and/or Black identities. The gay men of color expressed a desire to come out in college as a site for self-discovery but struggled to do so as they navigated the implications that coming out would have on their relationships with their family, friends, religion and overall ability to find a sense of belonging on their college campus (Strayhorn et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2012). In order to establish a sense of belonging, these students involved themselves in student organizations, LGBTQ community events/venues, and built familial and romantic relationships (Strayhorn, 2012).

Many of the studies previously mentioned focus on the experiences of Black and some Latino LGBQ people. Asian American LGBQ people identified similar challenges of identifying as LGBQ in their Asian American communities. Chan (1989) invited 19 Asian American lesbian women and 16 Asian American gay men belonging to Asian American lesbian and gay organizations to complete a survey about how they choose to identify and establish community. Many of the participants identified more strongly with
their lesbian and gay identity but preferred an acknowledgment of both aspects of their identity. Like their Black and Latino/a peers, the participants described that it was harder to come out to other Asian Americans due to the cultural expectations and norms that come with identifying as nonheterosexual in communities of color. Some of the previous studies briefly mentioned this, but Chan’s (1989) highlighted how many Asian Americans identified the gay community as White and did not feel accepted by the gay and lesbian community.

Although there are similar challenges that LGBQ Asian American people share with other LGBQ Black and Latino people, there are a number of unique challenges that LGBQ Asian American people face as they navigate the intersections of their racial and sexual identities. Bhattar and Victoria (2007) shared their personal experiences as Asian American gay men. Raja Bhattar identifies as Indian, Hindu, and gay, and Nathan Victoria identifies as Filipino, Catholic and gay. Raja described that his racial identity and experiences growing up in Indian in the early part of his life impacted his understanding of his gay identity. Unlike other communities of color, homosexuality is integrated into the Indian penal code as “against the order of nature,” which creates a struggle for him to identify as gay when the disapproval of homosexuality is written into law. For Raja, Hindu and Indian were interchangeable in his mind. His strong affiliation with his racial/ethnic identity and religious identity as Hindu made it feel like these identities were “at battle” (Bhattar & Victoria, 2007, p. 40). Although there is little support from the Hindu community of his gay identity, the religious and spiritual beliefs cannot be separated from his racial identity and should be considered simultaneously. Finally, he struggled with the balancing act of passing as heterosexual among other
Indians to not lose the strong connections to that community and integrating his ethnic and sexual identities in a non-Indian community, especially since most of his experiences with the LGBTQ community were with White identified LGBTQ people.

Nathan lived a double life between gay culture and a Catholic, Filipino American life. He lived in binaries that connects his experiences with his multiple identities as Catholic and Filipino—right versus wrong, good versus evil, man with woman—that pitted his sexual orientation against his religious identities. He and Raja struggled to openly identify as gay in their Asian American communities, especially within their families. Nathan also highlighted how queer people of color is not the ideal standard of beauty in the LGBTQ community, which made him feel future exoticized and marginalized in the LGBTQ community. Bhattar and Victoria’s (2007) vignettes, as well as the previous studies about the experiences of LGBQ people of color, highlighted how their experiences as people of color and LGBQ included a strong relationship to their other identities, specifically the importance of their faith identity in how they made meaning of their experiences. Even if not the explicit purpose of the studies, faith identity could not be taken out of the context of the experiences of LGBQ students of color, because it serves as an integral aspect of their meaning making process.

**Intersections of Race/Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation and Faith Identity**

One of the participants in Strayhorn’s (2011) study on the impact of gospel choir participation on the success of Black collegians, Quincy, described the difficulty for him to identify as gay in the choir. Though the choir was a site of support and pride in one’s racial identity, LGBQ identities were not a topic of conversation. Furthermore, Quincy
did not feel comfortable disclosing his gay identity in order to maintain his relationships with the choir members and the sense of belonging he had established in the group. Quincy’s experience highlights the ways that even marginalized populations can experience marginalization in spaces designated as “safe,” because of other aspects of identity, such as sexual orientation. For many of the studies about LGBQ people of color, faith and religion simultaneously served as a point of contention with their LGBQ identity, a source of internal support, and an internal meaning making filter for their experiences as LGBQ students of color. Very few studies in student affairs have explicitly examined the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith. Therefore, I relied on literature from related fields, such as counseling, sociology and queer studies, that explicitly looked at the intersections of racial identity, sexual orientation, and faith identity for more insight on these intersections.

Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles (2008) conducted a life span study using a narrative analysis methodology that looks at the life experiences of 80 Latino gay, bisexual and transgender people, 66 of whom identify as Catholic. Although the study did not focus on the experience of these individuals in college, Garcia et al. (2008) proposed that one’s religiosity is impacted by the context in which they exist at any given moment in their life span, which includes the influences of people and other transition moments that would lead people to make decisions about their religious identity. Like Abes’s (2011) longitudinal study, Garcia et al. (2008) were able to track the development of their participants’ religious identity over time. Garcia et al. (2008) found that, around adolescence and adulthood, 40 of 66 participants left the Catholic faith, either to convert to more affirming faith practices or were unaffiliated with any particular faith or religion.
Of the participants that continued to identify as Catholic, almost half of them chose to separate their sexuality and their religious identities or establish a more homo-positive interpretation of their religious identity. The rest of the participants who identified as Catholic dissociated from the Catholic Church or identified as Catholic because of the deep-rooted connections of the Catholic religion to their identities as Latinos.

In one of the few studies explicitly about bisexual people of color, Jeffries IV, Dodge, and Sandfort (2008) explored the role of religion and spirituality in their study of 28 Black bisexual men. Jeffries IV et al. (2008) found similar issues of homonegativity in Black Churches and the distinction that many of the men made between spirituality as an internal practice and form of reflection versus religion, which refers to the structures, dogmas and institutions that are often homonegative. The one unique experience bisexual people of color face in their religious communities are the relationship they have to women and men. Many of them expressed the desire to still marry a woman, because they had same sex desires that did not reflect their future commitments and/or they wanted to follow what their religious communities, culture and family expected of them. These bisexual men experienced feelings of being an outcast in the heterosexual community and homosexual community, though they practiced within both communities. Much of these feelings of being outcast have to do with the binaries and desire in our cultures for choosing one identity or the other, which can be a struggle for bisexual identified people who experience their sexual orientation as a more fluid identity. Spirituality serves as a coping mechanism for their religious condemnation, struggles with bisexuality and other struggles they face as they make meaning of their multiple identities.
Previous studies (i.e. Chan, 1989; Bhattar & Victoria, 2007) have highlighted how the LGBTQ community is White because White people are seen as the norm in these communities. Therefore, some people of color choose to identify outside of what they describe as a White construct with terms like same gender loving (SGL). In one of the few studies I saw about people of color who identified outside of the labels of LGBQ, Pitt (2010) completed a study of gay and same-gender loving (SGL) Black men’s experiences negotiating and managing conflicts between their religious and sexual identities. This study looked at men who were not “out” as SGL or gay in their churches and were highly respected leaders in their church. The men were often “out” to friends and sometimes close family. Pitt (2010) struggled to identify participants for the study and forty-two percent of the participants were contacted via phone or email conversation for their interview because of their level of comfort, which provides particular insight into the potential struggles that come with interviewing LGBQ people of color who may not identify as “out.” Like the studies discussed previously, Pitt (2010) found that these gay and SGL Black men sometimes compartmentalized their religious identity and experiences from their sexual identity in order to maintain their status in their churches and the sense of belonging they had in their communities, despite their desire and struggle to integrate the two identities when pervasive homonegative experiences in Church and the Black community made them feel stigmatized into silence and compartmentalization. Furthermore, spirituality served as a source of support for these individuals who often struggled with the relationship between their sexual identity and religious identity in their various communities.
Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed literature relevant to the proposed thesis on the process of meaning making that occurs for LGBQ people of color and faith. In the first section, I provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks that framed the literature review. Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and Baxter Magolda’s (2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) provided an overarching theoretical framework that integrates the process of meaning making and self-authorship with the relationship that multiple identities play in that process. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework situates intersections of multiple identities within larger structures of power, privilege and oppression that are involved in how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013). These frameworks not only guide my approach to the literature but also guide the epistemological and methodological choices for this study that are discussed in chapter three. The next section reviewed the literature on the intersections of racial identity and faith identity. The distinction between religion as a dogmatic and institutional structure and spirituality as a pursuit for meaning, beliefs and understanding of self was made (Stewart, 2010). My use of the term faith as defined by Fowler (1981) was explored. Faith serves as a source of meaning making and as sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2011). The third section reviewed the literature on the intersections of sexual orientation and faith identity. Although these intersections are often pitted against one another because of religious dogmas against homosexuality, Love et al. (2005) developed a theory that explored the various degrees of reconciliation that one can achieve as an LGB person of faith and what that looks like. D’Augelli (1994) was used to provide a framework for better
understanding LGB identity development. The fourth section reviewed the literature on the intersections of racial identity and sexual orientation. This section highlighted the unique relationship between racial identity, cultural norms about gender and sexuality, sexual orientation, and religion that exists for students of color at minority serving institutions and predominantly White campuses. The fifth and final section reviewed the literature on the intersections of racial identity, sexual orientation and faith identity. Although there are not many studies in student affairs that have explicitly focused on the intersections of racial identity, sexual orientation, and faith identity, this section looks at literature from outside of the field of student affairs to provide some of the unique experiences of LGBQ people of color with their faith identity.

Love et al. (2005) also include in their implications section how much more research is needed in this topical area, specifically research needing to be done with students of color and students who are not “out.” Pitt (2010) identified some of the struggles of accessing people who are not “out” as LGBQ. The review of the literature also showed that there are not many studies in student affairs that have explored the experiences of questioning, bisexual, and lesbian students as they navigate the intersections of race, sexual orientation and faith. Most of the literature focused heavily on the experiences of Black students, which left Latino/a and Asian or Asian American identified student voices and experiences in the dark. Other than Abes (2011) study on Jewish lesbian women and Raja Bhattar’s (Bhattar & Victoria, 2007) experience as Hindu, most of the studies looked at the experiences of students from various Christian denominations, which showed a lack of religious/spiritual diversity that exists in the literature.
The proposed thesis has the potential to address the gaps that exist in student affairs literature around the meaning making process of the multiple identities of LGBQ people of color and faith. The following chapter will describe the epistemological framework, methodological approach and methods that best suite the topic of LGBQ people of color and faith and their meaning making process in college.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methodology for this thesis study. The purpose of the study was to explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning (LGBQ) college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. A primary aim of the study, consistent with its methodology, was to capture and describe this process in the words and experiences of the participants themselves. Three research questions guided the study:

a. How do LGBQ college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple social identities?

b. What identities, if any, seem to become more or less salient for these students in the meaning making process?

c. What role, if any, does meaning making play in the development of their sense of belonging on campus?

This next section describes the epistemological underpinnings that guided the methodological choices for the present study, directing specific attention to constructivist epistemological framing and grounded theory as methodology. Discussion of the sampling approach, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis is presented afterwards. The chapter concludes with a statement of the researcher’s positionality in relation to the study.
Epistemological Framework

Crotty (1998) described constructionism as the process of “meanings being constructed by people as they engage with the world that they are interpreting” (pp. 42-43). Constructivism also assumes that an individual’s meaning is situated in a social context. The social context (e.g. church, family, college LGBTQ student organization) plays an important role in the construction of multiple identities. It is through social interaction that individuals become active participants in constructing meaning. A constructivist viewpoint assumes an ever-changing world that allows for multiple realities and addresses how a person’s experience and agency in experiences affect themselves and the world around them (Charmaz, 2006). This epistemological framework is grounded in the idea that there is not one “true” answer or essence of a phenomenon because the participant and their experiences are situated within a particular time, place, and social context. Constructivism as the epistemological framework ensures that the meaning making process of the multiple identities of LGBQ people of color and faith is at the forefront of the study.

Constructivist epistemology situates knowledge as created by the individual’s social context and how that context affects how individuals make meaning of one’s social identities and core sense of self (Crotty, 1998). Meaning making and what scholars have come to refer to as self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) states that knowledge is initially constructed from information derived from external sources of authority (e.g. parents, teachers) until disequilibrium or cognitive dissonance occurs and challenges previously held this knowledge. Therefore, individuals must reconstruct what
they think and believe as they interpret the world around them, while negotiating the influence of external forces on this meaning making and establishing their own set of beliefs and values based on internally derived foundations (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b). The role of the researcher in constructivist epistemological studies is as an interpreter of the experiences of the participants (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The researcher guides participants through a process of inquiry that creates knowledge about a particular construction of meaning in the lives of the participants using the participants’ own words. The next section defines the methodological approaches to this study.

**Methodology**

The present study employed grounded theory. The purpose of grounded theory research is to develop a theory that is true to the people who live the experiences or phenomena under investigation (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The resulting theory of a grounded theory study is “conceptually dense,” which means it shares relationships with multiple concepts that have been repeatedly reviewed and synthesized across processes that present themselves in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 278). Grounded theory is deeply invested in the process, which refers to the analytical process of the methodology as well as the process of meaning making involved in the lived experiences being examined. A brief overview of the origins of grounded theory is discussed below.

Grounded theory as a methodological approach was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) via an objectivist epistemological lens. Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory to reflect and challenge the quantitative orthodoxy.
Specifically, they sought to challenge the primary notion of quantitative research methods as the most objective or “correct” perspective. Development of grounded theory rendered the “processes and procedures of qualitative investigation visible, comprehensible, and replicable” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 34). By making the process and procedures “visible, comprehensible, and replicable,” Glaser and Strauss achieved a sense of validity and reliability in the field of qualitative methods.

Glaser and Strauss (1967), particularly Glaser’s roots in quantitative research, led to a focus on the objectivist methods in grounded theory in order to hold the same esteem that is held by quantitative methods for being objective, more precise, and reliable. However, Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) objectivist approach to grounded theory “erases the social context from which the data emerges, the influence of the researcher, and often the interactions between grounded theorists and their research participants” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131). An objectivist approach to grounded theory limits a researcher’s ability to integrate multiple theoretical frameworks and to critically engage with their positionality to the research at hand. Constructivist grounded theory builds on the objectivist foundation of grounded theory. Researchers (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) have further developed the grounded theory methods that Glaser and Strauss (1967) created to account for the co-construction of meaning between the participants and the researcher that occurs in the data analysis process in grounded theory.

A constructivist approach to grounded theory “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). Knowledge arises from interactions between the researcher and the participant and the
meaning that is unfolding in the process of inquiry that occurs in that relationship about the lived experiences of the participant.

Unlike the objectivist perspective of grounded theory’s history, a constructivist grounded theory study depends on the researcher’s perspectives and interpretations to draw meaning from data that is produced by a participant’s lived experiences. The methods of grounded theory provide a framework to track the processes that students engage in making meaning of their multiple identities, which are integral to understanding the process that is involved in the development of meaning making in LGBQ college students of color and faith.

**Methods**

“Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2), which in this case is the words of the participants. This section outlines the methods that guided this constructivist grounded theory study about the experiences of meaning making of the multiple, intersecting identities of LGBQ college students of color and faith.

**Purposeful Sampling**

In grounded theory studies, the ideal participant is “one who has been through, or observed, the experience under investigation” (Morse, 2007, p. 231). The sampling of ideal participants that can speak to the phenomenon under investigation is called purposeful sampling and guided the initial sampling that occurred in this study. Ideal participants are also those who can speak to their own experiences reflectively and
articulately. However, for LGBQ college students of color and faith, articulating one’s experiences reflectively and articulately may be difficult to do, because this may be the first time they are being asked questions that examine how they have come to understand these multiple, intersecting identities in the interview process.

In terms of sample size, the true goal for purposeful sampling is to achieve saturation, or “sampling to redundancy” (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006, p. 71). This occurs when the researcher begins to hear the same kinds of information related to the categories being developed throughout the data analysis process. However, “saturation is not an end point to the study but a stepwise decision that you are certain of some category or finding before moving forward at each phase of the analysis” (Morse, 2007, p. 231). Essentially, sampling ceases when the researcher is certain that they have created an analysis of a particular category to the point where it has been developed to its fullest potential. While it is important to achieve saturation of data when conducting purposeful sampling, Morse (2007) was clear about the fact that if a particular sampling strategy is not working a different strategy must be tried. Saturation does not help the researcher when the data does not capture the experience being explored.

Throughout the data collection process, data was being analyzed. Purposeful sampling is the first step in achieving data that captures the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith. Sampling to redundancy further enhances and develops the categories being analyzed throughout the data collection process. In order to refine ideas and categories being developed, theoretical sampling was used. The goal of theoretical sampling, which occurs after the initial purposeful sampling, is to refine ideas and categories but not to increase the original sample size (Charmaz, 2006). The reality of
the matter is that there is a limit to the time and energy that can come from this particular study. The process of theoretical sampling can not only help refine categories, but also help discover variation in experiences or fill in gaps in the experiences and processes.

**Recruitment of Participants**

The research site for this study was a large, predominately White public research institution in the Midwest. This institutional context was selected in order to explore how LGBQ college students of color and faith making meaning of their identities in a predominantly White setting and to better understand how meaning making plays a role, if any, in how they find sense of belonging as underrepresented students. Furthermore, prior research in higher education and student affairs has not paid specific attention to these students in a predominantly White setting.

The IRB approved email (Appendix A) to recruit participants outlined the demographic criteria for participating in the study, the purpose of the study, and my contact information, as well as the contact information for my thesis advisor and the IRB. The criteria for participation in the study included that participants identify as an undergraduate student; as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning; as a student of color (e.g. Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, Asian/Asian American, Native American/Indigenous/American Indian/First Nation, Biracial/Multiracial), and as a person of a particular faith or spiritual identity.

A number of methods were utilized to gain access to this particular population. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) discussed the importance of gatekeepers and key informants in developing a sample. They defined gatekeepers as people who have authority in accessing the population, such as a professional staff member who works
specifically with that population. Key informants are individuals who have insider knowledge of the population. In this study, I utilized gatekeepers and key informants who have access to LGBTQ students and students of color. I sent the IRB approved recruitment email (Appendix A) to gatekeepers, such as the Intercultural Specialists for Latino/a Student Initiatives, African American Student Initiatives, Asian/Asian American Student Initiatives, and LGBTQ Student Initiatives at the Multicultural Center. I also sent the recruitment email to organizations such as the Black Student Association, the Asian American Association, Queers and Allies, and Shades (an organization for LGBTQ students of color). From this recruitment technique, I was able to recruit the one female student in the study who identified as an LGBQ person of color and faith.

Although key informants and gatekeepers are helpful in accessing the population being studied, it is even more vital that the researcher is “spending time at the site, developing relationships and gaining insider knowledge” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 76). Developing relationships and spending time with the population one hopes to study will help to develop rapport with the community, which makes it easier for students to connect with and trust the researcher enough to share their experiences. This was especially important in this study because the questions students were asked in order to understand how they have come to make meaning of their multiple identities required them to share stories that can be difficult to share with someone with whom they had not developed rapport. I spent time working with and getting to know the LGBTQ student population on campus, as well as students of color on campus through my involvement in the Black Student Association and my work at the Multicultural Center. These roles were precipitated by my relationships with gatekeepers and key informants who have
access to and/or are a part of these communities. I took the time to get to know these students, a few who identify as LGBQ people of color and faith. I was able to recruit six of the eight participants as a result of the time I spent developing relationships and rapport within the LGBTQ student population on campus.

LGBQ students of color and faith are a difficult population to access and identify at a predominantly White institution, especially considering the multiple and intersecting identities being examined simultaneously in this study. A final sampling technique used to identify this specific student population was snowball sampling. Patton (1990) wrote about the use of snowball sampling in accessing diverse populations that can sometimes be difficult to identify. Snowball sampling is the technique of asking participants in the study to refer individuals who would meet the criteria of the study and add perspective to the study. Snowball sampling was thought to be especially helpful in identifying questioning students and students who choose to not disclose their sexual orientation. Snowball sampling helped provide one participant who added diversity to the racial/ethnic identities of the sample and provided variation in the sample related to experiences with religion. Another female participant who was recruited via snowball sampling chose not to participate in the study.

Participants

As a result of the aforementioned recruitment strategies, eight students agreed to participate in the study. The majority (six out of eight) of the participants in this study were recruited via personal relationships developed over the course of two years getting to know students involved in LGBTQ events and student organizations on campus. One student was recruited through active outreach to the Black Student Association. The last
student was recruited via snowball sampling methods. The participants that emerged in this study reflect a strong diversity in racial and ethnic identity, as well as including two students who come from international contexts. However, there was a lack in diversity in gender, faith, and sexual orientation. All but one student self-identified as gay, one student self-identified as female, and one student self-identified from a non-Christian context or origin (Muslim). Despite a lack of diversity in gender, sexual orientation, and faith, the racial/ethnic and national diversity provided variance in student experiences and how those students made meaning of their multiple, intersecting identities as LGBQ students of color and faith. Table 1. reflects the pseudonyms, ages, genders, sexual orientations, race/ethnicities, and faiths of the eight participants in the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sex. Orientation</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Faith</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Hispanic/Mexican</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Gay</td>
<td>Latino/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Asian/Filipino, Spanish, and Chinese</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Gay</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
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<td>Gay</td>
<td>South East Asian/Indian</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Asian/Chinese</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Summary of Characteristics of Study Participants (Pseudonyms used)

Data Collection

I used a semi-structured interview protocol to ask a series of questions that delve into the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith and how participants came to understand these identities, as well as the relationship that these identities have with each other. The one-hour interview consisted of an informed consent form, open-ended interview questions, and an adapted social identity wheel. The participants were also informed that they would be asked to participate in a thirty minute member check meeting in order to ensure that the data analysis reflected how they have made meaning.
of their experiences. All interviews were conducted in person, in a private and comfortable location of the participant’s choosing in order to ensure that the participant was comfortable and the recording was clear and audible.

The interview protocol (Appendix C) identified key areas for conversation that the participant guided through their responses. Each interview began with an adapted social identity wheel (Calderón & Runell Hall, 2010; Appendix D) that took an inventory of how the participant self-identifies. The rationale for using the social identity wheel in order to gather information about how participants self-identified was to maintain alignment with a constructivist epistemological framework. Using the social identity wheel as an inventory of a participant’s social identities recognizes that how one self-identifies is situated within a particular time, place, and social context. It also situates the participant as an active agent over the labels that reflect their identities and experiences. How they self-identified on the social identity wheel informed how I spoke about their identities throughout the interview.

The interview protocol (Appendix C) consisted of a total of twelve questions that explored how LGBQ college students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple, intersecting identities. According to Baxter Magolda and King (2007), the key to conducting a quality interview to understand self-authorship is “accessing the meaning-making structure underlying any experience the interviewee regards as important” (p. 496). Therefore, the researcher’s job is to construct questions that exist in the context of what the participant introduces. This requires the interviewer to be attentive and flexible, to trust the process and adapt to anything that may arise in the course of the interview (Baxter Magolda and King, 2007). It is important as a researcher interviewing for
meaning making to leave that room for reflective space for the participant to think and speak. These strategies to interviewing for meaning making were utilized in the conducting of interviews with LGBQ students of color and faith.

The first question in the first set of questions asked participants to describe the identities on the social identity wheel that are most salient for them, allowing the participant to lead the direction of the conversation. The next three questions in the first set asked participants how they have separately come to identify as LGBQ, a person of color, and a person of faith. The participants guided the conversation and the researcher asked probing questions for further clarification and/or more depth on what the participant regards as important. Although the first set of questions asked participants to consider how they came to identify in terms of their faith, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identities, many of the participants made meaning of their identities in conjunction with other intersecting identities.

The second set of questions asked participants to consider the intersection of social identities, specifically their perceptions of faith and sexual orientation together and their perceptions of racial/ethnic identity and sexual orientation together. Participants were also asked to consider how people in their racial/ethnic background and faith community (if those are different) think about individuals who identify as nonheterosexual and what participants feel about these participants. The purpose of the second set of questions was to understand how participants understand their multiple identities together, if they do or if they had not already considered them in previous questions. To understand identity together expresses a level of complex thinking about the impact that identities have on each other and the ways that one’s context can
influence one’s perceptions of identity. By asking about their feelings about the messages they received about their sexual orientation from their faith and racial/ethnic communities, the researcher was able to gauge how their current feelings and thoughts about their multiple identities are or are not mediated by external influences. The final set of questions focused on where LGBQ students of color and faith find a sense of belonging and community in college and if there is a particular identity group that they identify more strongly with as a source of support and community.

The logic that informed the interview questions illuminates something about the meaning making process that LGBQ students of color and faith engage in around their identities. The researcher made sure to ask about the contextual influences (e.g. upbringing, family, school, media, etc.) as it relates to their identities and the messages they receive from this particular social context and authorities. Participants were asked about their current thoughts about their sexual orientation, faith, and race and whether or not that differs from what they were told about these identities. Baxter Magolda’s (2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) theory of self-authorship and meaning making, as well as Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, informed the logic behind the first four sections in the interview protocol. The last section was an opportunity to investigate what kinds of communities that LGBQ students of color and faith find themselves most supported and connected to and why. This last section helped inform the implications for practice and what is needed in these communities to best support LGBQ students of color and faith.
After conducting interviews, I transcribed the recorded interviews to begin to code and categorize the data. An integral aspect of maintaining anonymity and confidentiality was to ensure the safety of the transcripts and sound files. Sound files and transcriptions were stored on my personal computer hard drive, which only I use. The only people who had access to the transcripts and sound files are the faculty on my thesis committee. I transcribed the interviews myself, in order avoid the prospect of someone else mistranscribing or sharing sound files. It also brought a sense of comfort and trust to some participants to know that their sound files were not being transcribed by outside and unknown sources. Finally, the transcriptions were analyzed using grounded theory methods, which I discuss in greater detail in subsequent sections.

**Data Analysis**

This section outlined the methods of data analysis involved in this constructivist grounded theory study. Grounded theory methods of analysis incorporate a constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2006) to data analysis. In alignment with grounded theory methods of data analysis, I used a series of coding and categorizing that resulted in the emergent theory about the meaning making process of LGBQ students of color and faith presented in chapter four and discussed further in chapter five.

**Constant Comparative Approach**

Grounded theory research used a constant comparative method in order to engage the researcher in sampling, data collection, and data analysis continuously and in relation to one another (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 43). This approach involves comparing different participants with one another, comparing the participant to themselves at different points in time during the interview, comparing responses to
different events/incidents, comparing data with a category that emerged from coding, and comparing multiple categories with one another (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). This constant comparison helps develop strong codes that are informed by intentional engagement with the data, both individually and across participants. This approach also helps to avoid redundancy in the data collection process, identifies gaps in the data, and connects this redundancy into categories that span the experiences of all the participants. The purpose of constant comparison is for the data to support and continue to support emerging categories (Holton, 2007). This process of constant comparison occurs from open/initial coding all the way through selective coding.

**Coding Data**

Coding involves the process of defining and interpreting “what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Grounded theory coding consists of the following processes: open coding, axial coding, selective coding and memo-writing. The coding process gives meaning to the various themes that come up in an individual transcript and across transcripts.

**Initial Coding**

At this initial phase of coding, the researcher is open to the many theoretical possibilities available and present in the data (Charmaz, 2006). The initial coding is grounded in the data and focused on initial impressions of meaning the researcher is making of the data. It is also in this phase that the researcher can identify gaps in the data, which can later inform theoretical sampling that fills gaps in order to aid in further developing the emergent theory. The first step to open coding is line-by-line coding, which is the process of providing a name for each line of the transcript to develop
meaning (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50). Line-by-line coding is helpful in presenting nuances in the data. This type of coding forces the researcher to remain close to the data and specifically use the words of the participants in the development of codes. After coding line-by-line, researchers conduct coding incident to incident, which involves comparing identified incidents and codes from the line-by-line coding conducted (Charmaz, 2006, p. 53). The last aspect of the initial coding is focused coding. Focused coding is the process of taking all of the codes that are developed via line-by-line and incident to incident coding to decide which codes make the most sense to maintain. This involves practicing a constant comparative approach of the data of an individual’s transcript with itself and with other transcripts.

**Memo-writing**

“Memos are theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between categories” (Holton, 2007, p. 281). Memo-writing occurs parallel to the coding and analysis process. Memo-writing includes flagging for gaps across the data and/or moments of saturation, which begins the process of theoretical sampling. Saturation of data occurs when the researcher begins to notice that similar categories or codes are occurring across the transcripts. The theoretical sampling that results from the appearance of saturation and/or gaps in the data helps to identify areas of further definition in the categories and qualities or criteria for an individual that can further develop and refine a category.

**Axial Coding**

The purpose of axial coding is to “sort, synthesize, and organize large amounts of data and reassemble them in new ways” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). Initial coding was
concerned with breaking down the data and opening it up to the many possibilities that are present. Axial coding is more concerned with bringing the data together and attempting to draw connections between the codes, parse them down to larger categories with subcategories and attempt to understand the relationship between these categories and subcategories.

**Selective Coding**

Selective coding, or “theoretical coding” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63), takes the codes that have been identified and begins to arrange them in a way that would develop a theory grounded in the data. Theoretical codes provide coherence across the codes and connect all of the data with one another to come up with the emergent theory. A “story line is generated to capture the essence of what is happening in the study” (Jones, Torres, and Arminio, 2006, p. 45). An analysis of story line, or core category, becomes the emergent theory.

**Trustworthiness**

Accuracy, validity and reliability of data in a constructivist grounded theory can be in assured in multiple ways. Shenton (2004) outlined how to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research by addressing threats to rigor, such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility accounts for trustworthiness in the study and expertise of the researcher. The following are ways that I accounted for credibility in this study: establishing rapport with the participants, conducting member checks, utilizing previous research to frame my study and findings, and debriefing the data collection and analysis process with my thesis advisor, Dr. Terrell Strayhorn. Participants were able to not participate in the study or answer any question that they did
not like to answer, which allowed them to be in control during the interview process. Anonymity and confidentiality of data collected was ensured, and participants were able to choose their alias in the study. My work at the Multicultural Center, specifically with students of color and LGBTQ students on campus, has given me access to gatekeepers, key informants, and the student population that helps to ensure myself as someone this student population can trust. My identity as a gay person of color and faith provided a sense of comfort for many of the participants, which they articulated to me at the conclusion of the interviews. Some went so far as to say that they would not have felt as comfortable sharing what they did about their identities if I did not identify as an gay person of color and faith, which fosters an environment that is more trusting and honest. There is a certain expertise and credibility that exists in my own lived experiences in this research topic.

Conducting member checks “provides participants with the opportunity to react to the findings and interpretations that emerged as a result of his or her participation” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 99). Not only did member checks allow participants to engage with and expand upon the researcher’s interpretations of their words, but participants could also trust that the researcher was remaining true to their words and appropriately interpreting their experiences. Member checks provided participants an opportunity confirm or deny that my interpretation of their lived experiences reflects how they make meaning of their experiences. As a new researcher, I do not have the same credibility in relation to expertise that researchers before me have established. Therefore, prior to entering the data collection process, I provided a substantial amount of research that frames my study around the work of previous researchers who have established
themselves as valid sources of research. Finally, debriefing with my thesis advisor Dr. Strayhorn and thesis committee member Dr. Susan Jones provided me with an expert perspective on the data collection and analysis, while expanding my ideas about the data presented. They each identified areas for further thought and areas with flaws or in need of further expounding related to the presentation of this study.

Ensuring validity and reliability related to transferability relates to how the study can be compared to other contexts. Enough background information about the context of the study and a detailed description of the phenomenon and findings of this study is required in order for comparisons to be made to the experiences of these students in other contexts. Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and repeatability of the study. The grounded theory methodology allows this study to be deeply rooted in a process of coding and categorizing that can be tracked and repeated. An in-depth description of my methods allows the study to be repeated elsewhere. In particular, the interview protocol was reviewed by my thesis committee, which consists of two seasoned faculty members, to ensure further validity of the instrument and its ability to be used in multiple social contexts. Saturation of the data also “ensures replication and validation of data; and it ensures that our data are valid and reliable” (Morse, 2007, p. 234).

Confirmability refers to the objective nature of the study, which in the positivist framework would be ideal. However, Shenton (2004) advocated for recognition and transparency of the bias and assumptions with which researchers come in. Especially in qualitative research that utilizes a constructivist paradigm, it is impossible to be truly objective. We as researchers come in with our own identities that may impact the way that we interpret data. Aside from the previous suggestions made earlier, such as member
checks, I am very clear about the bias and assumptions that I hold in relation to this topic. Much of my bias and assumptions come from my own lived experiences as an LGBQ person of color and faith. My positionality as a researcher will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Furthermore, I describe the shortcomings in the study’s sample and how it impacted the data in the final chapter of this thesis study. In order for the study to be scrutinized (which strengthens confirmability), providing an in-depth methodological description leaves little room for the integrity of the project to be questioned.

**Positionality**

Before embarking on this study, I reflected on my own positionality to the study. Exploring my positionality is an “attempt to become aware of their presuppositions and to grapple with how they affect the research” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 131). My positionality to the study impacted choices in theoretical frameworks, methodology, and analysis of the data. It also impacted relationships with my participants. As it relates to the study, I identify as a gay man, who is biracial (Latino and White), and Christian. My motivations for choosing to explore the topic of this study is directly related to my own lived experiences a gay man of color and faith. I was raised in a Puerto Rican, Catholic home in the Bronx, New York City where my mother engrained the value of a personal faith in God into my mind. Growing up in a predominantly Black and Latino/a neighborhood, the strict expectations of what it means to be a man in the Black and Latino/a community made me subject to a great deal of bullying, both inside and outside of school, on the basis of my perceived sexual orientation and femininity. This bullying occurred as early
in my elementary school years as I can remember and persisted into high school. I always acknowledged myself as different in some way but did not understand what that difference meant until I came out as gay in my first year of college to my mother and to myself. I did not experience contention between my faith and sexual orientation, because my faith existed prior to identifying as gay and has gotten me through many struggles in my life. I never questioned God for making me gay, but I did question why He would allow me to be target of bullying for so long. After coming out, I lost my faith after my mother and I stopped talking for a few months. Redeveloping our relationship pushed me to fill a void in my life, which was my faith. Identifying a LGBTQ affirming Catholic Church helped me regain my faith and inspired me to create spaces for LGBTQ people to participate in dialogue about faith. Furthermore, my meaning-making journey with my multiple, intersecting identities has placed diversity and social justice education at the core of my work as a student affairs professionals. This passion for diversity and social justice has led me to enter positions that would allow me to support the experiences of underrepresented students. My guiding philosophy for my work in student affairs and higher education is to create safe(r) spaces where students can be respected and valued as their whole selves in all spaces, despite some of the contentions that systems of power, privilege, and oppression in our society create (e.g. faith and LGBTQ). This thesis was motivated by my desire to apply my research to my work with underrepresented students and contribute knowledge to the field that would inform future research, theory, and practice.

I came into this study with my own meaning making about the intersections of faith, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity, which I made sure to not project onto my
participants during the interview, on my interpretations of the data, or my presentation of the findings. I specifically chose to conduct a constructivist grounded theory study for a number of reasons related to my positionality. Grounded theory requires that I remain true and sincere to data, which should hopefully avoid misinterpretation of the data that is conflated with the meaning making of my own experiences. Constructivism promotes that a researchers’ reflexivity about their interpretations exist in partnership with the interpretations participants make of their experiences. Therefore, I have had an opportunity to stay true to the interpretations the participants make of their experiences while contributing the knowledge I have from my own lived experiences. Ultimately, my positionality to the study helped participants to feel comfortable meeting with me and sharing as much as they did about a number of personal stories that were at times difficult to share. In the process of interpreting the participants’ experiences, the emergent theory and subsequent findings may not have always reflected my own lived experiences, but challenged the ways that I have made meaning and continue to make meaning of my experiences as an LGBQ person of color and faith.

Conclusion

This chapter described the methodology for the proposed constructivist, grounded theory study of the meaning LGBQ students of color and faith make of their multiple and intersecting identities. Through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, I was able to identify students to participate in this study. Through grounded theory methods of coding, I was be able to identify gaps that would precipitate a series of theoretical sampling in order to fill in gaps that eventually produce an emergent theory. My
relationship with students in this population, as well as to key informants and gatekeepers to this student population, helped identifying students to participate. The interview protocol helped guide the participant through their lived experiences with their faith identity, sexual orientation, and racial identity and how these experiences have intersected in a way to develop the meaning they currently make and have made over time of their LGBQ, faith, and racial/ethnic minority identities. The process involved in grounded theory methods provided an opportunity to engage with in-depth readings and analysis of transcripts that was also engaged in constant comparison. The specific and in-depth nature of grounded theories helped me identify nuances in these students’ meaning-making process. Chapter four provides the results of conducting interviews and the subsequent grounded theory and constant comparative methods of analysis.
Chapter 4: Findings

Each of the eight participants presented stories and meaning-making processes that were unique to their social contexts, identities, and experiences, which created a challenge in identifying themes across the interviews. However, as a result of analyzing the data using constant comparative methods, I discovered that all of the participants made meaning of their experiences and various messages from external forces in order to (re)frame their faith in a way that differs from how external forces had initially framed faith. Therefore, the themes were arranged to move from external definitions and influences on the participants to how they made meaning of their experiences and those external influences in developing internal commitments related to their faith and sexual orientation. This chapter presents the following themes: (a) identity salience, (b) importance and role of family, (c) messages about nonheterosexual people, (d) role models with a “different story,” (e) coming to identify as nonheterosexual, and (f) (re)framing faith. The chapter concludes with the findings about where participants found a sense of belonging in college.

Identity Salience

Participants were asked to complete a social identity wheel (see Appendix D) as an inventory of how they self-identify. They were then asked to describe the identity or identities on the wheel that was most salient for them. This section about identity salience will review the identities that participants self-identified as most salient for them.
at the present moment. Of all the identities on the social identity wheel, all eight participants selected race and ethnicity as one of their more salient identities. Race and ethnicity are the identities that connect all of the participants together. Race and ethnicity are the identities where they uniformly feel different on a predominantly White campus. Participants described racial/ethnic identity to be more salient to them as a result of experiences with racism, strong racial/ethnic affiliation, and/or the challenges of identifying as a person of color in a predominantly White institutional setting. Although other social identities stand out in the participants’ minds, race and ethnicity occupy a particular space in their everyday existence at a predominantly White university where they are different from the majority. As a result of analyzing the interviews, it was discovered that race and ethnicity served as a backdrop and an added layer of complexity to participants’ experiences of navigating a primary area of conflict, which is between faith and sexual orientation.

As a computer science major, Dynea spoke about the ways in which being Black makes her feel that she is “different and you must do more to prove that you should be here.” The disproportionate representation of people of color, specifically women of color, in her classes has created an environment where she feels she must prove that she deserves a right to be in that major. “In classes, I guess it can be kinda intimidating. I don’t know if it’s from being Black or being a female or maybe a mixture of both, but it is a little intimidating in my classes.” Dynea struggles to locate her feelings of intimidation with a particular identity. Although she feels that she is “just like everybody else,” being Black and female makes her stick out from everyone else in her classes.
Christopher has a unique racial experience as an African American person raised by White parents since the age of 9 years old in a predominantly African American neighborhood and educational system. Having White parents has made him aware of the existence of differences in race. However, his parents supported his African American heritage and identity, as well as maintaining a relationship with his African American birth mother and brother. Like some other participants (e.g. John, Dynea, and Kevin), college was the first time that Christopher was in a predominantly White context where he was made more aware of his race, because it was the first time he was not surrounded by people of his own racial identity. Like most of the other participants, he describes race as something that distinguishes him from other people or makes him different from the majority of people in college. For him, race and sexual orientation are identities that he is “forced to face regularly” because of the ways that they make him different from the norm.

For Zeek, Mike and Raj, racial and ethnic identity is salient for them because of their involvement and strong relationships with their racial/ethnic communities. For example, Zeek is biracial but identifies as Puerto Rican, because of the ways his family has fostered his exploration of and identification with a Puerto Rican identity. When asked how he came to identify at Puerto Rican, Zeek’s racial/ethnic identification was initially formed by the limitations of the boxes in surveys around race. He expressed his struggles to choose one identity, because he had grown up in a mixed race household. His mother told him to choose and embrace a Puerto Rican identity in completing these surveys; his ethnic pride has only increased since his desire to major in Spanish and to connect more with his Puerto Rican culture and family. However, he describes how he is
often read as White. “We had a lot of racists in our school and the things that they would say are just terrible. I was thankful that we were White Latinos.” Although he identifies solely as Puerto Rican and acknowledges the variance of color in Puerto Ricans, he expresses that his perceived Whiteness has afforded him the luxury of not having to be the target of racist attacks by peers in high school. He identifies strongly as Puerto Rican, even though his light complexion protected him from racism in high school.

Raj maintains strong Indian and Bengali cultural ties since his family and Bengali community is close to college. He describes how his Muslim and Bengali identities are interrelated and were framed for him growing up as one in the same. His racial/ethnic identity are a strong source of support and community for him, although where he finds the most community in college is within predominantly White student organizations, specifically undergraduate student government. Raj also feels that he has to serve as a representative for his marginalized identities in all of the communities he is involved in, including the LGBTQ community, the Muslim community, and in groups with predominantly majority identities (i.e. White, Christian, heterosexual). Raj shares:

I can be a source of strength. I am not embarrassed by it anymore. I feel like I can inspire people just by being strong and confident in myself…They need somebody to look up to. If I knew somebody like me growing up, I would be a hell of a lot more comfortable. I would have grown so much faster in terms of my own insecurities.

Since his Muslim, Bengali/Indian, and gay identities are all minority identities in many of the spaces that he enters, he feels the need to represent them positively in order to debunk negative stereotypes he has heard about these communities in his identity formation. He
feels a greater sense of belonging in predominantly White student organizations because there he can incorporate all of these identities into the work that he does and they are valued and celebrated by the group. In the complex understanding of his multiple identities and sense of identity integration, he hopes that he can serve as a role model for other gay men who also experience other areas of oppression and difference, such as being more feminine, a person of color, or Muslim. He has shifted his own identity development to serve as a role model who could provide the counter narrative needed to help LGBQ people of color and faith explore the complexities of their multiple identities and feel that they are not alone in their identity development.

The social identity categories of race and ethnicity discussed are situated within a specific United States context. For Kevin, a Chinese international student, nationality and race/ethnicity are far more salient for him in the United States than it was in China. Kevin currently positions race and ethnicity as a salient identity, which was not made aware to him until he moved to the United States. In China, most people were Chinese and therefore, race and ethnicity were not aspects of differentiation between him and the people around him. The way that he understood how his faith, sexual orientation, nationality, and race/ethnicity were salient for him fluctuated between a United States context and Chinese contexts. In terms of race, ethnicity, and nationality, he experienced multiple contexts that have increased salience of these identities. Moving to Beijing for college from Guangzhou China made him different because he was moving from a place where the primary dialect spoken is Cantonese to a place where the primary dialect spoken is Mandarin. Moving to the United States was the first time encountering the Western social construct of race where some races are dominant and other are
subordinate. Furthermore, coming to college in the United States made race, ethnicity, and nationality more salient because it was the first time that he was encountering being a minority within a predominantly White context.

Although Nick has spent most of his life in the United States, he also expresses similar feelings about the changing dynamics of race/ethnicity based on national context. In Zambia, everyone is Zambian, but coming to the United States made him feel different being Black and Zambian. He has seen it as an opportunity to educate other people about his race, something of which he is proud. When asked whether he has always been proud of his race and happy to educate others about it, he speaks about the town in the United States he moved to and how his family was one of only a few Black families. He vividly describes a game that the kids in the neighborhood played where they would drive down the street and “yell the ‘n’ word out their windows.” The first time he remembers being very surprised, as it was the first time he had experienced any overt racism. He remembers it feeling “very painful” and “wishing I could be White so I could fit in with everyone else.” However, he has become increasingly more resilient to racist experiences as he has made meaning of this experience and a few other experiences of overt racism, or what he calls “meanness” against him about his race. Experiences with overt racism in the United States shifted race as an identity that is salient for him.

Faith was only salient for three out of the eight participants: Nick, Raj, and Mike. Faith was a more salient identity for the three individuals who were more aligned with their religious community. As mentioned earlier, Raj has drawn strong connections between his faith and ethnic identities. As a practicing Muslim, his faith serves as a source of personal strength. Mike is a practicing Roman Catholic who went mostly to
Catholic schools. Similar to Raj, Mike connects his faith identity with the prevalence of Catholicism in the Philippines. It functions as a “philosophical system,” which he practices through Catholic traditions like (almost) daily prayer and attending Church every Sunday. Mike expressed struggles reconciling his faith and sexual orientation because of the messages of the Catholic Church that dictate how someone should not act on their gay tendencies or attractions. Mike’s struggle to reconcile his faith with his sexual orientation will be discussed further in later sections. For Nick, Christianity is the most salient identity, overshadowing every other identity. Much of this is rooted in his devout relationship with God, the spiritual and social support he finds from his faith community, and his strong involvement in the faith community.

Although all of the participants feel a sense of difference around the intersections of race, sexual orientation, and faith, the way that they have made meaning of their experiences and external forces in their life to come to these understandings of identity salience is more varying. Much of the way that they have come to understand their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, faith, and other social identities are influenced by the messages they received from family, their racial/ethnic communities, their faith communities, and other individuals who have crossed their paths up until this point. The subsequent section of chapter four will go into greater detail about the role that family plays as an integral part of the participants’ identity formation.

**Family**

Navigating relationships with family around one’s racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and faith identity came up as a consistent theme across all of the interviews. All participants described having strong relationships with family. These
strong relationships, as well as the expectations that family had around sexual orientation, gender, race/ethnicity, and faith, created environments where students were encouraged and supported to formulate their own opinions or contributed to conflict in the development of one’s voice.

Familial expectations around faith ranged for the participants. Some participants described the important role that religion played in their families, and others expressed that they went to church and practiced faith as more a cultural practice that was strongly related to their race/ethnicity. As mentioned earlier, Mike’s connection and relationship with faith is directly related to his parent’s Filipino Catholic heritage. His mother who, “goes to mass every day,” modeled a devout relationship to faith. Although he identifies as Roman Catholic, he does not subscribe to all of the teachings of the Catholic Church, which is a point of contention for his own faith identity and the relationship with his family’s faith identity. He spoke about when faith is “engrained in you that deeply” as it is for his parents, he does not “try to mess with that,” or challenge the beliefs his parents have about faith.

In the development of the opinions that differ from those of their families, the participants must often negotiate sharing opinions and identities with their family, in order to maintain the family ties that are so important to them. Zeek spoke about the ways he has struggled to develop a “voice” and maintain strong relationships with family:

Now coming back from college and going back home or even when I call, if my dad sees something he doesn’t like, he’ll still say that. It is hard, because I try to be politically correct and now I have a bigger voice, I feel like. “That’s not nice to say,” and he would be like, “If you don’t like it, then you can move out.” In
my opinion, since I have a bigger voice now, it has led to more problems because now I have formed my own opinion, and he has his opinion and we sometimes butt heads.

Zeek’s desire to be “politically correct” is in direct opposition to his father’s opinions on issues related to sexual orientation. In his interview, Zeek described multiple instances where his father expresses his disapproval of nonheterosexual people, a topic about which Zeek has differing opinions. His father also poses a challenge to Zeek in his approach to disagreements that Zeek can either get used to his father’s opinions or he can move out. Given these challenges, Zeek finds that he must balance respecting his father, which is a key component to maintaining a relationship with him, with the “bigger voice” he has developed since coming to college. Specific disagreements around sexual orientation have ultimately become a source of internal struggle for Zeek, causing him not disclose his sexual orientation to his parents. This is difficult for Zeek, as this is one of his most salient identities and one that he wishes he could share with his family. On the other end of the spectrum, Christopher’s parents’ support has helped Christopher be “blessed with autonomy and a mind.” Christopher describes his parents as “hippies” who have helped foster his voice by challenging what he believes in order to allow him to develop internal commitments.

Regardless of whether or not their family members fostered and supported their “bigger voice,” all of the participants described the importance of their relationships with their family members and how their success in college and prior to college has a lot to do with the relationships they have maintained with their families. Families contributed a number of spoken and unspoken messages to the participants about their identities. The
next section will describe the way that participants make meaning of the messages about nonheterosexual people that they receive from family and other external forces.

**Messages about Nonheterosexual People**

As participants have came to understand their own sexual orientation, all of them have been subject to a number of negative messages about nonheterosexual people and have had to incorporate these messages into how they made meaning of their sexual orientation and faith. Some of these negative messages have come from their racial/ethnic community, their religious community, and/or family. Messages from family often connected back to values espoused by one’s racial/ethnic community and faith.

At least three of the male participants shared personal experiences with negative messages about gay people. These negative messages manifested themselves in the form of jokes or bullying around their perceived feminine tendencies, such as playing with girls at school, having mostly female friends, or walking and talking in a particular way. Participants made different meaning of these experiences. John shared that his ability to be “clever” allowed him to utilize his likeability to woo the people around him, and therefore, refocusing his peers from any perceived feminine tendencies. Raj spoke about being bullied and called “girly” at a young age, even before his peers were able to articulate what this difference meant. It was not until later in his elementary school experience that the jokes Raj’s peers shifted from calling him “girly” to correlating Raj’s perceived femininity with the stereotypes about all gay people being feminine.

Zeek was one of the few participants who experienced overtly negative messages about nonheterosexual people from family, specifically his Puerto Rican father.
Growing up, if my dad were to ever see somebody on TV that was gay, he would say, “Oh, look at that faggot” or just really bad, nasty words. I would always correlate it with something negative. I would correlate what he was saying because it was very hateful.

Upon reflecting on this particular story, Zeek expressed how he did not connect with these messages because he was not identifying as gay at the time. However, as he continues to hear these messages from his father when he goes home, Zeek has started to take these messages personally, which has resulted in serious internal struggle. He expressed, “I just feel like my dad doesn’t love the true me, and it is kinda hard.” Zeek has begun to question the love that his father has for him, because his father does not know that Zeek identifies as gay. His fear of having these negative messages directed at him has ultimately been a major reason why he has not come out to his family. He desires to maintain strong relationships with his family, because they serve as a source of support in college.

Aside from the overtly negative connotations that come with calling a gay person a “faggot,” Zeek also speaks about experiences where his father would force Zeek to walk in front of him to make sure Zeek was not “swaying his hips,” or walking like a girl. Much of the messages Zeek received around gender and sexual orientation are rooted in issues related to racial and ethnic expectations of men and masculinity. Within the Puerto Rican community, it is expected that men are masculine and that they get married to women. Zeek’s father has no concept of Zeek doing or being otherwise. Zeek shares, “It’s hard because he has his expectation built, and I am not quite sure what my expectation is.” His father’s expectations around marrying a woman and Zeek’s lack of
expectations about whether he will marry a man or a woman has led to internal conflict. Internal conflict describes an internal struggle between the expectations of external forces and the participants’ ability to make meaning of these expectations in a way that matches how they feel. In Zeek’s case, the inability to externalize his opposing viewpoint about sexual orientation with his father.

Most participants experienced a lack of acknowledgement or a silence around people who are nonheterosexual, meaning people simply did not talk about it. Although not overtly negative, silence sends the message that nonheterosexual identities are either not important to talk about or are not acceptable to talk about in public discourse. Dynea does not remember ever hearing any negative messages. However, she had been bringing her girlfriends to church and home, yet not one person, including her mother, ever outwardly made the connection that Dynea was gay. Raj spoke about the silence or lack of acknowledgement in Muslim and Bengali communities. His parents have begun to make some arrangements for Raj to marry a woman, because Bengali tradition is arranged marriage between a man and a woman. Much of the silence surrounding nonheterosexual identities is based on the expectations that racial/ethnic communities have that marriage and dating should be between a man and woman. For Kevin’s changing contexts, he found that being in China was different than being in the United States. In China, nonheterosexual existed in the margins of society and were never mentioned or acknowledged. There was no visible LGBTQ community in China with which to connect. This pervasive silence around the existence of nonheterosexual people in China permeated into his faith community. However, in the United States, Kevin experienced negative messages being perpetuated by his Christian community about
nonheterosexual people, which ultimately led him to dissociate from that community because he felt more accepted by the LGBTQ community on campus. His LGBTQ identity became increasingly more salient through this involvement.

Unlike the silence that exists in racial/ethnic communities around nonheterosexual identities, all of the participants share that they have heard, either personally or in their social contexts, about how it is wrong to be nonheterosexual. Since seven out of the eight participants either identify as Christian or were raised in a Christian background, they all heard people share that it is a sin to be nonheterosexual, because “the Bible says so” or their religious denomination has explicitly denounced nonheterosexual relationships. This section highlights the explicit and implicit messages that LGBQ people of color and faith receive from their various communities which denounce nonheterosexual people. The next section describes how participants make meaning of their experiences encountering people, or role models, that provide positive messages about people who identify differently in terms of gender and sexual orientation.

**Role Models: A “Different Story”**

As the participants have navigated their multiple identity developments, some of them had role models that helped them feel affirmed in their identities as LGBQ people of color and faith. These role models created a counter narrative to the negative messages and silence they heard about nonheterosexual people. Dynea experienced multiple positive LGBTQ people in her life who also identify as people of color. Being raised in a predominantly Black environment helped her connect with out LGBTQ people of color, which allowed her to not see identifying as an LGBQ person of color and faith
as a problem. Although not a nonheterosexual woman, Dynea’s female pastor served as a strong role model for Dynea.

The fact that she is a woman preaching the Word, I felt like God accepts you no matter who you are or where you come from. I was like, “If she’s a woman being a pastor…” I am sure somewhere in the text it says that’s not supposed to be. So the fact that I’m gay and a Christian, even though it is not supposed to be, it’s accepted.

Having a female pastor created a counter narrative about leadership in the Black Church and served as a role model that it is okay to fall outside of the norms of gender. Dynea drew a direct relationship between her status as a sexual minority with her pastor being a minority within Black Church leadership. Her pastor continues to serve as a mentor figure throughout her college experience.

John’s involvement in online forums, such as blogging and podcasts, provided him with diverse, positive perspectives of LGBTQ people. Hearing the podcasts of LGBTQ people from around the country and world showed John that there was a lot more to LGBTQ people than just the stereotypes that create a monolithic story of the LGBTQ experience. “These are real gay people as opposed to media portrayals of gay people.” To hear perspectives via the podcasts served as a counter narrative to the stereotypes that John had heard about gay people and allowed him to feel affirmed in his own identity. For Kevin, simply meeting a gay person when he went to college in Beijing allowed him to see that one can be out and gay, which inspired him to explore his sexual orientation and eventually move to the United States.
However, when participants did not have role models to provide counter narratives from which to draw new knowledge, they continued to function on the only messages about LGBQ people they had heard or seen, which were overwhelming rooted in negative stereotypes. As Nick explores his sexual orientation, he has become more involved in the LGBTQ community on campus. However, he has found that he does not connect to the LGBTQ community, because the people he has met perpetuate the many stereotypes he heard and saw on television. His experiences with certain LGBTQ people in college perpetuate negative stereotypes that excessive drinking and promiscuity define the LGBTQ community. This created tension for Nick to connect to the LGBTQ community and an LGBQ identity since his Christian identity discourages overdrinking and sex before marriage. Nick’s inability to identify with the LGBTQ community in this way is one of the reasons that inhibit him from identifying as nonheterosexual. The next section explains the other reasons that Nick does not identify as nonheterosexual, as well as how the other participants have come to make meaning of their sexual orientation.

**Coming to Identify as Nonheterosexual**

Sexual orientation was one of the most salient identities for seven out of the eight participants; everyone except for Nick who identifies as straight or “questioning.” Like race and ethnicity, the seven participants described their sexual orientation to be most salient for them, because sexual orientation makes them different from other people and/or was an identity that relates to their involvement and friend groups on campus. When asked about how they came to identify as nonheterosexual, all eight participants spoke about the first time they remember feeling attracted to members of the same gender. Consistent across all of the participants’ stories is an initial awareness of feeling
different from others. Although the age of awareness ranged from five to eighteen, all of the participants described feeling differently than their peers about sexuality. As they were making meaning of their own feelings of same gender attraction, many of them were being told by others or by messages from other socializing forces (e.g. media, church, school) that they were different. Half of the participants mentioned in their interviews experiencing gossip or bullying from peers about their sexual identity. Finally, they all concluded that they were different from others in their sexual orientation and began to identify within themselves as nonheterosexual. From this point, participants’ unique experiences, messages (internalized or not), and multiple identities shaped how they came to identify as nonheterosexual in the ways that they do today, in varying degrees of saliency and disclosure to others.

In the process of identifying as nonheterosexual, six out of the eight participants first identified as bisexual before eventually identifying as gay. For several of the participants, bisexual served as a transitional identity to eventually identifying as gay. John spoke in his interview about the ways that bisexuality served as a “safety net thing” and an opportunity to be “normal.” For Raj, bisexuality served as “as a stepping stone and it would allow me to keep one foot in the straight world. For me, it was better than to be ‘fully’ gay.” Much of the hesitancy to identify as gay came from the expectations around sexual orientation and gender norms that being gay defied. Furthermore, identifying as gay required a certain level of risks for the participants, because it could result in severing ties with family and friends. However, many of the participants began to identify as gay because of the overwhelming feeling that they were living a “lie.” Dynea suggests this language of lying after trying to date multiple guys after being
attracted to a girl, only to realize that she would never feel what she felt with women, with men.

Although the aforementioned trend around bisexuality reflects what most of the participants experienced in terms of their sexual orientation identity development, two of the participants—Nick and Zeek—made different meaning of their sexual orientation. Nick was the only participant in the study who does not identify as gay. He has been having same gender attractions for over five years and continues to identify as questioning, although he prefers to identify as straight. Like the other participants, he felt different in terms of his sexual orientation but did not relate to messages about gay people because he saw himself as different from them. His questioning is rooted around how he feels that the labels that define nonheterosexual people do not fit his experience and feelings. He articulates that he is attracted to some men in particular, but he is mostly attracted to women and foresees himself marrying a woman.

Prior to coming to college, Nick did not act on or explore his questioning identity. In the quote below, Nick shares some of his earlier thoughts about his sexual orientation:

I guess for me having both, I either want to be straight or be gay. I don’t want to have a middle. If I want to like men, I only want to like men. If it is girls, I want it to be only girls. I was hoping that God would help me choose. I remember it was very frustrating for the longest time because I still had aspects of both. I felt attraction for both of them, and it wasn’t just going away. It was really frustrating for me. I remember praying about it multiple times, “God, make it go away. Can I just have one, and not be frustrated with two?” It has always been double and that was really hard for me.
Nick’s understanding of sexual orientation exists dichotomously as either straight or gay. Although he shares that he would either want to be straight or gay, his preference is to be straight, because of his stronger attraction to women and desire to marry a woman. There were many moments throughout the interview that Nick shared how he cannot imagine dating a man because he does not have the same emotional connection to them as he does with women. His attraction to a particular type of man is grounded in physical attraction, not emotional attraction.

Since coming to college, Nick has tried to connect with the LGBTQ community in order to meet new people and explore his same gender attraction more. He has been engaged in the LGBTQ community on campus for about a year and has developed meaningful friendships that have challenged some of the messages he received about LGBTQ people up to that point. However, since his values around not having sex before marriage and not drinking as much seems to have been negatively perpetuated by the LGBTQ people with whom he has socialized, his sexual orientation has continued to remain straight, despite his same gender physical attractions. Furthermore, he does not feel that people in the queer community allow him the space to question his sexual orientation, because they often tell him that he has to choose. This has created confusion for Nick, because he does not understand how LGBTQ people can judge in some of the ways that LGBTQ people complain that they experience from straight people—a question for which I had no answer. At the time of the interview, Nick has found a sense of purpose in his attraction to men that is a part of God’s plan for him. Although the full meaning of this plan is unclear and the purpose is still formulating for him, he has found
a connection between his faith and sexual orientation, which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter in more detail.

Although Zeek identifies as gay, he feels that sexuality is more fluid. Zeek dates men in college, so for the sake of confusion that people often have around bisexuality, he chooses to identify as gay. “My friends, I tell them that I am gay because it is just easier to be like, ‘I’m gay!’ If they want a more philosophical answer about I think sexual attraction is fluid.” Like Nick, Zeek feels confined by the labels that currently exist for people who are not gay or straight. Because of his feeling the need to identify as either gay or straight, Zeek experiences struggles with dating. Since he came to identify openly as gay with his friends despite his attraction to both men and women, he struggles to date women because people either perceive him to be gay or have heard from others that he identifies as gay. He would rather identify as gay, because to identify as straight would be to lie to women about his same gender attraction. His decision to identify as gay has ultimately placed him in a box around identity that has affected his ability to date women.

Zeek’s sexual orientation has brought a number of internal conflicts. Aside from the identity labels not fitting his feelings, dating women, and negotiating sharing his opinion with his father, Zeek struggles with disclosing his sexual orientation. Although his sexual orientation is one of his most salient identities and a part of his identity that is very important to him, he knows that to share his sexual orientation with his family would disappoint them and potentially cut off family bonds. Since much of his emotional support in college has come from family and familial relationships in Latino communities are integral to identity, he has chosen to not disclose his sexual orientation. Zeek shares, “If that is the one thing that I have to keep from my parents then that’s fine. Everybody
has their secrets…They sacrifice so much to raise me and give me a good childhood so I can make sacrifices to keep them happy too.” In order to maintain his family relationships, he feels that he must make a “sacrifice” comparable to the sacrifices his parents have made for him. Maintaining family relationships also includes ties to his Puerto Rican culture, which is another identity that is most salient for him, and connections to his faith community. Keeping this secret from his parents has larger implications for Zeek’s other salient identities and overall emotional, social, and academic success in college.

The issue of disclosing to family ranged across the participants, depending on their identities, experiences, and contexts. Conversely related to Zeek’s decision to not disclose his sexual orientation to family, John and Christopher disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, because their families believe that to not accept one’s gay identity goes against family and cultural values. Interestingly, Zeek and John both come from Latino/a backgrounds and yet their families have interpreted family relationships in Latino/a families differently. Much of this has to do with the difference between their parents’ known political affiliations, views of gender and sexual orientation, and affiliation to various religious beliefs. Like Zeek, Raj has not come out to family in order to maintain family ties, specifically a relationship with his parents who provide strong emotional and financial support for him in college. However, Raj has made clear meaning of his relationship with his family, as well as his other multiple identities.

Raj describes not being out as a “calculated thing.” Zeek and Raj express similar repercussions that coming out would have on finances and emotional relationships with family. However, in relation to Raj’s calculated coming out process to his parents, he
shares about his parents, “You are going to pay for my college before I come out to you…I am not trying to have nobody cut off my education; money comes first.” Unlike other people who come out to parents because they cannot keep it to themselves any longer, Raj expresses that the need to come out to parents is not an issue for him. He is out to the people that he wants to be, specifically his communities in college. Although he is very close to his parents and he does not want to ruin relationships with them, it is important for him to first have a job that would support him financially and then he can share with his parents about his sexual orientation. This particular process of thought is one of the many ways that Raj has been able to make meaning of his multiple identities, commitments, and experiences in a way that allows him to come to decisions that relate to what he values and wants for himself.

Raj and Christopher came to understand and accept their sexual orientation much earlier than the other participants in this study. Raj came to a realization that he was attracted to men at the age of five. He remembers feeling real emotional crushes at a young age. Like the other participants displayed in their meaning making process, Raj speaks about how people started commenting on his femininity and associated being effeminate with being gay. From the age of seven and throughout his precollege years, Raj experienced bullying on the basis of his sexual orientation. The meaning he made of his sexual orientation at a young age was that he could not be gay. Like Nick and Zeek, Raj thought that if he prayed, his same gender attractions would go away. Over time, Raj began to identify more strongly with his gay identity, because he was forced to face it at a younger age than most. Currently, sexual orientation is his most salient identity, so salient that he describes his sexual orientation as “always in my mind. It is the lens
through which I see everything.” As he came to embrace his more feminine identity, his gay identity became more salient, because people have perceived and continue to perceive him as gay. He describes how he is more likely to “hear faggot, before terrorist,” because his Muslim identity is an invisible identity for him. He has embraced and is very aware of how his gender expression fits a stereotype of gay people and has challenged how this is not a negative stereotype for a man to be feminine. He also challenges other negative stereotypes about gay people, Muslim people, and people of color as a part of his desire to be a role model for these various communities.

One area of conflict for Raj is his relationship to the gay community. He feels that the gay community is “defined by rejection” and is very petty. He describes how the gay community has ideal standards of beauty, which includes the “standard White, masculine, built.” John and Nick share similar feelings about how the gay community idealizes White people. While John and Nick do not comment further about the topic, Raj shares how “that’s not me and I can’t do anything about that” and has come to terms with this reality. However, he does not have favorable view of the gay community, despite his participation in it, because he perceives it to be a community that does not reflect his racial/ethnic identity, his values, and his experiences. Raj relates the gay community to the Bengali community and how much more “family oriented” the Bengali community is. This connection that he makes is not only an external observation but also one that reflects his internal commitments to and appreciation of the family oriented Bengali community. He describes his own internal dialogue about his multiple identities in relation to how there is a “stigma being a person of color” when he shared, “When I juxtapose them together, I think about how my ethnicity or race comes into contact with
attraction rather than how my ethnicity undermines my being gay.” Despite this conflict, he has come to understand the complexity of his multiple identities together and the relationship of his identities to the racist nature of the LGBTQ community that often privileges the voices and experiences of White people while silencing people of color.

Christopher experienced a long and challenging journey prior to coming out as gay in high school. At the age of 9, Christopher was taking care of his younger brother for long, extended periods of time as his mother was in and out of the house, because she was a drug addict. He would make sure to take his brother to school, feed them with some support from nearby family members and teachers, and continue to care for himself and his academics. At nine years old, Christopher was taken to a new home with White parents. Because his parents were not prepared to take another child, Christopher also struggled for a number of years without his relationships with his brother, who had been with him through all of these struggles. Despite all of this immediate and dramatic changes, his adoptive parents continued to make sure that Christopher saw his brother and mother periodically, in order to maintain the relationships that were important to him. Eventually, his parents adopted Christopher’s brother.

By the time he came out as gay to his peers and family, Christopher had been through a great deal of hardship that only made him more resilient to any repercussions that may have followed. When he experienced some bullying because of his gay identity when he went to high school, Christopher initially felt hurt by his peers’ words. However, his experiences had made him outspoken:

I stood up for myself, because I had been out for two years already, my parents were not ashamed of me and made me proud of who I was. Whenever stuff like
that happened my freshmen year, I spoke up. This is who I am and I am not going to be bullied into not being who I am. After freshmen year, everyone was used to me being who I am.

From this point in high school, Christopher met LGBTQ juniors who served as an additional source of support and people he could look up to as role models. As a result of his gay identity increasing in saliency and his desire to create change, he got involved with school administration to start the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at his school and eventually became a part of the youth board of Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

With all of these prior lived experiences and leadership, Christopher came into college with a strong sense of his identities and who he was a person. As a result, he experienced a “weird transition” to college.

Coming here was weird for me. I was in a different place and still am I, then a lot of other LGBTQIA organizations here…Coming out at 12 is pretty early and I guess coming out in high school is still pretty early, so I have come across a lot of people who were not out yet or had just come out yesterday or were coming out tomorrow to their parents. I think I have always said I am comfortable with my own identity as a gay male. I know who I am, I know what that means to me, and I don’t feel self-conscious about it. I am pretty certain as far as what that means to me. With that being said and with me having been out for six years when there are people who were out yet or who were just coming out or were only out to certain people, I had a different set of needs than the people in the groups I interacted with here as far as my involvement. Sometimes that was fine and
sometimes that was bothersome…I was so involved in high school, and I feel like there are people here addressing education and research around LGBTQ people that is catered to those who have a different set of needs because of their relationship with their identity.

Christopher acknowledges the importance of research and education for people who are in the beginning process of figuring out their identity, but he feels that this research and education does not meet his needs, because he feels that he is at a higher level of self-awareness about his sexual orientation than many of his peers. For example, he does not need coming out support, because this is a process he has already gone through and come to be comfortable around. He demonstrates a level of comfort and internal foundations that he has developed around his identity and what he believes. Although not specifically highlighted in the quote about his comfort with his gay identity as opposed to many of his peers in college, this level of comfort also exists within his racial/ethnic identity, despite the complexities of growing up with a Black mother and being raised by White parents, and his faith, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Coming to terms with their sexual orientation at an earlier age, as well as challenging life experiences, greatly reflected in the complexity of Christopher and Raj’s answers around sexual orientation, as well as their other identities. They both also made meaning of many challenging experiences they faced at an earlier age. Their resilience to challenges that they faced resulted in a strong sense of cognitive complexity around how they made meaning of their identities and the desire to serve as leaders or role models for people in their various communities.

(Re)framing Faith
Participants experienced various degrees of contention between faith and sexual orientation currently or at some point in their lives. As a result, all of the participants have (re)framed faith to some degree. (Re)frame is used in this way because all of the participants had their faith identity framed for them in a particular way. Contention between their sexual orientation and their faith forced them to (re)frame faith to allow them to be simultaneously nonheterosexual and a person of faith. Despite varying approaches to making meaning of their faith and sexual orientation, all of the participants articulated that the basic focus on faith for them was how it served a purpose of moral guidance, emotional support, self-reflection, and values. John shared how “faith creates hope” for him. While faith may create hope, it has served as a site of contention for other participants.

Mike’s faith was framed by his Filipino Catholic upbringing. He went to Catholic schools and churches growing up and his mother attends church multiple times a week. Mike emphasized the important role that being Roman Catholic has played in his life. When asked how he came to identify as Roman Catholic, he describes it as, “It was one of those family things. I just always grew up in it. I have never known anything other than it.” For Mike, he does not have clear personal understanding of why he continues to identify as Roman Catholic. However, he does share how his faith is “philosophical system that dictates how I live. I still go to mass every Sunday.” Within one sentence he speaks to how his Catholic identity is a personal philosophical system and yet is rooted in tradition. In the rest of the interview, he also shares how he does not follow all of the teachings of the church, including acting upon his same gender attractions. This reflects Mike’s attempts to (re)frame faith, although he has not been able to (re)frame his faith in
order to contend with the tension between the teachings of his religion and his sexual orientation.

His (re)framing of faith has not reached a point where he feels completely comfortable with the intersections of multiple identities, specifically his faith and sexual orientation. He shares that this particular contention is a source of daily struggle for him between his faith and sexual orientation.

That’s the one thing I haven’t been able to reconcile yet, and I have been trying to for the last few years because they are both really important to me. And I am starting to just leave it, like I am both of them and they don’t need to make sense with each other as long as I can be okay with being both of them at the same time, but it still gets to me everyone one in a while…They really just don’t agree and I can’t figure it out I guess, and it causes a lot of mental anguish and you feel like you aren’t good enough for anyone, because you haven’t figured out the basics of who you are and how it works with itself.

Mike expressed the challenge he faces to believe what he knows would best alleviate his mental anguish, which is to simply believe that it is okay to be simultaneously gay and Catholic. However, he was socialized into a rigid and traditional Catholic household and Catholic schools that both perpetuated traditional understandings of the relationship between human sexuality and faith. Mike says:

I feel like there’s a way to make them work but I haven’t been able to find it yet. But even if I did make it work it would have to be bending the rules because it’s very basically said in Roman Catholicism that being gay is compatible if you’re it, but you don’t act on it. But if you act on it then they can’t go together. And I do
act on it so that’s where the problem lies. But if I took out that one central thing, which is why a lot of Catholics might say that I ignore the official church teachings, then I think there’s a way. And I have never had a problem with any Roman Catholics preaching to me and being like ‘What are you doing? You can’t do that’ so… it hasn’t been a problem outside of me, but it has been a problem inside of me.

Although he never receives any explicit negative messages from Roman Catholics about being gay and Catholic, Mike’s conflict has been an internal struggle between what he knows the Catholic Church believes and how he feels about his attraction to men. It is difficult for Mike to simply give up or ignore official church teachings because to give up one part of Catholic teaching would shake up what he believes about the Catholic Church broadly. Mike has a strong faith identity that guides his decision making and also serves a support system for him, which is something he is internally conflicted about giving up or attempting to (re)frame.

Mike’s Catholic identity serves as a “bigger base” for him because it has always been there, while his sexual orientation emerged over time. He says, “I was almost willing to give up my happiness being gay than to give up being Roman Catholic, because I knew I would be miserable not having either one, but I would definitely be more lost without religion as a base than being gay as a base.” He has set up the internal paradigm that he must choose between his faith and sexual orientation. Within this interview, he verbally expressed the internal dialogue he has gone and continues to go through “every day, several times a day, actually…So it’s not something that comes up once in a while; it’s always present. And then ethnicity plays into religion. It’s not a big
part. It just explains where things came from.” After sharing that he thinks about the contention between his faith and sexual orientation on a daily basis, he expressed that it is a contention that is always present in his mind because his identities are always present. He is also the only participant who was able to directly connect how his faith, racial/ethnic community, and sexual orientation were all interrelated, although faith and sexual orientation are in conflict with each other.

Mike’s Catholic identity is deeply rooted in Catholic Church teachings, while most of the participants have either (re)framed the teachings of their religious community to disrupt the contention between sexual orientation and faith or created a personal faith separate from any religious institution. Although Zeek still currently practices his faith within a Methodist context, he has personalized his faith and appreciates the tradition of church and the power of prayer and meditation. Much of the way that he articulated faith in his interview was based on a “personal relationship with God.” Zeek shares:

I feel like I have this really good relationship with God. Although it doesn’t really reflect upon what the church really believes, it reflects on what I think my relationship with God has. I think that there’s a reason I am here to stay. If there were something that God really wanted me to be, then he would have made me that way. I’m going to be ok.

Zeek’s relationship with God is good, because he believes that God has made him the way that he is for a purpose. Since God made him this way, then what God made is good. As earlier sections illustrate, the contention within his identity development is more rooted within his sexual orientation and how they relate to gender, labels, dating, and his father’s expectations.
Like Zeek and Mike, Raj also practices his faith within a particular religious context. Raj’s salient “gay being my first identity” has situated his Muslim identity in opposition or “attacking” his sexual orientation, as he puts it. Although his Bengali identity and Muslim identity are closely related, he has differentiated that his Muslim identity is in conflict with his sexual orientation. As a result of this conflict, he initially rejected his religion, because he felt it was being “forced down my throat at one point.” When he identified as Atheist, he “demonized faith” as the reason why the world was bad. However, without his faith he shared, “I felt empty.” He came to identify as Muslim again his first year of college for a few reasons. First, his feelings of emptiness made him know that something was not right in his life and he had let go of something that was important to who he was as a person. Furthermore, to be Muslim was both political and spiritual. He wanted to have a connection to God and help represent Muslims positively after 9/11. He (re)framed his faith in order to fill that emptiness, to root his faith in values of how to be a good person, and to create a sense of integration between his faith, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identities.

Kevin’s faith emerged when he was older and in China. His family made him go to church for reasons he is still unaware. When he came to the United States and was looking for community, he began to divide his time between LGBTQ groups and Christian groups. Unlike China where LGBTQ people are unacknowledged, silent, and invisible, attending college in the United States presented a larger LGBTQ population than Kevin had ever experienced. However, the negative messages about nonheterosexual people from his Christian friends also emerged as a result of entering college in the United States. As he began to feel a sense of comfort in the LGBTQ
community and a lack of comfort in the predominantly straight, Christian spaces on campus, Kevin rejected his involvement in religious groups. In China, he set up a clear dichotomy between his faith and sexual orientation as separate entities. In the United States, he eventually brought the identities together as they were forced into contention by his negative experiences with Christian friends, which has shifted his understanding of faith from religious to more personal Christian identity.

All of the participants (re)framed their faith in some way. An integral part of this faith development was challenging and questioning their beliefs about religion and faith, as a result of the meaning they were making of their experiences. John describes that his Catholic upbringing was really a “Spanish sort of thing,” meaning that his Catholic upbringing was as a result of traditional expectations of Mexicans to be Catholic. Even though his parents and family did not go to church much or practice religion, they did revere the saints, spirits, and the power of prayer as a part of the mixture of their Mexican culture and faith. When John came out as gay, he rejected religion because of the negative connotations around gay people that came with identifying with a religion. He describes the moment he remembers truly letting go of religion for the last time:

We had to go on a retreat where they locked us in a church the whole day. I don’t know how the conversation started, but I started talking about my experiences as a gay person and how I feel unsafe in the church setting and I got really emotionally and really deep but everyone of my classmates around me were really affirming about it. Then right after that discussion, we all went into the church for another discussion or prayer and stuff like that and the guy who was leading that small group discussion came up to me and was like “Oh I used to identify as gay but
then I found the church and found God” and your typical ex-gay messages and I was like…for me that was a very enlightening moment. I don’t want to be you when I grow up because I find my identity so powerful and important to me that I’m not going to throw it away to fit into another group…or not throw it away, which I never intended to, but adjust it to fit into another box that I didn’t want to be a part of to begin with. So, for me that was a very interesting experience that very much lit up my gay identity and made me realize that I’m fabulous.

Although he had a very positive experience in a religious setting with peers who affirmed his gay identity, his interactions with this person who formerly identified as gay was the moment that solidified for him that he could not associate with religion. He rejected the possibility of growing up to be like this man by rejecting his involvement with religion. He came to a realization that his gay identity was extremely important to him and an opportunity for him to be what he wanted to be without the limitations of being fit into a box in which he did not want to be placed. As he explored the podcasts later in high school and college, he heard about the term “spiritual” from a queer podcast. He became more comfortable with the idea of not “being aligned with a specific religious group” and the possibility of developing his own personal relationship with his faith in which he could be fabulous and (re)frame the way that his faith was going to look like.

Nick’s (re)framing of faith is the most unique of all of the participants’ stories. Above all other identities, Nick’s Christian identity is the one social identity he identifies with the most. He goes to Bible studies and church multiple times a week, his friends are involved in Christian ministries, and he feels the most sense of belonging on campus with his Christian community. Before college, he struggled with identifying as straight but
questioning his sexual orientation and wished that God could fix it or take it away. When he attended college, he became increasingly more involved in the Christian community. Although one would think that increasing involvement in a Christian community would cause conflict between his faith and same gender attractions. However, Nick’s positive experiences and feelings of acceptance in this community has permeated the positive (re)framing he has made about his faith, despite his knowledge of some of the negative messages of many Christian communities about nonheterosexual people. In college, he has identified that perhaps his attraction to some men serves a purpose:

It is cool because I have seen communities talking about the sinfulness and that sucks, but I have see God use it in cool ways. There was a guy who was atheist last year who I saw to church and brought to Bible study. He was in my Physics class. I remember specifically seeing him at church, because I found him attractive. Like “Oh, he’s a good looking guy!” Then I saw him at church and thought, “Hey! There’s that guy again!” Other people in my class I didn’t remember except for the good looking guys and girls. It is cool how God is using this to bring someone like him into the faith.

I even remember the guy who brought me to Real Life (Bible Study) was a really good looking guy. I met him at Church. He asked me to get dinner with him one time. I remember thinking that I liked him a lot because he was really attractive and affirmed in his faith. God’s using it in cool ways, even when it is looked at as evil by my friends. God still used it to bring people to the faith and for me to be where I am right now.
In these two separate instances, Nick talks about the ways that his attraction to men has not only been purposeful but has served as a way to bring him and other people closer to God. Despite the negative messages that he hears Christian people share about LGBQ people, he has personally experienced at least two moments that have challenged the belief that homosexuality is wrong, because it was his same gender attractions that brought him and this guy to God. Because his faith is so integral to who he is as a person, he has made meaning of these experiences to reject the negative messages he hears about nonheterosexual people in order to allow his faith and same gender attractions to coalesce.

Navigating Identity and Sense of Belonging

Participants were asked a final question about which communities they feel most connected. The question about where LGBQ students of color and faith find the most sense of belonging was specifically catered to understanding what spaces these students occupy for community and why. Four of the participants—Kevin, Christopher, Mike, and John—described feeling a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ community. None of the participants spoke about identity-based groups that approached more than one identity simultaneously as a part of the group’s purpose. Kevin and John expressed the strongest connection to the LGBTQ community as a primary source of support, friendship, and education. Mike expressed that a primary sense of belonging on campus was through the LGBTQ community that he was trying to create for himself and for others as a founding member of a fraternity for gay, bisexual, transgender, and straight ally men. Despite not feeling that the LGBTQ community was always a space where he
fit, Christopher identified that most of his closest friends were LGBTQ and he still remained engaged with the LGBTQ community, at times.

Only Nick identified sense of belonging with his faith community. Since many of the campus communities of faith are centered on a particular religious community that often does not affirm LGBTQ identities, many of the participants found it difficult to connect to a faith community on campus that matched their values and beliefs around sexual orientation and faith.

Mike was also the only person who found primary sense of belonging on campus around his racial/ethnic community. As an executive board member of the Filipino Student Association, Mike has actively served as a leader in a community that relates to one of his more salient identities and an identity that he has come to learn more about and appreciate.

Another four of the participants—Dynea, Zeek, Raj, and Christopher—expressed that their primary involvement and sense of belonging on campus was not through identity-based groups. Dynea’s primary community on campus is the rugby team, which takes up much of her time and disconnects her faith, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation communities. She would like to be involved in faith, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation communities but rugby does not allow for the time to invest in finding a sense of belonging in these spaces. Zeek has received leadership skills and support through his struggles in a theater group on campus. Since he currently functions under the stereotype that the gay community is promiscuous and drinks a lot, Zeek does not associate himself with a gay community. Raj and Christopher have closer relationships with communities regardless of identities in the group, but they also both maintain connections to the
identity-based communities that are important to them, such as the LGBTQ community, Bengali community, Black community, Muslim community, etc.

Conclusion

Chapter four provided findings from the study as it relates to the meaning making that LGBQ college students of color and faith of their multiple, intersecting identities. As a result of interviews with eight LGBQ students of color and faith, the following themes emerged: (a) identity salience, (b) the role of family, (c) messages about nonheterosexual people, (d) role models with a “different story”, (e) coming to identify as nonheterosexual, and (f) (re)framing faith. The identities that were most salient for the participants were often the identities that made them different from the majority of the people they are surrounded by on college campuses, hence why race was the only consistent salient identity for all participants who attend a large, predominantly White institution in the Midwest. Their ability to identify their salient identities at the time of the interviews required that they navigate the many messages they received about their multiple identities, specifically their faith, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identity. As they made meaning of these messages, some participants encountered by people who changed the way that they thought about these messages, which required them to rethink their stances on their identities. Other participants faced strong challenges in their lives that promoted the development of their sexual orientation, faith, and racial/ethnic identities prior to college. As a result of negative messages about nonheterosexual people from their faith communities, many of the participants experienced moments of internal struggle where they had to manage the tensions between their faith and sexual
orientation. (Re)framing of faith occurred for most of the participants, which helped alleviate the tension between their sexual orientation and faith. However, one participant still continues to struggle on a daily basis with this tension, despite attempts to (re)frame faith in a way that would allow him to be both gay and Catholic. Chapter five includes a discussion of my findings, the limitations of the study, and the implications for theory, research, and practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter focuses on a discussion of the findings and an analysis using the theoretical frameworks, as well as the ways that prior research either supports or contradicts the findings of this study. It also includes a discussion of the implications for theory, practice, and future research around the experiences of LGBQ college students of color and faith. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed.

The purpose of this study was to explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning (LGBQ) college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. A primary aim of the study was to capture and describe this process in the words and experiences of the participants themselves. Three research questions guided the study:

a. How do LGBQ college students of color and faith perceive and make meaning of their multiple social identities?

b. What identities, if any, seem to become more or less salient for these students in the meaning-making process?

c. What role, if any, does meaning making play in their sense of belonging or sense of affirmation on campus?

Utilizing multiple theoretical frameworks in the development of this study provided an opportunity for a rich analysis that considers multiple identities and the intersection of these identities with each other and larger structures of inequality. Abes,
Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (R-MMDI) incorporates meaning-making capacity into the MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) to “provide a richer portrayal of not only what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also how they come to perceive them as they do” (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007, p. 13). The R-MMDI considers contextual influences in identity development and meaning making process of students in a way that does not prescribe what contextual influences students must filter. Participants made meaning of their identities and experiences via the degree to which they allowed their context and external influences to permeate into their own understanding of their multiple identities. Using intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013) as an additional theoretical lens challenges that consideration of larger structures of inequality, as the context in which LGBQ students of color and faith exist. Furthermore, since research in higher education and student affairs has yet to explicitly explore how LGBQ college students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple and intersecting identities, intersectionality challenges researchers to consider the untold perspectives and experiences of underrepresented students in college.

As a holistic model of student development, meaning making and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) provides a framework that contributes to a holistic analysis of LGBQ students of color and faith. One’s meaning-making capacity and ability to be self-authored (Baxter Magolda, 2010) encompasses three dimensions: epistemological (or how one knows), interpersonal (or how one constructs relationships with others), and intrapersonal (or how one comes to understand who one is). The primary focus of this analysis is using meaning making and self-authorship, because of
the relationship of these frameworks with the themes that emerged in this study, as well as the focus of the research questions on the meaning-making process in the holistic development of identity.

As a result of eight semi-structured interviews, the following themes emerged: (a) identity salience, (b) importance and role of family, (c) messages about nonheterosexual people, (d) role models with a “different story,” (e) coming to identify as nonheterosexual, and (f) (re)framing faith. The themes of importance and role of family, messages about nonheterosexual people, and role models with a “different story” highlight the external forces and messages that LGBQ students of color and faith must contend with as they navigate their multiple identities. The themes of identity salience, coming to identify as nonheterosexual, and (re)framing faith focus on how LGBQ college students of color and faith come to understand their multiple, intersecting identities. These three themes is the focus of the subsequent discussion, although the discussion incorporates the themes related to external forces and messages. The research questions guiding this study are discussed in relation to the themes that emerged.

Identity Salience

The theme of identity salience that emerged from this study directly responds to the second research question related to how the meaning-making process contributes to identity salience. The meaning participants made of their contexts and experiences influenced the process by which they settled on their most salient identities. All of the participants articulated that race was a salient identity for them, which was a common thread across all of the participants’ interviews. This racial/ethnic identity salience primarily emerged around feelings of difference and minority status on a predominantly
White campus and in some of their predominantly White hometowns. Many of them described their racial/ethnic identities as a consistent frame of reference for meaning making around cultural values and identity.

All but one of the participants identified sexual orientation to be one of their primary salient identities. Unlike race where awareness of racial difference emerged depending on context, sexual orientation emerged at various ages for the participants depending on when they found themselves attracted to people of the same gender. Regardless of the context they were in, participants were acutely aware of the differences in their nonnormative attractions to people of the same gender. Furthermore, their sexual orientation became salient after making meaning of the overt negative messages and silence they received about from family, peers, the media their faith communities, and their racial/ethnic communities, to name a few.

**Coming to Identify as Nonheterosexual**

The theme of coming to identify as nonheterosexual exposes the varying ways that LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their sexual orientation in relationship with other social identities. The age of awareness of same gender attractions ranged from five to eighteen. All of the participants described feeling differently than their peers about sexuality. As they were making meaning of their own feelings of same gender attraction, many of them were being told by others or by messages from other socializing forces (e.g. media, church, school) that they were different. Half of the participants mentioned in their interviews experiencing gossip or bullying from peers about their sexual identity. Participants were being bombarded by a number of negative messages about their sexual orientation that they made meaning of differently, depending
on their capacity to filter messages that do not match their emerging or formulated internal commitments.

Coming to identify as nonheterosexual engages with the holistic model of development that is meaning-making and self-authorship. Initially, all of the participants knew that that they were different in some way related to their same gender attractions. What others said about nonheterosexual people, sometimes directed at them, confirmed their feelings of difference. Finally, participants began to personally identify as nonheterosexual. Over time, experiences with their sexual orientation, in tandem with various messages about nonheterosexual people and role models that provide a “different story”, pushed the participants through the crossroads and towards greater cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal complexity. All of the participants, interpersonal complexity increased as they developed relationships in high school or college around other people who identified as nonheterosexual. How participants came to understand and identify with their nonheterosexual identity emerged as they made meaning of the various negative messages about nonheterosexual people and processed them in order to create positive, internally defined messages about nonheterosexual identities.

Of those participants who initially identified as bisexual, they began to reject bisexual as the label they identified with because they saw bisexuality as an attempt to conform to external forces’ desires for the possibility of normative intimate relationships, and this did not reflect their internal voice, desires, or values. Important to note about this particular finding is that bisexuality served as a transitional identity for many of the participants in this study in an attempt to balance their own attractions to people of the same gender with the negative messages they received about nonheterosexual people.
However, this finding does not reflect the experiences of people of color and faith that find that bisexual reflects the way they feel and are attracted to others. Some of the participants were also clear about the fact that bisexuality is an identity for many people outside of this transitional identity phenomenon that most of the participants in this study described in their experiences. Ultimately, what this finding illustrates is the challenges of identity labels that reflect one’s internal desires and values in the face of various nonaffirming external forces that previously framed sexual orientation and gender for LGBQ students of color and faith.

**Relationship to Prior Research**

Consistent with and related to this particular finding, Love et al. (2005) described the struggles that nonheterosexual people face in developing their LGBTQ identities since they lack “role models or visible socializing experiences” to help them define their identities as LGBTQ (p. 194). All of the participants in this study shared how they had to navigate their sexual orientation on their own, but a few participants (John and Dynea) had relationships with role models who helped them feel comfortable identifying as gay. When considering the lack of role models for these participants, Raj shared how he wants to serve as a role model for LGBQ people of color and faith, since he never could identify with someone who shared all of these identities. He believes he represents himself well as a gay man of color and faith, and therefore, can serve as a role model for others where he did not have one.

A major inconsistency in the research about sexual orientation was that much of the research was situated in a historically Black college and university (HBCU) setting. The present study extends the research on the intersections of race and sexual orientation
to a predominantly White context. Both institutional contexts present unique challenges to LGBTQ people of color and faith. Much of the findings about LGBTQ colleges students of color in HBCUs (Patton, 2011; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011) describe the overt homophobia that these students must contend with in the development of their identities and their relationships with others, which is not as overt or pervasive in PWI settings. Although LGBTQ college students of color may find a lack of support around nonheterosexual identities in an HBCU setting, these students experience support around their racial/ethnic identity in a way that is lacking in PWI settings.

In comparison to the research about race/ethnicity and sexual orientation at HBCUs (Patton, 2011; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011), there were some consistencies with this study. LGBTQ students of color at HBCUs and in this study struggled with coming to terms with their sexual orientation because of the desire to not be essentialized or stereotyped for their sexual identity. Zeek lacks familial support around his sexual orientation, a finding that is consistent with the research on the lack of familial support for Black gay and lesbian students at HBCUs. Finally, the larger structures of inequalities that situated Christian values—do not affirm nonheterosexual identities—as a point of contention for LGBTQ people of color and faith is consistent, regardless of context. Although some findings from this study located in a PWI were consistent with findings from studies at HBCUs, not all findings were. The findings unique to the PWI context are presented next.

While most of the participants in the studies about LGBTQ people of color (Patton, 2011; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011) expressed struggles with the cultural expectations about race, sexual orientation, gender, and religion, the primary
contention for the participants in this study was between faith and sexual orientation. Only Zeek expressed similar struggles to the students at HBCUs. Being at a PWI did not offer the participants in this study the same benefits of feeling supported around one’s race/ethnicity in the same way that HBCUs were able to create this environment. Even for research looking at LGBQ people of color at a PWI (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2010), the findings of this study contradicted those of the prior studies. In contrast to the participants in a prior study by Strayhorn, Blakewood, and DeVita (2010), the participants in this study have managed to find sense of belonging and did not express issues coming out on campus (except Nick). While most participants in the HBCU setting did not disclose their sexual orientation with their social communities (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2011), all participants but Nick in the present study identified the importance of coming to openly identify as nonheterosexual as an important part of their identity development and the development of their voice, or capacity for self-authorship.

(Re)Framing Faith

The first research question and primary purpose of this study was to understand how LGBQ college students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple, intersecting identities. Consistent with grounded theory, the emerging theory that resulted from an analysis of the interview data was directly related to (re)framing faith. As participants made meaning of the relationship between their sexual orientation, faith, and race/ethnicity, all of the participants described a contention between their sexual orientation and faith identities that challenged them to (re)frame faith in a way that would allow them to
integrate their faith and sexual orientation. Faith was framed for the participants by external factors, such as churches, parents, and schools. In making meaning of the contention that these external factors set up for the navigation of their multiple identities, LGBQ students of color and faith must (re)frame faith in a way that matches their beliefs, opinions, and commitments around their sexual orientation and faith identities. This particular theme provides an often-untold narrative that LGBTQ people of color can also identify with their faith identities. Furthermore, the way that these participants made meaning of their various experiences and (re)framed faith resists the common discourse around faith and sexual orientation.

**Relationship of the Findings to Meaning Making and Self-Authorship**

In Baxter Magolda’s (2009a) most recent book about meaning making and self-authorship, some of the participants that she followed over the past thirty years described their relationship with God and faith. For those participants, God and faith served as an internal foundation that supported them through struggles, pain, difficult decisions, and many of the challenges they faced in life. All of the participants who aligned with God and faith described a personal relationship with faith later in life that was unique to how they made meaning of those experiences. Similarly, participants in this study went through a process of (re)framing faith into a personal identity for them.

In Baxter Magolda’s (2009a) theory of developing one’s capacity for self-authorship, she describes the path to self-authorship as starting with functioning from external formulas, entering a crossroads or moment of cognitive dissonance, trusting one’s internal voice, building an internal foundation, and finally securing internal commitments. She also describes the importance of having good partnerships between
oneself and others in this journey towards self-authorship. In discussing the (re)framing faith that LGBQ students of color and faith navigate as they balance the relationship between external formulas and influences and one’s internal voice in the development of their multiple and intersecting identities, I found it helpful to look at this process from the lens that Baxter Magolda describes in her theory of self-authorship.

In making meaning of their multiple and intersecting identities, participants were socialized by certain messages about their sexual orientation, faith, and racial/ethnic identity. These messages were specifically rooted in the explicit and implicit negative messages about sexual orientation that came from religious and/or racial/ethnic communities. These external formulas created multiple places of contention (e.g. sexual orientation and faith; sexual orientation, gender, and race/ethnicity) that pushed participants toward a crossroads, or moment of cognitive dissonance.

**Crossroads**

Although experienced differently by each participant depending on the context they were in or the nature of the negative messages they received. The contention between one’s faith and sexual orientation, as well as the cultural expectations around sexual orientation and faith from racial/ethnic communities, precipitated the LGBQ students of color and faith in this study to enter a crossroads. In order to make space for their emerging nonheterosexual identities, participants had to renegotiate, (re)frame, their relationship with external formulas around faith. Unlike the participants in Baxter Magolda’s (2009a) research, the timing of a crossroads that precipitated a (re)frame of faith occurred earlier in life for the participants in this study. Much of the reason why the participants in this study experienced crossroads earlier on was because they were
bombarded by many negative messages about their sexual orientation were delivered at an earlier age and in a way that caused the internal strife necessary to lead them into a crossroads.

Although almost all of the participants have (re)framed faith, the road to self-authorship and (re)framing the negative messages they received about their sexual orientation continues to be difficult for some individuals. As Mike continues to negotiate and (re)frame the relationship between his sexual orientation and faith, he moves back and forth on a daily basis between the crossroads and trusting his internal voice. For every moment that his internal voice tells him that he can be gay and Roman Catholic, the messages against homosexuality from the Roman Catholic Church make it difficult for him to move past the crossroads in order to fully trust his internal voice. Dynea did not share particular experiences of crossroads. Positive supports and role models in her have helped her establish her identities as a gay woman of color and faith, despite the lack of crossroads that all of the other participants shared in their interviews. The way that Dynea challenges the theory of self-authorship will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Trusting the Internal Voice**

For the participants in this study, trusting one’s internal voice was the process of acknowledging their nonheterosexual identity and beginning to internally trust that they can identify nonheterosexual and a person of faith, despite the many messages that tell them otherwise. All of the participants in this study had reconciled the relationship between their multiple, intersecting identities or had begun to trust their internal voice at the time of the interview.

**Building an Internal Foundation**
Building an internal foundation is the point in the meaning-making process where participants strengthened their trust in their internal voices and organized their beliefs into a foundation that would help guide them in their own going meaning-making process in relationship with their identities as LGBQ people of color and faith. The participants’ (re)framing faith is the internal foundation that strengthens their internal voice in order to reconcile their multiple and intersecting identities and allows them to create internally derived conclusions about the relationship between their faith, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Furthermore, the (re)framing of faith helps them make meaning of future negative messages as they reject those in order to identify as a person of faith and nonheterosexual.

**Securing Internal Commitments**

Securing internal commitments refers to putting one’s internal foundation into practice in daily life. Most of the participants in this study had not fully secured internal commitments, because of the challenges of space and navigating identity and sense of belonging on a college campuses that is set up around external formulas about the intersection of faith and sexual orientation. Many of the participants expressed a desire to be engaged in identity-based communities that allow them to identify as LGBQ people of color and faith without worry of judgment. None of the participants found an affirming identity-based space in their campus context that allowed them to identify openly as LGBQ people of color and faith. However, some participants brought their multiple identities into all of the spaces they occupy and were very open about their identities, despite the potential for negative experiences, which reflects a securing of internal commitments.
**Good Partnerships**

Baxter Magolda (2009a) described the important role of having good partners in one’s journey towards self-authorship, or the people who “offered guidance from the back seat, encouraging them to steer the bicycle and shift the gears while the partner contributed to the forward motion by pedaling.” (p. 12). Good partners were those who respected participants’ thoughts and feelings, helped them make meaning of their experiences, and worked with them to assist in solving their own problems. This good partners model is especially pertinent for our work as student affairs professionals supporting LGBQ students of color and faith.

The participants in this study experienced a number of external and internal challenges and supports that have contributed to their identity development. How to be a good partner described by Baxter Magolda (2009a) is reminiscent of the work of Nevitt Sanford (1966), who described how student affairs professionals and higher education institutions should provide strong challenges that would move students forward to greater development, assess the ability of the student to cope with these challenges, and provide supports when challenges become too great for students to manage. Some experiences have challenged the participants in this study to a point where they construct new meaning of their identities and experiences that is internally defined as opposed to externally driven. Raj’s experiences with bullying because of external perceptions of his gender expression and sexual orientation challenged Raj to make meaning of these experiences. At the time of the interview, Raj had made meaning of these negative bullying experiences and built a resiliency that is rooted in a strong sense of self and comfort with his identities. Over time, Raj filtered out these negative messages in order to
protect himself from the negative repercussions that these messages could have and create an understanding of self that is influenced by these negative messages but not defined by them.

Mike experiences internal challenges at the intersection of his gay and Catholic identities because he is not able to (re)frame faith in a way that would make the space for him to comfortably identify as gay. For Mike, he experiences sufficient internal conflicts with no support to help him make meaning of his gay and Catholic identities. Therefore, he experiences daily struggle identifying as both gay and Catholic. Zeek also experiences a number of internal conflicts related to internalizing the challenges he experiences with his father. The greatest challenge for Zeek is that his father serves a source of emotional support for everything except his sexual orientation, which is an integral part of Zeek’s identity. Because he keeps this information to himself, he may not have the support system to navigate this relationship between his internal commitments to his gay identity and relationships with his family. Ultimately, Zeek’s experiences highlights the needs for multiple supports for various aspects of identity, especially when family does not serve as a support in identity development.

Christopher’s experiences show the value of the balance between challenge and supports. Christopher’s resiliency and commitments to who he is reflects how years of challenging experiences, including coming out and an inconsistent/unstable home life, can facilitate development. Christopher experienced many challenges in his upbringing that led him to a very supportive family. His relationships with his adoptive parents have challenged him to think critically about who he is as a person and what he believes about his faith, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation in a supportive environment, which is a
process of being guided from internal commitments to building an internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2008). These particular relationships between challenge and support highlights the role that good partners can play in the identity development of LGBQ college students of color and faith.

**Relationship of (Re)framing Faith to the Literature about Self-Authorship**

Baxter Magolda’s (2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) work around meaning making and self-authorship has included participants that she has followed and interviewed for over twenty-five years. Much in the way that this study attempts to apply the self-authorship to LGBQ students of color and faith, researchers (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Torres, 2009) have applied the work of Baxter Magolda to high-risk and minority students in college and universities to test its applicability, since most of Baxter Magolda’s participants are White students from more affluent backgrounds, some who did not have a crossroads moment until after college. Consistent with the students in the present study Pizzolato (2003) found in her study of the capacity for self-authorship in high-risk students that the challenges many of them experience earlier in life push high-risk students into the crossroads earlier than their White, higher socioeconomic status, and non-first generation peers, sometimes even before college. All of the participants in the present study experienced a crossroads about their faith, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity prior to coming to college, although they trusted their internal voice at different times in their development.

Torres (2009) found that Latino/a students become aware of racism on an intrapersonal level, while White students become aware of racism and their racial identity later in life and through their interpersonal relationships. LGBQ students of color and
faith in this study experienced intrapersonal development as early as five around their sexual orientation and the negative messages. These experiences with heterosexism challenged participants to negotiate how they felt about their sexual orientation and come to identify as nonheterosexual. LGBQ students of color and faith in this study had to (re)frame faith in order to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation, which led these students to create cognitively, interpersonally, and intrapersonally complex meaning of their multiple identities, specifically their faith in relationship to their sexual orientation. In their study on the ethnic identity development of Latino/a students, Torres and Hernandez (2007) highlight the ways that negative messages that Latino/a students receive about their Latino/a identities contribute to development as they have to make meaning of these identities, which is a finding that is consistent with the experiences of negative messages that LGBQ students of color and faith receive that contribute to their identity development.

However, this study also contributes new information and knowledge around the research about self-authorship. This present study is the only known study that explicitly looks at the intersections of faith, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identity in tandem with self-authorship. The (re)frameing faith as an emerging theory in this study suggest meaning making and self-authorship but the participants in this study have to navigate complex intersections of identity in order to continue to identify as LGBQ people of color and faith. Abes and Kasch’s (2007) work about queer-authorship is the only research that applies self-authorship to the experiences of LGBTQ-identified people and considers the complexity of other intersecting identities in the development of self-authorship. Like Abes and Kasch, the present study does not focus solely on identity, as some of the other
previously mentioned research has, but rather on the intersections of identities. The overlap with queering authorship in the present study is that many of the participants, their (re)framing process, seek to challenge their context about how the intersection in of faith, nonheterosexual identities, and race/ethnicity are currently situated as conflicting. Rather than being passive agents in the development of their multiple identities as the R-MMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) suggests, some participants in the present study and in Abes and Kasch’s (2007) research seek to represent their identities in a way that challenge the current discourse around the intersections of nonheterosexual identities with other social identities. This particular point highlights the dynamic nature of identity and the development of self-authorship as not only a process where people must constantly filter messages through a meaning-making filter, but as a more fluid and nonlinear process that allows people to present counternarratives to their context.

**Dynea – Challenging Self-Authorship**

In defining queer-authorship, Abes and Kasch (2007) utilize queer theory to describe how their participant KT participates in a more fluid and nonlinear process of self-authorship. Dynea, the one female participant in the present study, presented some unique challenges to the way that self-authorship has been considered. Dynea did not share that she had experienced challenges, or a crossroads moment. However, she has (re)framed her faith in order to reconcile the conflict between her faith and sexual orientation in a similar way as the other participants in study have.

Her overwhelmingly positive support systems and role models have presented a counternarrative to the common discourse around nonheterosexual identities, people of
color, and faith that has helped her (re)frame her faith more seamlessly than the other participants.

Although she seemed somewhat oblivious to some of the larger structural systems of inequality that LGBTQ students of color and faith experience, Dynea’s experience illustrates how LGBTQ students of color and faith who exist in positive, supportive contexts and experiences can develop in a more fluid and nonlinear way. Dynea had the space to develop intrapersonally, or in their capacity to understand who she is as an LGBTQ person of color and faith, which has helped her develop resiliency to resisting the negative messages she has heard and continues to hear about nonheterosexual people. The one challenge that Dynea did express is being one of the only women of color in her computer science classes and not feeling connected to anyone in her program, which she did not come to any particular conclusions about in the interview. Patton and Simmons’s (2008) study of Black lesbians at an HBCU differed from Dynea’s experience as a lesbian at a predominantly White campus. While the women at the HBCU experienced feeling a sense of triple oppression as a woman, Black, and lesbian, Dynea struggles to understand what it means to identify as Black, LGBTQ, and a woman within a White male dominated major. Although she has made meaning of her experiences as an LGBTQ person of color and faith intrapersonally and epistemologically, I foresee Dynea having a moment of crossroads as she navigates being a LGBTQ person of color and faith in a predominantly White, male dominated space. In this context, the intersections of gender and race come to the forefront of her experiences and does not seem to be an intersection she has yet had to consider in a predominantly White, male setting.

**Relationship to Prior Research**
Stewart (2010) distinguished between religion as an “organizational and doctrinal dogma” and spirituality as a journey towards “meaning, purpose, belonging, and values” (p. 10), which was consistent with the theme of (re)framing faith that all of the participants in this study experienced. (Re)framing faith is making meaning of one’s experiences with religion in order to develop a more personal faith that offers the space to identify as LGBQ. As an integral part of their identity, the participants in this study, as well as Stewart’s (2010) study, spirituality helped participants draw purpose from their everyday experiences. Negative experiences with faith led many of the participants in this study to resist organized forms of religion in order to provide room and flexibility for them to make meaning of their multiple identities (Stewart, 2002). Research around race and faith stated that faith communities were often not spaces where these participants found a sense of belonging (Stewart, 2010), which is consistent with all of the participants except for Nick.

Although much of the literature around sexual orientation and faith drew from a predominantly White sample, there were many consistencies with this study. Love, Bock, Jannarone and Richardson’s (2005) study looked at the spiritual experiences of lesbian and gay college students. One major consistency between Love et al.’s (2005) study and this study on LGBQ students of color and faith is that coming out served as a process that stimulated faith development as they were presented with a “crossroads” that challenged them to reconcile these two integral parts of their identities. The participants (re)framed the messages they received that created this tension between their faith and sexual orientation, although some folks like Mike struggled to reconcile this tension. Love et al. (2005) also presented participants who were at varying stages of their faith
and sexual orientation identity developments, which challenged a monolithic story about the experience of LGBQ students of faith. Related to the (re)framing faith theme, Abes (2011) found that faith identity becomes more fluid and self-authored over time and context, especially as LGBQ identity become more integrated with other multiple identities. Consistent with Abes’s study, participants who had (re)framed their faith outside of the context of religion developed a more fluid and personal relationship with faith. However, all participants (re)framed faith in a way that was more fluid than the strictures established by their experiences in a more traditional, religious communities.

The literature presented in chapter two from related fields addressing the intersections of faith, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity were more consistent with the study. Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles (2008) found that a majority of their Latino participants left the Catholic faith. Those participants who continued to identify as Catholic established a more homo-positive interpretation of their religious identity and identified with faith because of the deep-rooted connections of the Catholic religion with their identities as Latino. Many of the participants, including John, Zeek, Mike, Dynea, and Raj, spoke about the deep-rooted connections between their faith identities and their racial/ethnic identity, which made it important to (re)frame faith in a way that would allow them to reconcile various contentious sites of identity intersections. Jeffries IV, Dodge, and Sandfort’s (2008) study about Black, Christian bisexual men related closely to how Nick and Zeek articulated the challenges they faced in navigating the internal conflict of being with women and having same gender attractions with men. Like the participants in Jeffries IV et al.’s study (2008), Zeek and Nick struggled to manage the relationships and expectations of their religious communities, family, and cultures.
Although specifically designed for Black, Christian bisexual men, the findings of the present study expands the applicability of Jeffries IV et al.’s study to include nonheterosexual people of color who experience attraction to both men and women. Furthermore, Jeffries IV et al. (2008) also spoke about the way that spirituality became more about internal practice and a form of reflection and less about practicing within a religious context, which is consistent with the (re)framing of faith that participants in this thesis study have undergone.

**Navigating Identity and Sense of Belonging**

Finally, the third research question referred to how the meaning-making process of LGBQ students of color and faith contributes to where they find a sense of belonging in college. Contrary to previous hypotheses about LGBTQ spaces being the most affirming for LGBQ students of color and faith, the results showed that LGBQ students of color and faith face a number of challenges related to finding community on college campuses. Some students expressed sole sense of belonging in a queer community on campus, but conversations around faith often did not come up and/or these perspectives were not welcomed in these spaces. On a predominantly White campus, the queer community reflected the racial/ethnic demographics of the student body and therefore, left LGBQ students of color and faith feeling like they were alone or one of a few people of color in these spaces. A few participants shared experiences of racism within the queer community on campus. Other students expressed how they felt more comfortable with non-identity based groups, although conversations about identity were often not happening in these spaces and/or these students were tokenized as the “diverse” students. Only two students (Nick and Raj) felt comfortable in their faith community, in which
sexual orientation was not a topic of conversation. Most of the students did not feel comfortable in faith-based communities because of the silence and/or explicit discrimination of LGBTQ students of color. Ultimately, I present these findings around sense of belonging on campus to illustrate how LGBQ students of color and faith must navigate a campus culture that consists of student groups which do not consider the needs of students with multiple, intersecting identities. These siloed communities force these students to seek out multiple communities to get what they need and/or choose one community that best fits what they are looking for.

In describing the benefits for Black students that come from involvement in a gospel choir, Strayhorn (2011) identified one participant Quincy who felt that he could not share his sexual orientation within his racial/ethnic community. Quincy’s experiences in the gospel choir as nonheterosexual illustrates the ways that LGBQ students of color and faith can often experience sense of belonging in one aspect of their multiple identities but not in others. Despite this limitation of these communities, racial/ethnic and faith communities can provide the sense of belonging that allows them to feel supported in their racial/ethnic identity in a predominantly White setting. In the present thesis study, Mike was the only participant that found a primary sense of belonging with his racial/ethnic community on campus. Although not explicitly stated, most participants in this study occupied predominantly White spaces for their sense of belonging, either being in an LGBTQ group or within non identity-based groups on campus. Raj and Zeek felt a strong sense of racial/ethnic pride but they, and many of the other participants, acknowledged the silence that existed in their racial/ethnic communities around sexual orientation. LGBQ students of color and faith can experience
sense of belonging in various communities on campus but may not be able to fully integrate all of their identities and feel comfortable sharing that those identities within these spaces.

**Implications for Practice**

The more practitioners understand how students make meaning of their identities, the better they are able to assist in promoting student learning and development in higher education institutions. (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 578)

I begin the implications for future practice, research, and theory section with this quote to highlight the importance of research that examines how students make meaning of their identities. What is more important is that this research is utilized by practitioners to better understand how students make meaning of their identities in order to create spaces that promote student learning and development.

In relation to Baxter Magolda’s (2009a) discussion about the importance of good partners in the development of self-authorship and Sanford’s (1966) theory on challenge and support in higher education and student affairs environments, practitioners must consider their student’s multiple, intersecting identities when assessing how to challenge and support them in their development. As the findings of this study demonstrate, LGBQ students of color and faith enter college at different points in the self-authorship trajectory and in the complexity of one’s meaning-making capacity about their multiple identities. Some students, like Christopher, enter college having already made meaning of their multiple identities as LGBQ students of color and faith and therefore, may require different services and opportunities for leadership that will provide them with
challenges that will continue their development and serve as a visible role model for other LGBQ students of color and faith who are still making meaning of their multiple identities. However, there are other students who are struggling with a number of challenges before entering college related to their LGBQ, racial/ethnic, and faith identities who need sufficient multiculturally competent support. Using this study to understand how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their identities and the challenges that they face would help inform how to offer support and challenges that would promote development.

An implication for practice that could help facilitate engagement and development of LGBQ students of color and faith is technology. John described the influence that engaging in online forums, specifically podcasts, had on his gay identity development. Podcasting and online forums can provide a sense of belonging to the queer community, engage them with role models who promote development, and present multiple LGBTQ perspectives, which can increase cognitive complexity by providing a counter narrative to the stereotypes previously heard about LGBTQ people. Renn (2012) spoke about the relationship between technology and identity and how “the ability to instantly access images, sounds, and text from someone in the next room or around the world provides radically changed opportunities for identity development” (p. 25). Although some LGBQ students of color and faith may have come into college exploring their identities via online forums, practitioners can utilize technology to provide resources to LGBQ students of color and faith around their identities, as well as online conversation forums or chats to engage students who are hesitant to publically disclose their identities to others.
Related to the opportunities that John had to engage with queer people around the world through online forums is the importance of role models for LGBQ college students of color and faith. Many of the participants shared similar struggles to find people who identify as LGBQ college students of color and faith. This draws attention to an important issue related to representation of LGBQ student affairs professionals of color and faith in higher education institutions. As a practitioner and researcher, it is important for me to identify myself to students openly as a gay man of color and faith in order to serve as a role model and mentor for students looking for someone with whom they can identify. However, practitioners who do not identify within these communities should also be intentional about who they choose as keynote speakers or as speakers for panels, making sure to include LGBQ people of color and faith that would offer them an opportunity to hear from a potential role model and for other students to become more aware of folks who identify with these intersecting identities.

Finally, a last major implication for practice is related to how spaces are currently set up to include or exclude LGBQ college students of color and faith. The primary implication for practice related to space is about how student affairs practitioners can make all spaces inclusive of the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith. Kevin, who is making meaning of his relationship between his faith and sexual orientation, shared that he wishes there was a group for LGBTQ Christians on campus. A group that allows LGBTQ students to have safe and inclusive dialogue around their faith and queer identities would challenge them to make meaning of this site of contention that many LGBTQ students face. This particular group set up may contribute to the development of LGBQ students of color and faith. Oftentimes, there are no exclusive spaces for LGBQ
students of color and faith to talk about their multiple identities, so they must find communities they feel most comfortable in and are most salient for them, even if they cannot be their whole selves in those spaces.

This presents a challenge to practice about how the campus culture around communities and involvement is does not currently allow provide the space for LGBQ students of color and faith to bring their whole selves and experiences into spaces, which may impede their development. Another related implication for practice is promoting conversations within racial/ethnic communities, queer communities, and especially faith communities around the identities and experiences LGBQ students of color and faith. Creating opportunities in these various spaces to have open and safe dialogue is critical to helping LGBQ students of color and faith not feel that they have to pick and choose communities that reflect what is most important to them, even at the risk of silencing one of their salient identities. Furthermore, the issue of creating inclusive spaces on college campuses for students with multiple underrepresented identities requires practitioners to consider an intersectionality perspective when promoting dialogue about identity and promote this perspective with the students involved in these various communities in order to open up these spaces for LGBQ students of color and faith.

**Implications for Research**

This study explored how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple, intersecting identities. A constructivist, grounded theory approach was employed to conduct and analyze semi-structured interviews with eight LGBQ students of color and faith. Future studies could identify some of the nuances in experiences of each student that would get at the complexities of studying multiple identity
development. For example, Kevin introduced the experience of a gay, Chinese international student, which could be a study of its own. This study could further expand literature on the experiences of international students by providing new knowledge around the multiple identities that international students bring to United States colleges and universities. Furthermore, the experiences of LGBTQ international students can contribute new knowledge to literature about LGBTQ students, as well as challenge the current models of LGBTQ identity development that are situated within a United States context. Other studies that have not been addressed in the literature that could stem from the present study include breaking down the experiences of LGBTQ students of color by their various racial/ethnic identities, examining the experiences of bisexual students since much of the literature focuses on gay and lesbian students, focuses on the (re)framing of faith that occurs for students in college, and exploring the sexual orientation identity development of questioning students.

While there were some consistencies between previous studies related to LGBQ people of color and faith, this study on how LGBQ college students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple identities contradicted with much of the research about the topics. A major inconsistency in the research about the intersections of race and sexual orientation was that much of the research was situated in a historically Black college and university (HBCU) setting. The present study extends the research on the intersections of race and sexual orientation to a predominantly White context. This PWI context changed the nature of the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith in college, and therefore, created findings that differed with previous findings located at HBCUs.
Implications for Theory

The present study also has implications for theory that is currently being used to understand multiple identity development. This study used Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, which incorporates Baxter Magolda’s (2001; 2008; 2009a; 2009b) theories of meaning making and self-authorship, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013). Critiques about these theories in relation to this study include how the R-MMDI and Baxter Magolda’s theories of self-authorship and meaning making both derive from a large White sample. Studies have been conducted to understand how self-authorship and meaning making holds up with minority or high-risk student populations (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Torres, 2009). Unlike the majority White, straight student sample in Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship and meaning making, the studies found that many of their participants came to college with a stronger sense of self-authorship and had made meaning of their identities earlier in life and intrapersonally driven, rather than interpersonally driven (Torres, 2009). The studies also found that the Baxter Magolda’s work on self-authorship did not fully capture the experiences of the underrepresented students they were considering and required multiple theories in conjunction with meaning making and self-authorship. However, when put in conversation with one another, these theoretical frameworks provided an opportunity to explore how LGBQ college students of color made meaning of their multiple and intersecting identities within a larger system of power that disadvantages their
underrepresented experiences on college campuses and within the research in higher education and student affairs.

This study also highlights how the current models around identity development (e.g. D’Augelli, 1994, Fowler, 1981) do not sufficiently capture the experiences of students with multiple underrepresented identities that are often not considered intersecting, such as LGBQ college students of color and faith. The work of Fowler (1981) focuses faith and spirituality outside the context of religion and considers faith more broadly, much in the way that many of the participants in this study did in (re)framing their faith. For Fowler, faith underlies both belief and religion but includes secular worldviews about how individuals find meaning of themselves in relation to the world. He argues that faith is universal but the manifestation of that faith looks differently for everyone. However, the participants in this study differentiated from Fowler’s (1981) participants that helped inform his theory of faith development. In stage four, or the individuative-reflective faith stage, the individual begins to define what their faith means to them and they create self-authored explicit meaning, which Fowler initially stated occurred during young adulthood but later expressed that he thinks it happens between ages 30 and 40. In making meaning of experiences and external messages, participants in the present study entered stage four at a significantly younger age. Fowler’s work does not consider the importance of context in the development of self-authorship as it relates to faith development.

D’Augelli’s (1994) Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development does not capture or address the complexities of multiple, intersecting identities. Although it accounts for context and environment, as well as allows for the six interactive processes
to develop in a nonsequential order, the model presupposes that disclosure to friends and family is an aspect of identity achievement. Furthermore it presupposes that to be truly developed in one’s sexual orientation, one must be out to everyone, which does not take into account the various reasons why someone would choose not to disclose their sexual orientation, including socioeconomic dependence on family and cultural expectations around race and gender. D’Augelli’s (1994) model does not address the interactive relationships between multiple identities and context, in the same way that the R-MMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) and more so the I-MMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013) accounts for. In response to D’Augelli’s model, Fassinger (1998) described parallel identity developments—a personal and social path to gay and lesbian identity development. These two paths distinguish between the internal awareness and acceptance of a gay or lesbian identity and one’s decision to develop group membership and be a part of a gay or lesbian community. Unlike D’Augelli (1994), Fassinger (1998) acknowledged the importance of context in decisions to develop a personal and social gay or lesbian identity. Furthermore, Fassinger posited that it is sometimes healthy to consider the two paths of development separately because of the importance of social supports (e.g. family, friends, Church community) in the lives of gay and lesbian people.

Another example of the dynamic nature of multiple identities is the meaning that John and Zeek have made of their identities as Latino. John shared that for his family to not accept him in his gay identity would be to go against Latino values related to maintaining family bonds. However, Zeek spoke about how his father’s understanding of masculinity, distaste for gay people, and inability to “love someone who is gay” is rooted in values espoused in Puerto Rican culture. Zeek does not disclose his sexual orientation
to his father, in order to maintain family bonds. This example highlights how the unique contexts and relationships that LGBQ students of color and faith exist in impact their identity development. These key examples highlight some of the many challenges in developing a theory that describes the experiences of LGBQ students of color and faith.

Limitations of the Study

The present study consisted of a number of limitations. One limitation is related to data collection and participant recruitment. Although the study consisted of diverse racial/ethnic sample, the diversity of the sample in other identities was a limitation. Recruitment methods were insufficient to locate women willing to participate in the study. I was only able to recruit one woman to participate in the study, which leaves the voices of LGBQ women of color and faith disproportionately unheard. Since the institution is located in the Midwest and is largely Christian (a related limitation), there was also a lack of diversity in faith identities. Most of the participants identified as Christian or were raised in a Christian background, except for one Muslim student. The limited inclusion of people from non-dominant faiths allowed for minimal consideration of how different faith traditions influenced LGBQ students of color’s meaning making. Although the participants made meaning of these identities differently, most of them identified as gay, which created silence or one perspective about the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students. Another major limitation related to recruitment methods is the lack of bisexual students in the study.

A final limitation is the timeline of the study. For a numbers of reasons, I was forced to interview, transcribe, analyze, and conduct member checks in a short period of
time. This may have affected my ability to spend ample time with the data and make sure the analysis was as thought out as it could have been if I had more time.

**Conclusion**

Eight semi-structured interviews with participants at a large, predominantly White institution in the Midwest were conducted. As a result of asking the participants questions about they came to identify with and understand their sexual orientation, faith, and race/ethnicity, the following themes emerged: identity salience, importance and role of family, messages about nonheterosexual people, role models with a “different story”, coming to identify as nonheterosexual, and (re)framing faith. The themes highlighted the larger context and messages that LGBQ students of color and faith experience and how they make meaning of the messages they receive from these external forces. The themes of coming out and (re)framing faith specifically highlighted how participants were making meaning of these external messages in order to develop their identities as LGBQ students of color and faith. As a result of a desire to identify as a person of faith and LGBQ, participants (re)framed faith in order to alleviate the tension that is placed between faith and sexual orientation in our society. Although not all participants did not disclose their sexual orientation to members of their family, those participants that chose to disclose their sexual orientation in middle school, high school and college to peers and family were affirmed in that identity and found community with people who identified similarly. Perhaps this reflects changing times where disclosing one’s nonheterosexual sexual orientation is now becoming increasingly less of an issue.
Mike shared with me at the beginning of our interview the following: “I feel like this is such a perfect study for me to find. The intersectionality between all three of them can create very isolating circumstances for people to grow up in I suppose.” This statement, as well as participants expressing their gratitude and excitement for the opportunity to speak about the intersections of their faith, sexual orientation and race/ethnicity with someone they identified similarly, is the reason why I conducted this study. Having to navigate these complex, sometimes conflicting, multiple identities myself, I understood how difficult and complicated my meaning-making process has been and continues to be. The implications of this study for theory, future studies, and practice are reflective of the findings, as well as my own lived experiences identifying as and working with LGBQ students of color and faith. Although the implications section describes each implication in more detail, I would like to highlight the importance of space. As student affairs practitioners, it is our job to create environments where our students feel welcomed, included, and safe. At the current moment, most LGBQ students of color and faith do not feel welcomed, included, and safe being their whole selves. As previous research suggests and the present study supports, navigating a campus that does not engage in dialogue or in structure that considers people and their experiences through an intersectional lens can be difficult for students who have multiple underrepresented identities. Not only do they have to navigate the internal conflicts that their identities may pose, but they also must do so in relationship with college campuses that do not provide adequate spaces for them to be who they are.
To all the LGBQ students of color and faith in this study, I dream for us of a day when we can be our whole selves in the world, so that we can begin to heal and find peace within ourselves and in communities that affirm our experiences and identities.
References


higher education to promote self-development. Sterling, VA: Stylus.


Appendix A: Email Correspondence Outreach

Hello!!

I am looking for students to share their experiences identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning (LGBQ) students of color and faith for my Master’s thesis on this topic. In order to participate in the study, you must identify as:

- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning; AND
- A student of color (e.g. Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, Asian/Asian American, Native American/Indigenous/American Indian/First Nation, Biracial/Multiracial); AND
- A person of a particular faith or spiritual identity.

Participation in the study will consist of an hour-long interview. Your answers will be used for my Master of Arts Thesis on how LGBQ students of color and faith make meaning of their multiple and intersecting social identities. Following the interview, there will be a 30-minute meeting where I will share findings from what you share in the interview to ensure that the analysis reflects your experiences and what you have shared.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me back at woods.514@osu.edu to determine a time and date that would work best for you. All responses will be kept confidential, and no personally identifiable information will be collected.

Thank you! I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Chris Woods
Master of Arts Candidate
Graduate Program in Education and Human Ecology
Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs
Appendix B: Informed Verbal Consent Form

Thank you for your interest in this interview to discuss your experiences as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning student of color and faith in college. This is a Master’s thesis research study.

You are here as a result of voluntary participation in this interview examining your multiple social identities as an LGBQ student of color and faith. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will consist of a set of questions related to your experiences. The session will be recorded, and no personal identifiable information is attached to any of the information collected. Recorded interviews will be transcribed and audio files secured in a locked cabinet in my office to which I only have the key. Following the interview, there will be a 30-minute meeting where I will share findings from what you have shared in the interview to ensure that the analysis reflects your experiences and what you have shared.

The interview includes questions that you may potentially find uncomfortable to answer specifically those related to aspects of your personal experiences. However, risks are no greater than those experienced in daily life. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer, and may exit the interview at any time.

The benefits of your participation include having a space in which you can safely and confidentially speak about your experiences with your sexual orientation, racial identity, and faith. However, there are no incentives related to participation in this study. The answers to these questions will help inform future research on, knowledge about, programmatic efforts for, and support for LGBQ college students of color and faith.

Efforts will be made to keep your information confidential. However, there may be circumstances that the information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. However, this information will not be shared with family or any parties that do not have legal rights to the information. Also, the recordings and information may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the study):

- Office of Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;

- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;

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-My graduate thesis advisor Dr. Terrell Strayhorn (strayhorn.3@osu.edu)

You may discontinue participation in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Your student or employment status at Ohio State will not be affected in any way, if you choose to discontinue participation.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

For questions regarding the study, or if you feel as if you have been harmed as a result of the study, please contact my thesis advisor Dr. Terrell Strayhorn in Higher Education and Student Affairs at strayhorn.3@osu.edu

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

Thank you!!
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Date: ______________________________________
Participant Alias: _____________________________

Briefly describe purpose of the study and review key points in informed consent form.

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. (What year are you, major, where are you from, etc.)

I will be using this adapted social identity wheel to learn more about the way that you identify in terms of your social identities and use it as a jumping point for this conversation.
   • The adapted social identity wheel will provide the labels, which I will use for the duration of the interview to refer to the person’s identities.

2. Can you describe what identities on the Social Identity Wheel are more salient for you, and why?
   • **PROBE**: Do your communities reflect these salient identities? How or how not?

3. How have you come to identify as [insert non-heterosexual identity label that participant uses]?
   • **PROBE**: When did you first come to identify as non-heterosexual, and how did this happen?
   • **PROBE**: To what extent, if any, do you disclose your sexual orientation to others?
   • **PROBE**: What were your earlier messages about your sexual orientation and from whom/what did they come?

4. How have you come to identify as [insert faith identity label that participant uses]?
   • **PROBE**: Who or what influenced your faith background?
   • **PROBE**: Tell me about your religious or faith experiences growing up?
   • **PROBE**: Was there a predominant racial/ethnic identity of the community?
   • **PROBE**: Do you currently practice your faith? How?
5. How have you come to identify as [insert racial/ethnic identity label that participant uses]?

**Intersections of Social Identities**

6. How do you think your faith relates to your perception of your sexual orientation and vice versa?

7. How do people in your faith community think about people who identify as nonheterosexual?
   - **PROBE:** How do you feel about these perceptions that your faith community has?

8. How do you think your racial/ethnic background relates to your perception of your sexual orientation and vice versa?

9. How do people in your racial/ethnic community think about people who identify as nonheterosexual?
   - **PROBE:** How do you feel about these perceptions that your racial/ethnic community has?

**Questions about Community and Sense of Belonging in College**

10. In terms of finding community in college, where do you feel a sense of belonging?

11. Do your communities relate to your social identities? If so, how?

12. Anything else you would like to add? Anything that I didn’t ask you about but you feel is important for me to know?
Appendix D: Adapted Social Identity Wheel