

LIFE HISTORIES OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND QUEER
POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS WHO CHOOSE TO PERSIST:
EDUCATION AGAINST THE TIDE

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The University of Dayton

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By

James Lee Olive, Ph.D.

The University of Dayton, 2009

Dr. Carolyn S. Ridenour, Committee Chair

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what factors enable some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer (GLBQ) students to persist in college whereas a significant number leave. Specifically, the research question that framed this study was "What factors in a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer person's life history enable him or her to persist through higher education and successfully obtain an undergraduate degree?"

A life history methodology (Bertaux, 1981; Cole, 2001; Denzin, 1989; Goodson, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995) was used to capture the lived experiences of 3 female and 3 male postsecondary students who self-identified as GLBQ and were on target to successfully complete their bachelor's degree within one academic year. Additionally, participants were asked to identify where they believed they reside on frequently cited queer identity development models (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Lipkin, 1999; Troiden, 1989).

A grounded-theory approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was utilized in order to identify the factors that help or hinder a GLBQ postsecondary student's academic progression.

Ten common themes or factors were found to exist among the participants. These were: (1) high behavioral expectations during childhood and adolescence; (2) a strong family connection; (3) strong work ethic; (4) high educational expectations; (5) guardian acceptance; (6) involvement in GLBQ activities on campus; (7) sexuality as a component of the whole person; (8) self-confidence and autonomy; (9) ability to deal with life's obstacles while taking care of themselves and continuing forward; and (10) tendency toward planning and the possession of a post-graduation course of action.

Recommendations for future research and implications for practice are presented.

“One of the central roles of research and institutions such as schools and colleges is to enable people to come to terms with their own historical circumstances....Unity comes from the acceptance of difference and the willingness to engage one another in dialogue about it.”

William G. Tierney, 1993

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my husband, Rodney and our son, Bryce. Thank you both for your love, support, and encouragement throughout this process. Your presence in my life has made me a better man.

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I express my sincere appreciation to the six participants of this study, without whom this body of work would not have been possible. Thank you for opening your lives to me and enabling your stories to be told.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Being different is hard. Growing up as a gay man in a fundamentalist Christian family, my difference was palpable – at least to myself. Entrance into college presented me with an opportunity to explore the people and worlds that had been deemed deviant and forbidden by my family. I met new people, gay and straight, who taught me through their actions and words that the world need not be so ‘black and white.’ Consequently, I started to question the teachings I had received at home and began to suspect that the feelings I was experiencing were not abnormal or sick.

I eventually arrived at a point in my development where I could verbalize to myself that I was gay. Since I was fairly certain that my family would not be completely supportive of my realization, I initially kept this knowledge to myself. But, as keeping any large secret does, hiding my true feelings from my family weighed heavily upon my conscience and after a short period of time, I decided that it was necessary for my family to know the truth.

As the only child of a single parent, my mother and I were extremely close. I chose to tell her first, reasoning that she would probably be the most accepting of my family; unfortunately, I was very wrong. My mother’s immediate response was that I was devil-possessed, going to hell, and needed to ask for God’s forgiveness and salvation. When I attempted to explain that being gay was not simply a choice that I had made and

that I had been dealing with these feelings throughout my life, her only response was to demand that I pack all of my things and move out of her house.

The rest of my family's reactions were the same and I quickly found myself alone, homeless, and struggling with immense feelings of abandonment and fear. Fortunately, I had developed a terrific support network of friends who helped me move my belongings out of my mother's house and locate a new place to live. Those friends and others like them quickly became my family; however, even with their help and support I often found myself paralyzed with emotions – anger, resentment, and a great amount of fear. I did not know how to work through these feelings or how to live on my own and I did not have the money or wherewithal to obtain counseling. When I visited my college's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) office looking for advice and support, I discovered that it was more of a social-planning organization than a place to provide me with the services and guidance I needed. Unfortunately, I also found the college's student counseling center lacking the necessary skills required to assist someone whose entire family and way of life had been eliminated.

There is no doubt in my mind that, were it not for my friends, I would most likely be dead today. Numerous times I sat alone in my small studio apartment and worried about how I would pay my bills and survive on my own. I contemplated suicide on more than one occasion; luckily, each time I reached out to a friend instead and slowly began to navigate my way through the painful transition to adulthood.

One of the essential components of parenting involves loving and supporting a child and helping that child grow. Most individuals are not forced to deal with the issues that I, and many others like me, have had to contend with as a result of acknowledging

their sexuality. Additionally, these issues are exacerbated by the stigma associated with GLBQ individuals and the hostility toward those deemed fundamentally different, two unfortunate conditions prevalent in our society. For these and similar reasons, there is little mystery as to why it took me an additional 3 years to complete my undergraduate degree. Amidst my studies, I had to contend with feelings, emotions, and circumstances that I was ill-equipped to handle. If one accepts the notion that a central responsibility of higher education is to provide the proper tools and services to students in order to facilitate successful growth and development, then my personal experience might have been different as these systems of support would have been made available to me.

Fortunately, many colleges and universities have begun to recognize that a number of students reside beyond the confines of heterosexuality and that these students may feel marginalized or ignored by common social practices or policies. Many of these same institutions have made the choice to implement GLBQ specific programs and initiatives (Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Rankin, 2003). Unfortunately, research shows that these programs are typically short staffed and underfunded (Nieberding, 1989; Ritchie & Banning, 2001); thus, adequate student support relies to some degree on the efficient implementation of institutional policies, procedures, and resources. Rather than employing a “one-size-fits-all” approach or “best-intentions” strategy, institutions would better serve their GLBQ students if more was known about this minority population and support programs were tailored to fit their specific needs. This is the primary aim of the current study – to obtain a greater and more in-depth understanding of the GLBQ students who successfully complete their postsecondary degree. Utilizing this knowledge,

I seek to identify the implications that may exist for sound decision making and policy designs in regard to non-heterosexual students.

Research Question

The primary research question put forth in this study endeavors to identify the various human components and characteristics that may exist which enable an individual possessing a minority sexual identity to succeed within a heteronormative higher education culture. Specifically, the question being asked is “What factors in a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer person’s life history enable him or her to persist through higher education and successfully obtain an undergraduate degree?”

In order to answer this central question, three additional queries must be addressed: (1) At what level of personal development, within commonly cited Queer Identity formation theories, do the persistent GLBQ students reside? (2) Are there elements within their respective familial and higher education cultures that serve to support GLBQ students and, if so, what are they? and (3) Are there elements within their respective familial and higher education cultures that serve to hinder persistent GLBQ students and, if so, what are they?

The discovery of similarities or significant differences that exist between persistent GLBQ students’ queer identity formation, familial background and experiences, and higher education cultures might suggest factors which influence GLBQ student persistence and degree completion. By providing an understanding of the common dynamics inherent among the 6 participants of this study, postsecondary practitioners may be better informed about this sub-population of students.

Statement of the Problem

For many individuals, the process of accepting one's non-heterosexual identity is a very personal and often lonely process devoid of guidance or support from parents who are not accepting of sexual identities deemed "perverse." The establishment of a positive self image as a GLBQ individual can be extremely difficult (D'Augelli, 1993; Rhoads, 1994). Waldo (1998) states that "many LGB[Q] students are first exposed to LGB[Q] communities at their universities" (p. 746). College life and the autonomy associated with it, offers one of the first signs of hope for young people in the struggle to accept their non-heterosexual identity. Unfortunately, there are many campuses that do not provide a safe and nurturing environment for GLBQ students (D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Dilley, 2002b, 2005; Herek, 1993; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998).

Importance of the Study

There are several important implications that may result from this study, the first implication relates to higher education. Due to their very nature, higher education institutions are in the best position to assist GLBQ students in the development of a positive sense of self-efficacy and there are several reasons why they should choose to do so. The notion that diversity offers increased creativity through alternate perspectives and greater opportunities for organizational growth has been echoed by many researchers (Collins, 2001; Senge, 1990; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000; "Survey Reports Educational Benefits of Diversity," 2000). It follows that a college or university would reap similar human capital benefits from a more diverse postsecondary student population. Even if one chooses simply to ignore the human benefits that result from diversity, it is difficult

to argue against the positive financial implications that an increased student enrollment promises.

The second area of importance for this study relates to society as a whole. It stands to reason that our nation will benefit from an increase in the education level of the workforce because a higher education typically results in higher wages. Another similarity related to diversity that exists between the workforce and the collegiate environment involves the positive effects that inhere within multiple perspectives and increased creativity. Simply put, the cultivation of multiple perspectives during collegiate years increases the probability of multiple perspectives in the workforce. In a complex and rapidly changing job market, corporations are finding themselves forced to continuously evolve and adapt in order to survive. Collins (2001) argues that a work environment devoid of creativity and multiple perspectives has little hope of continued existence. Similarly, Sonnenschein (1999) states that diversity “brings differences in styles and in ways of looking at and doing things which can help organizations do more than they ever dreamed possible” (p. 3).

Another area of importance is in the realm of social justice, or the concept of maintaining a just society. Current-day budgeting constraints within higher education dictate that any policy or procedure fashioned in support of GLBQ students must be done efficiently and be applicable to as many students as possible. If common sexual (i.e., Queer) identity variables and psychosocial developmental components are found to exist among persistent GLBQ postsecondary students, the information may be utilized in the formation of additional research and potential new policies and procedures.

Research on identity formation suggests that “many LGB[Q] students are first exposed to LGB[Q] communities at their universities” (Waldo, 1998, p. 746). College life and the autonomy associated with it, offers hope for many of these young people struggling with their sexual orientation; however, not all campuses provide a safe and nurturing environment for non-normative students. In fact, studies show that many colleges and universities can be quite hostile toward GLBQ students (D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Herek, 1993). Sherril and Hardesty (1994) also contend that “31 percent of GLBT students left school for one semester or longer and 33 percent dropped out or transferred because of coming out or harassment issues prior to coming out” (p. 269).

Colleges and universities are charged with ensuring that all students are treated in a fair and just manner; however, the very foundation of institutional policies and procedures are built upon an assumed heterosexual standard. This offers GLBQ students a sense of false hope, violating their sense of justice and equity. As such, the decisions made and policies formed by future higher education leaders may be better informed by results gleaned through this study.

Higher education serves as a prime example of a social system wherein bias and prejudice toward GLBQ people have been passed down from one generation to the next. Blumenfeld (1992) refers to this practice as ‘institutional homophobia’ and states that, in some cases, “these organizations systematically discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or identity” and that in some cases “laws, codes, or policies enforce such discrimination” (p. 5). Only through knowledge and critical reflection can the unequal balance of power be addressed. The life histories told by the participants of this study

may offer significant challenges to the oppressive structures inherent within society and serve to thwart the domination of one group by another.

Assumptions

The assumptions carried into this research study are a result of numerous factors which include: my upbringing within a fundamentalist Christian home, my 33 years living as a gay man, my committed relationship to my husband of 9+ years, my relationship with friends who are GLBQ that I consider to be my family, the lack of resources and support that I witnessed during my own ‘coming-out’ process, and my 6 years as a college instructor.

It is my belief that individuals deserve the right to live their life as they see fit. Whether a person is gay or straight, Black or White, old or young, physically or mentally handicapped – it should make no difference provided that how a person lives does not harm others.

Secondly, I do not agree with the notion that being gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer is a lifestyle choice. Rather, I believe that what separates one sexuality from another will ultimately be found to exist within a person’s biological or psychological construction. There is a diversity of opinion on the issue of whether sexual orientation is a “choice”; however, evidence in support of a biological basis is mounting (Bagemihl, 1999; Bogaert, Blanchard, & Crosthwait, 2007; McHugh, 2009; Zuk & Bailey, 2008). My earliest memories of sexual attractions always involved members of the same sex and, because of this fact, I feel that there is great value in the concept of immutability which suggests that one’s sexuality is biologically determined (Hegarty, 2002).

I do not consider homosexuality to be a defining factor of one's existence; however, due to the current political movements advocating for and against GLBQ rights within our country, it is an unfortunate fact that this particular portion of an individual's life is oftentimes one of the most contentiously scrutinized. Society's current focus on non-normative sexualities is troubling when one considers its possible effects on young GLBQ people who are attempting to successfully transition from childhood to adulthood.

Adolescence can be an extremely difficult period in a person's life, due in large part to the internal conflicts and insecurities that transpire during this stage of human development (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989; Feldman, 1996; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). Consequently, it is my belief that the majority of young people in our society may be hesitant to seek out what limited GLBQ resources and support systems may be available to them. For this reason, I would argue that any institution dealing with younger individuals (i.e., secondary and postsecondary) should be as proactive as possible in regard to GLBQ concerns and issues. Unfortunately, much research has been conducted which highlights the homophobic culture existent within higher education (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; D'Augelli, 1992; Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Rhoads, 1994, 1995; Tierney, 1992).

Another assumption made in this study is that all GLBQ individuals progress through, roughly, the same stages of queer identity development. The models and additional information regarding similarities that exist between queer identity development models is presented in the literature review.

Definitions

This study utilizes several terms with which a reader may not be familiar or terms that may call for a clearer definition than the one generally accepted within society. Thus, the following terms and definitions are provided:

Coming out: “the process of acknowledging that one is gay, lesbian or bisexual.” (Hogan & Hudson, 1998, p. 424).

Gender expression: “external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as masculine or feminine” (Kosciw, 2002, p. 2).

Gender identity: “refers to a person’s internal sense of being either male or female or something other than exclusively male or female” (Kosciw, 2002, p. 2).

Heteronormative: a term used to describe situations in which variations from a heterosexual orientation are marginalized, ignored or persecuted by social practices, policies, and/or beliefs (Warner, 1991).

Heterosexism: “overt or tacit bias against lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals based on a belief in the superiority or, sometimes, the omnipresence of heterosexuality” (Herek, 1995, p. 322).

Homophobia: “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals” or, more generally, “revulsion toward homosexuals” (Weinberg, 1972, p. 4)

Human capital: “a way of defining and categorizing peoples' skills and abilities as used in employment and otherwise contribute to the economy” (Becker, 1994, p. 16)

Queer: “word used since the late 1980’s to describe persons (as well as things and concepts associated with them) whose sexual desires or gender identity do not conform to socioculturally constructed norms” (Hogan & Hudson, 1998, p. 463).

Social justice: refers to the concept of an “egalitarian society that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognizes the dignity of every human being” (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006, p. 10)

Transsexual: “persons whose gender identity differs from what is culturally associated with their biological sex at birth” (Hogan & Hudson, 1998, p. 544).

Transgendered: “used to describe persons who assert a gender identity different from their biological sex but choose not to undergo sex reassignment surgery” (Hogan & Hudson, 1998, p. 544).

Summary

This first, introductory chapter began with a brief glimpse into my (the researcher’s) background, my coming out process and the impact that my family’s response to my homosexuality had on my postsecondary education experience. The primary research question framing this study was then introduced and explained as was a statement of the problem, the importance of the study, and a vetting of the assumptions I carry into this endeavor. The chapter concludes with a list of terms and their definitions for readers who may be unfamiliar with this area of research.

The second chapter provides a review of research pertinent to this topic while chapter III outlines the methodology utilized for the study. A life history for each participant is supplied in chapter IV with the analysis of those narratives presented in chapter V. The sixth and final chapter consists of my conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

This review of literature is structured into six sections. Section one provides a brief historical review of higher education in the United States and its culture. Additionally, the first section endeavors to clarify the initial function of postsecondary education. Questions that will be addressed in this section include: What makes higher education distinct from other societal venues? Is the commonly perceived view of higher education as an open-minded, free-thinking, diverse, and progressive environment accurate? And finally, what does the current, common model and culture of higher education look like (i.e., patriarchal, hegemonic, and/or heteronormative)?

Section two presents information to support the argument that higher education's culture remains inhospitable to gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer individuals. While much research exists to support this contention, both sides of the argument are presented.

In section three, a review of prominent student attrition and persistence research is presented. As colleges and universities are being forced to "do more with less" each year, this realm of knowledge has been increasingly examined over the last 30 years.

The fourth section begins with a brief historical account of the initial intellectual development theorists and then provides an overview of Kegan's (1982, 1994) work within this field on social maturity.

Section five presents an overview of the various psychosocial theories regarding the impact that family has on an individual's identity formation and how those interactions may influence a person's development later in life.

The sixth and final section consists of a review and synthesis of the most commonly cited models of queer identity development for GLBQ youth. As will be shown, a majority of these models have been combined to form a mega-model of queer youth identity formation.

Culture of Higher Education

The question of whether the commonly perceived view of higher education as an open-minded, free-thinking, diverse, and progressive environment is a subject for debate. Within the body of GLBQ literature exists a common thread of discontent amongst theorists and researchers and most agree that the current culture within higher education serves to perpetuate heteronormative standards to the detriment of non-heterosexuals (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Garber, 2002; Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998).

According to Harvard's Charter of 1650, the college was founded "to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity" (Morrison, 1935, p. 168). The primary goal of America's first generation of institutions was to produce learned men who would take their place, following graduation, amongst the ministers of the time. Brubacher and Rudy (2004) state that, "the desire of important denominations (such as the Anglican and Calvinist) for a literate, college-trained clergy was probably the most important single factor explaining the founding of the colonial colleges" (p. 6).

Within the last 50 years, however, an argument has ensued over what higher education's role should be within society. Due to an increase in commercialization and competition within today's workforce, a debate has ensued regarding higher education's *evolved* purpose and whether colleges and universities might better serve students by focusing more on vocational training and job placement (Bailey & Morest, 2004; Dougherty, 2002; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). For these individuals, the perpetuation of knowledge and the intellectual development of students are no longer the central goal of an advanced degree.

Regardless of the debate between intellectualism and vocational training, the fundamental nature and configuration of colleges and universities have remained relatively unchanged in regard to organizational structure and the domination of the White, heterosexual male throughout the ranks of administration and faculty. Consequently, a majority of the widely accepted policies, procedures, and social norms within higher education are tailored to suit this narrow population.

What makes higher education distinct from other societal venues is best captured by Newman's (2001) definition of a university:

in its simple and rudimental form, it is a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and *learners from every quarter*. . . . A University seems to be in its essence, a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse, through a wide extent of country. (p. 6)

The free exchange of ideas (or "circulation of thought") for no benefit other than the construction and/or perpetuation of knowledge is one distinct trait of higher education. Research that offers no guarantee of short-term practical gains (commonly referred to as

“pure” research) is one such example. The core motivation behind pure research is to expand mankind’s knowledge, not to create or invent something in the hopes of monetary gains (Creswell, 2005).

The notion of academic freedom stands as another unique characteristic of higher education. The origins of academic freedom as an institutional policy can be traced back to Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia (Brubacher & Rudy, 2004). Jefferson’s contention was that faculty should possess complete freedom in their choices regarding research, governance and communication. The University of Virginia’s policy spoke to the “illimitable freedom of the human mind” and ensured that faculty should not be “afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead” (Honeywell, 1931, p. 99).

Culture of Higher Education Toward GLBQ Students

As mentioned earlier, there is a substantial amount of literature which supports the contention that institutions of higher education have been and continue to be inhospitable to the GLBQ population (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson, 2000; Conley & O'Rourke, 1973; Crew, 1978; D'Augelli, 1992; Dilley, 2002b, 2005; Dunbar, Brown, & Vuorinen, 1973; Gose, 1996; Hechinger & Hechinger, 1978; Herek, 1988; Kurdek, 1988; Liddell & Douvanis, 1994; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998)

Herek (1988) completed three separate studies which measured heterosexuals’ attitudes toward homosexuals. The first study contained a sample of 368 undergraduate volunteers at a major California university (249 females, 119 males). These individuals completed an Attitude Toward Lesbians and Gays (ATLG) survey during a lecture period in an introductory psychology course. The ATLG was developed by Herek and consists

of 20 items in a Likert scale. Herek reported an alpha coefficient of .90 for the internal consistency of the ATLG.

In order to assess the replicability of the first study's findings, Herek conducted two subsequent studies utilizing the ATLG. The second study's sample consisted of 405 students (226 females, 179 males) across five additional institutions. This sample included individuals from state universities in Nebraska, an East-coast Ivy League university, Indiana, a New England state university, and another California state university in an alternate city. The third and final study conducted by Herek (1988) consisted of a new sample of heterosexual undergraduate students ($n = 149$) from the same California university used in the first study.

Herek's (1988) compilation of the three studies revealed that a majority of heterosexual college students held a negative view of homosexuals. Additionally, Herek found that a gender difference existed regarding the level of homophobia expressed and that male college students had a greater tendency to express hostile attitudes toward GLBQ individuals, most especially gay men.

Similar results were obtained through a study involving 103 primarily White, heterosexual college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a medium-sized Midwestern university (Kurdek, 1988). Participants anonymously and individually completed the following five assessments:

1. *Demographic information*: Participants provided background information regarding sex, age, class rank, marital status, academic performance, and sexual orientation (1, exclusively heterosexual; 7, exclusively homosexual);

2. *Sex Role Self-Concept*: The sex role self-concept of each participant was measured utilizing a Personality Attributes Questionnaire developed by Spence and Helmreich (1978). Cronbach alpha scores on this assessment for masculinity and femininity were .80 and .76, respectively;
3. *Traditional Attitudes Toward Men, Women, and the Equality Between Men and Women*: Participants' attitudes were measured using a 54-item Likert-type scale. Half of the items were reverse scored and the Cronbach alpha scores for each assessment were .85 (attitudes toward men), .83 (attitudes toward women), and .76 (equality between men and women).
4. *Negative Attitudes Toward Homosexuals*: Participants' negative attitudes toward homosexuals were measured by a 37-item assessment developed by Herek (1984). Cronbach's alpha for this assessment was .97;
5. *Principled Moral Judgement*: Principled moral judgment of the participants was measured via two moral dilemmas taken from Rest's (1983) Defining Issues Test.

Of the students surveyed in Kurdek's study, 17% obtained scores which indicated that they agreed with *every* homophobic statement listed on the instrument. More than 50% of the sample *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with 11 of the negative attitudes toward homosexuals statements.

D'Augelli (1992) performed a research study on harassment and discrimination experienced within institutions of higher education based upon sexual orientation. Results of the study indicated that 77% of the lesbian and gay undergraduate students indicated that they had been verbally abused due to their sexual orientation, 27% of the sample

stated that they had been threatened with physical violence; and that 3% of the respondents had been physically attacked (i.e., punched, hit, kicked, or beaten) because of their sexual orientation. Due in large part to many of these factors, GLBQ undergraduate students hold negative perceptions of their postsecondary institutions (Waldo, 1998). In a study consisting of 1,927 students (377 graduate men, 384 graduate women, 518 undergraduate men, and 648 undergraduate women) at a large Midwestern research university, Waldo (1998) found that GLBQ students' perceptions of campus climate differed significantly from those of their heterosexual counterparts in that they believed their campus was less accepting of non-heterosexuals.

Postsecondary institutional self-studies have further documented the existence of homophobia on their campuses (Brown, Happold, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2002; Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 1992; Herek, 1993; Nelson & Baker, 1990; Nieberding, 1989; Norris, 1991; Rankin, 2002, 2003; Shepard, 1990). For example, a survey conducted by Rankin (2002) of GLBQ individuals at the University of Missouri-Columbia found that 13% of the GLBQ students, faculty, and staff respondents indicated that they feared for their physical safety because of their sexual orientation or gender identity; 58% concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation or harassment; and 47% stated that they had been the victims of harassment on campus. Another example of the inhospitable culture on college campuses can be found at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) where it was found that 100% of the GLBQ undergraduates surveyed reported that homophobic attitudes existed on the campus; nearly 33% stated that they had been the victims of verbal harassment based upon their sexual orientation; 3% of undergraduate respondents had been threatened with

physical violence; and 9% had personal property damaged or destroyed. Of the 272 UNL faculty and staff surveyed, 75% agreed with the GLBQ students that homophobic attitudes existed on campus (Brown, et al., 2002).

A more recent, national study of nearly 1,700 GLBQ students, faculty, and staff was conducted by Rankin (2003). Fourteen institutions, geographically disbursed throughout the United States (US), participated in the study, including 4 private and 10 public colleges and universities. The survey utilized for the study consisted of 35 questions, each constructed so that respondents could provide feedback on their experiences on campus as a GLBQ individual, perceptions on the campus' climate toward GLBQ people, and their perspective on actions taken by the institution regarding GLBQ issues or concerns. The results of Rankin's study indicated the following:

- Over 33% of the GLBQ undergraduates surveyed had experienced anti-gay harassment within the past year;
- 19% of the study's respondents stated that they had feared for their physical safety within the past year due to their sexual orientation;
- 43% perceived their campus climate as homophobic;
- 41% did not feel that their institution was properly addressing issues related to sexual orientation;
- 51% hid their sexual orientation to avoid intimidation or harassment.

It is important to note that all of the participating campuses in Rankin's (2003) study contained a visible and institutionally funded GLBQ presence on campus (i.e., a GLBQ student support office/staff). This fact is significant as less than 130 higher education institutions throughout the nation maintain such an office (National

Consortium of Directors of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Resources in Higher Education, 2007). As Rankin explains, “it is possible that the climates on campuses with these resources will be more positive than on the overwhelming majority of campuses that do not have such centers” (p. 15).

As mentioned earlier, literature within the last few decades speaks to the inhospitable environment that many colleges and universities present to non-heterosexual students (D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Dilley, 2002b, 2005; Herek, 1993; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998). While only a small percentage of institutions have established GLBQ support centers, many more have chosen to enact anti-discrimination policies geared toward the protection of all faculty, staff, and students, regardless of sexual orientation.

A recent study completed by Baumgart, Bass, and Gerber (2006) of member institutions of the Association of American Universities (AAU) revealed that all but one of its 60 public and private U.S. research affiliates included sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies. According to Baumgart, Bass, and Gerber, the justification for its inclusion is that these institutions endeavor to recruit and retain the best faculty, staff, and students possible in order to maintain a high quality environment. At the core of this justification is the substantiated belief that diversity has a positive impact on higher education (Bollinger, 2007; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

Student Attrition and Persistence

Due to budgetary constraints and increases in market competition, research on student persistence has grown over the last 3 decades (Berger, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton, 2000; Braxton & Mundy, 2002; Milem & Berger, 1997;

Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1990, 1993). Tinto (1990, 1993) is one of the leading scholars within the area of student attrition, persistence, and retention. In his 1993 book, *Leaving College*, Tinto put forth the contention that students' persistence is heavily influenced by various background characteristics such as family structure or prior educational experience. Similarly, Seidman (2005) has also proposed that there is a connection between student persistence in higher education and the characteristics of their social and demographic backgrounds.

According to Tinto (1975, 1993), academic and social integration into the higher education culture are the two strongest predictors of persistence. Integration, as Tinto has defined it, is based upon numerous factors which include involvement with other students and faculty, the level of peer support, academic advising and counseling, and grade point average (GPA).

Academic integration is comprised of two dimensions: structural and normative. Structural academic integration involves a student's ability to meet the explicit standards of an institution. Normative academic integration relates to a student's identification with the dominant academic structure(s) within the institution (Tinto, 1975). Social integration is based upon the level of similarity that exists between the student and the institution's social system (Tinto, 1975).

Theories regarding student persistence and attrition have been categorized into five types: psychological, societal, economic, organizational, and interactional (Tinto, 1993). Psychological theories point to the various psychological characteristics that may influence a student's decision to leave higher education. These characteristics include

motivational state, personality traits, academic skills, and ability (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

Societal theories suggest that an external factor within society impacts the student to such a degree that he or she is forced to withdraw. This influence may originate from a social structure or social force such as peers, family socioeconomic status, or the level of support received from significant others (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Family emotional support (i.e., encouragement by others) has been shown to have direct and indirect effects on student persistence at the postsecondary level (Bean, 1982; Nora 1987, Nora & Rendon, 1990; Ortiz, 2004; Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Davis, 2006). The importance of an affirming relationship between a student and his or her family has been further underscored by Nora and Cabrera (1996) whose research indicates the existence of a positive correlation between parental encouragement and the integration of a student to his or her college or university.

Economic theories on college student departure suggest external, monetary reasons for a student's attrition. Braxton (2003) contends that a student will most likely depart from a college or university if he or she perceives the cost of attendance to be greater than the expected benefits of his or her education or training. Studies related to postsecondary student retention utilizing an economic perspective support this theory – that a student's ability to pay or perceived 'net' value of an education influences persistence (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; St. John, 1994; St. John, Paulson, & Starkey, 1996).

Organizational theories contend that the higher education institution is the cause of a student's dropout due to its size, interactions with faculty, or academic requirements

(Berger & Braxton, 1998). Braxton and Hirschy (2004) state that there are two organizational characteristics that impact a student's ultimate commitment to a college or university, these are: institutional integrity and institutional commitment to student welfare. Institutional integrity is based upon a student's perception of the day-to-day activities of administrators, faculty, and staff. Specifically, how closely related these activities or actions are to the expressed mission and values of the college or university. A student's perception of an institution's commitment to student welfare is shaped by how the college or university demonstrates that it cares about student success.

Theories situated within Tinto's (1993) interactional category argue that a student's departure from higher education is due primarily to a person's interaction with the institution's culture. Interactional theories underscore the importance of a student's participation in a college or university's organizations, clubs, and activities (Berger & Milem, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997).

Critics of Tinto's (1993) work argue that his theory fails to adequately account for cultural variables and thus cannot be applied as easily to minority students (Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Moore & Upcraft, 1990; Tierney, 1999). Consequently, Guiffrida (2006) argues that "a cultural advancement of Tinto's (1993) theory should start by recognizing and underscoring the importance of cultural and familial connections" (p. 452).

Intellectual Development Theory

To better understand the developmental stages each person completes over the course of a lifetime, it is beneficial to possess a working knowledge of the intellectual development theories available. Within the realm of intellectual development theories,

the work of four researchers is most often cited. These are: Piaget (1954, 1967), Gesell (1925), Erikson (1950, 1968), and Spock (1946). While all of these theorists believed that stages of cognitive development exist, each utilized a different approach in their research on children's learning and thinking patterns.

Kegan's Intellectual Development Theory

A more recent intellectual development theorist, Kegan (1982, 1994), has taken Piaget's ideas and applied them to the realm of social maturity, a concept which deals with how well an individual understands and is able to interact with his or her social environment. Stated another way, a socially mature individual possesses a set of social skills and is able to function as a healthy member of society.

In his first book, *The Evolving Self*, Kegan (1982) argued that, similar to Piaget's model, there exist successive, dependent stages of social maturity. Kegan's model, however, encompasses six stages or periods of development, which he refers to as: incorporative, impulsive, imperial, interpersonal, institutional, and interindividual. The crux of Kegan's model is that as a person matures from infancy to adulthood, he or she develops a more objective appreciation for his or her social context. This process is accomplished by successfully completing each of Kegan's six development periods which are described below.

Period one: Incorporative. Kegan's incorporate period is similar to Piaget's sensorimotor stage in that a sense of self has not developed and thus an infant is unable to discern from itself and the sensory data it receives.

Period two: Impulsive. The second period in Kegan's model refers to the fact that the child remains fully immersed in his or her own impulses. While the child may realize

that he or she can take action on its world (by crying for something they want, etc.), he or she is still unaware that the people around him or her are beings separate from themselves. The child's self-perception at this stage is nothing more than the sum of its needs. To the impulsive minded child, the caretakers around him or her are simply an extension of the body that can be controlled to satisfy needs just as he or she would a muscle reflex.

Period three. Imperial. A child in this period of development realizes that he or she is, in fact, separate from the beings around him or her; however, the child lacks empathy toward the beings or their needs. Children in the imperial period simply recognize that they are able to control other people in order to have their own needs satisfied. It is for this reason that Kegan refers to the imperial minded child as a "little dictator." Whereas the impulsive child wields its control in a more instinctive way, the imperial child brandishes its control over the environment through a more conscious act of manipulation.

Period four: Interpersonal. Kegan's interpersonal period of development begins once a child realizes that there are other people in the world, that those other people also have needs, and that all of those needs must be taken into account at the same time. Three decision paths exist for interpersonal children, (1) some will conclude that their needs are what is most important and supersede those of other people, (2) some children will decide that other peoples' needs should typically take precedence over their own, or (3) a child will fluctuate between the first two options. Over time and through experience, interpersonal children establish a set of rules that guide their decision-making process based upon a particular situation.

Period five: Institutional. As an individual establishes his or her own core set of values and guiding principles in making decisions, he or she transitions to Kegan's fifth period in development, called "institutional." Kegan asserts that society's basic set of values is derived from this period of social maturity. Widely accepted notions regarding fairness, honesty, and basic values stem from the institutional period. Kegan also suggests that the majority of adults do not progress beyond this point in their development and thus, the institutional period of social maturity is considered by most to be the last.

Period six: Interindividual. Kegan maintains that there is a sixth period in social maturity which he calls "interindividual." Individuals who attain this level of development recognize that there are multiple ways of adhering to a set of values and that every situation or circumstance encompasses at least two points of view. A person possessing an interindividual mindset is able to compare two different sets of values at the same time and judge them from both perspectives.

A person who successfully completes all six of Kegan's developmental periods is truly able to view the world in an objective manner and bases his or her judgment on what is perceived as best for society.

In his second book, *In Over Our Heads*, Kegan (1994) discusses the types of issues that present themselves when an individual is stuck within one particular period of social maturity. It is Kegan's belief that the majority of adults are socially stunted and are, thus, ill-prepared for the demands placed upon them by society. This is not to say that most adults are socially immature, but rather that our common societal institutions (such as marriage, employment, and education) assume that everyone is operating on the

same level of social maturity. Kegan suggests that this assumption is unreasonable given the infinite combinations that exist when the number of people alive, their collective experiences, and their interactions are taken into account.

Kegan re-conceptualized the first five stages of his original theory on social maturity and produced five “Orders of Consciousness” which he presents in his second book. The original five stages of social maturity coincide, *generally*, to the first four of these new orders of consciousness in the following way (Dombeck, 2007):

- *First order consciousness* relates to the incorporative and impulsive periods of development wherein an individual is fixated upon his or her own senses and impulses. Awareness of the self as separate has not been attained.
- *Second order consciousness* corresponds to Kegan’s imperial period of development in which there is recognition of the self, but not an appreciation for others and their needs.
- *Third order consciousness* encompasses the interpersonal and institutional periods of social maturity. Individuals within this stage are able to not only recognize themselves as separate from others, but are also aware that others have needs. Behavior and decision making are guided by a core set of principles.
- *Fourth order consciousness* coincides with the interindividual stage of social maturity. Individuals who attain this level of development possess a capacity to extend beyond society’s widely accepted values and are able to form their own, internalized set of guiding principles.

Kegan's fifth order of consciousness, therefore, extends beyond his original work on social maturity. According to Kegan (1994), ascension to the fifth order of consciousness is rare, but when it occurs, "it is never before their forties" (p. 352). Individuals who attain this level of development refuse to see themselves or another person as a single system of form. Rather, Kegan explains,

The relationship is a context for a sharing and an interacting in which both are helped to experience their "multipleness," in which the many forms or systems that each self is are helped to emerge. (p. 313)

Stated an alternate way, an individual working within the fifth order of consciousness perceives *the self* as incomplete when it is absent a relationship with an *other*.

Kegan's updated theory regarding intellectual development centers on the notion of meaning-making. Specifically, Kegan argues that individuals continuously make meaning of their lives by examining themselves, the people around them, and their past experiences. Kegan's five orders of consciousness endeavor to explain how meaning-making evolves over the course of a lifetime. As a person matures socially and progresses through the orders of consciousness, their meaning-making process evolves.

According to Kegan, at the core of the meaning-making process resides a subject-object distinction. Kegan defines this as the following:

"Subject" refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in. "Object" refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise act upon. (1994, p. 32)

Stated more simply, we *are* subject and we *have* object (Kegan's Orders of Consciousness, 1999).

Each of Kegan's orders of consciousness is based upon a unique subject-object relationship. Additionally, the orders of consciousness are similar to his original work and Piaget's developmental theory in that each order is successive and dependent upon the one prior. What was viewed as "subject" in one order becomes "object" in the next (Kegan's Orders of Consciousness, 1999).

Possible Applications to Postsecondary Students

Kegan's first and fifth orders of consciousness are not applicable to the traditional college-aged individual. Children typically transition from first to second order between the ages of 5 and 10 years old and, as Kegan's quote above explained, fifth order consciousness is never seen before the age of 40. Thus, what follows is a discussion of the possible applications of the remaining orders of consciousness to GLBQ students enrolled in college.

Second Order of Consciousness. Individuals operating within Kegan's second order of consciousness make meaning through the construction of "durable categories." Kegan (1994) explains that a change in an individual's perception occurs wherein physical objects change "from being principally about momentary perceptions of them to being about their existence as property-bearing 'classes' with ongoing rules about what elements may or may not be properties" (p. 23). Thus, *things* are assigned and categorized via concrete properties, *others* possess intentions and perceptions of their own, and *the self* contains its own set of preferences and abilities. Working within this

mindset, an individual is able to construct his or her own point of view, as well as a greater understanding of the self (“What I like,” “What I don’t like,” etc.).

The transition from the second to the third order of consciousness typically occurs between the ages of 12 and 20. Most often this transition occurs during adolescence; however, in some cases it can also take place when an individual enters college (Kegan’s *Orders of Consciousness*, 1999).

Third Order of Consciousness. Kegan (1994) asserts that an individual operating within the third order of consciousness is able to

think abstractly, identify a complex internal psychological life, orient to the welfare of a human relationship, construct values and ideals self-consciously...and subordinate one’s own interests on behalf of one’s greater loyalty to maintaining bonds of friendship, or team or group participation. (p. 75)

Through this “cross-categorical” thinking process, an individual is able to reflect upon *the self* in relation to a category rather than as the category itself (Kegan’s *Orders of Consciousness*, 1999). Consequently, individuals in this order of consciousness possess the ability to recognize not only the ramifications to themselves that may result from their actions, but also the potential impact their actions will have on their relationships (“If I do X, it could affect my relationship with Y. Therefore, I choose not to do X”). It is at this stage of intellectual development that a person becomes “socialized” and begins to identify with and conform to the values and beliefs of his or her particular social context as communicated by those surroundings.

The transition from third to fourth order consciousness is considered by Kegan to be the principal transformation of consciousness in adulthood. “It basically involves

attaining self-authorship: the ability to “write” one’s own life” (Kegan’s Orders of Consciousness, 1999, p. 71).

Fourth Order of Consciousness. An individual operating within Kegan’s fourth order of consciousness has the ability to create (rather than being created by) society’s values and ideals. Kegan states that “one-half to two-thirds of the adult population appear not to have fully reached the fourth order of consciousness” (p. 191). Consequently, a majority of adults are unable to perceive society’s value system as *object* rather than *subject* and thus fail to truly construct their own lives. These individuals reside within the ideological boundaries that mainstream society has constructed.

Functioning within a fourth order mindset, an individual possesses the capacity to judge the value *of* values and choose appropriately based upon a certain situation or set of circumstances. This capacity to choose between conflicting sets of values or to construct an entirely new value system based upon an internal identity is referred to as “self-authorship” (Kegan, 1994, p. 185). Interpersonally, a fourth order individual has the capability to view his or her relationships as *object*, independent of feeling. Individuals possessing this capability are said to have a “relationship to the relationship” (Kegan, 1994, p. 92). It is Kegan’s assertion that individuals must be capable of self-authorship in order to be effective members of society.

Psychosocial Theories of Identity Formation

The transition and acclimation to postsecondary education is considered for many individuals to be a significant step toward a future career and success in adult life (Galaway & Hudson, 1996). Whereas Piaget (1954, 1967) and Kegan (1982, 1994) focused upon motor and intellectual development, the research of Erikson (1950, 1968)

centered on the emotional development of children. In his theory of human development, Erikson asserted that a consolidated sense of ego identity is necessary for an individual to best function in life. Personality development, according to Erikson, consists of eight psychosocial stages which span the course of an individual's life.

Each of Erikson's (1950, 1968) stages results in one of two possible outcomes and, due to myriad external environmental and social factors experienced during each stage, the outcomes may be positive or negative. In stage 1 of Erikson's model, basic trust versus basic mistrust (ages 0-1), the primary focus of this stage is on the caretaker's positive and loving concern for the child. If needs are successfully met during this time, the child develops a positive sense of trust and a belief that the world is basically good. If the caretaker(s) fail to provide for the child, he or she cannot develop trust and is constantly frustrated. Consequently, the child will possess an overall sense of suspiciousness and distrust.

Stage 2, autonomy versus shame and doubt (age 1-3), involves the self-mastery of basic skills. The child learns to walk, talk, and develops fine motor skills. Opportunities to build self-esteem and a sense of autonomy occur as the child gains control over his or her body. It is also during this stage that the child begins to learn the difference between right and wrong. Successful completion of this stage results in a positive sense of control and self-esteem. Failure to successfully complete this stage results in a sense of self doubt, shame, and/or helplessness. One possible explanation for a negative outcome of this stage is a situation wherein a parent does everything for the child. In this case, the child is not given the opportunity to build trust in him or herself.

During Erikson's stage 3, initiative versus guilt (age 3-6), the child experiences a desire to mimic the actions and roles of adults and takes initiative in creating play situations. If the child is led to feel ashamed or frustrated over his or her natural desires or goals, he or she may experience guilt. The positive outcomes of this stage include: a strong sense of initiative or being a self starter and the ability to take responsibility. Negative outcomes of this stage are a strong sense of guilt or denial and irresponsible conduct.

In stage 4, industry versus inferiority (age 6-12), the child is able to learn, create, and master a wealth of new skills and knowledge; consequently, the child develops a strong sense of industry. Due to the highly socialized nature of this stage, the child may experience unresolved feelings of inadequacy or inferiority when compared to his or her peers. A positive outcome of this stage is that the child becomes an active participant in his or her learning. Negative outcomes of this stage include the child's sense of feeling inferior or inadequate.

In stages 1-4 of Erikson's model, what has been done to the child matters most to his or her development. This fact no longer applies to the remaining stages of the model as it is the actions of the individuals themselves that have the greatest impact upon personal development. Stage 5 of Erikson's model, identity versus role confusion (age 12-18), involves the personal investigation and discovery of who the individual is as a separate being from his or her family of origin. To those surrounding the individual, this stage appears to encompass a period of withdrawing from responsibilities, which Erikson refers to as a "moratorium." Unsuccessful completion of this stage results in role

confusion and upheaval (the individual does not know who he or she is). Individuals who successfully navigate this stage of development achieve a strong sense of identity.

Stage 6, intimacy versus isolation (ages 18-35), is considered by Erikson to be the initial stage of adulthood. In this stage, the individual searches for companionship and love through relationships such as marriage and friendships. The establishment and construction of families also typically occur during this stage. Successful negotiation of this stage results in the individual's ability to experience true, deep intimacy within his or her relationships. A person who is not successful in this stage experiences isolation and distance from others; moreover, he or she is not able to forge meaningful, satisfying relationships. A positive outcome of stage 6 consists of a strong sense of commitment to one's career and relationships while a negative outcome entails the person feeling isolated and distant from others.

During stage 7, generativity versus stagnation (ages 35-55), the individual's task is to transmit one's values and perpetuate culture via familial connections. This task is typically accomplished through the upbringing of children. An individual's desire during this stage to care for others and improve society is what Erikson refers to as "generativity." Positive results from this stage of development are that the individual becomes a productive member of society through one's family and career and a guide for a new generation. A person who fails to successfully complete this stage may become self-absorbed and/or stagnate.

In the eighth and final stage of Erikson's model, ego integrity versus ego despair (age 55+), the individual looks back upon his or her life with either content or dissatisfaction. The development of a sense that one's life had meaning is what Erikson

terms “integrity.” Individuals possessing integrity possess the knowledge that they have made a positive contribution to the world and can typically accept death as the natural completion of the life cycle. Those who reach this stage and fail to experience the positive sense of accomplishment feel regret and despair for opportunities lost and their perceived failures.

The fifth psychosocial stage, which typically transpires during an individual’s adolescent years, is considered by Erikson to be critical as attainment of a strong ego-identity is thought to provide the foundation for success later in life. Marcia (1966) operationalized Erikson’s identity development model and developed four distinct identity statuses: identity achieved, moratorium, diffusion, and foreclosure. Marcia’s first status, *identity-achieved*, describes an individual who has successfully formed an identity through experiencing a crisis, exploring alternative solutions to the crisis, and finally, committing to an identity based upon a set of values, goals, and beliefs. Individuals located within Marcia’s *moratorium* status are in the process of active exploration, but have not yet committed to an identity. The *diffusion* status describes an individual who is neither exploring nor committing to an identity. Marcia’s last status, *foreclosure*, refers to an individual who has committed to an identity without the exploration of alternative identity solutions.

Research has shown that adolescents falling within the identity-achieved or moratorium statuses tend to perform better in life than those classified in the diffusion or foreclosure statuses (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Marcia, 1993). A period of exploration during an individual’s adolescent years is widely considered necessary for proper identity development (Faber, Edwards, Bauer, & Wetchler, 2003) and there is a significant

amount of research which supports the assertion that an individual's family context has a profound impact on the successful navigation of the identity development process (Adams & Jones, 1983; Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000; Blustein & Palladino, 1991; Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985, 1988; Marcia, 1983, 1988; Nelson, Hughes, Handal, Katz, & Searight, 1993; Papini, Micka, & Barnett, 1989; Rice, 1990; Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994).

For many students, higher education provides an institutionalized moratorium in which they can freely experiment with alternate roles and identities (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006). The impact of family does not, however, end at the proverbial gates of a postsecondary institution; an individual's family context remains influential throughout his or her collegiate experience (Adams et al., 2000). Research conducted by Blustein, Devenis, and Kidney (1989) further suggests that psychosocial (i.e., family) influences on the identity development process may also impact an individual's career development.

Implications for GLBQ Individuals

Positive and negative implications of psychosocial influences on the identity development process have been found to exist in relation to GLBQ individuals. A study conducted by Konik and Stewart (2004), which utilized the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS), analyzed the potential impact of sexual identity on global, political, religious, and occupational identity development among 358 postsecondary students.

The EOM-EIS (Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979) is a 24-item, 6-point Likert scale instrument that measures Marcia's (1966) four possible outcomes in identity development: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement. Regarding the

validity of the EOM-EIS, Adams (1998) declared a median of internal consistency score across 14 separate studies using the EOM-EIS of .66 and a test-retest reliability median of .76. Additionally, evidence in support of the EOM-EIS's construct validity has been provided by Weiss (1984).

Konik and Stewart (2004) found a significant relationship between the possession of a sexual minority identity (i.e., identifying as GLBQ) and having a more advanced global, political, religious, and occupational identity. Additionally, those who identified themselves as a sexual-minority scored higher on a measurement of Marcia's (1966) identity-achievement status. In other words, the research performed by Konik, Stewart, and Marcia suggests that an individual possessing a sexual minority identity will not only have a better "sense of self," he or she is more apt to accept the societal, religious and cultural differences of others.

Conversely, negative implications of psychosocial influences arise when an individual experiences a harmful response from his or her family or social network. A study conducted by McFarland (2001) found that at least 26% of adolescents who "come-out" to their families were forced to leave their home and a significant number of these same individuals were disowned. Additional studies support McFarland's findings and further suggest that rejection by the family and/or peer network can have a destructive effect on a GLBQ person's physical and mental health (Armesto, 2001; Barden, 2004; D'Augelli, 1993, 1997; D'Augelli, Hershberger, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1997; LaSala, 2006, 2007; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanches, 2009; Szymanski, 2009; Tharinger & Wells, 2000)

Homosexual Identity Development Models

Overview of the Models

Between 1975 and 1982, 11 different theoretical models of homosexual identity development were introduced (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977; McLellan, 1977; Miller, 1978; Plummer, 1975; Schafer, 1976; Schultz, 1976; Troiden, 1977; Weinberg, 1977). Within lesbian and gay studies, three of these models are the most frequently cited; these are: Cass' (1979), Troiden's (1977), and Coleman's (1982).

Cass' (1979, 1984, 1996) model was one of the first and includes six stages of identity formation. In stage one, "Identity Confusion," an individual recognizes that his or her actions, thoughts, and feelings could be defined as homosexual. This revelation results in a significant amount of confusion and the person attempts to reconcile the notion of being lesbian, or gay from a third-person to a first person perspective. According to Cass, one of three possible developmental paths will be chosen at this stage: individuals will either consider whether they may be homosexual (eventually accepting the identity as positive or negative) or they will reject the possibility completely. The latter choice results in the foreclosure of further development and may be chosen at any stage of Cass' model.

At stage two, "Identity Comparison," Cass asserts that individuals emerge from stage one with a positive or negative view of themselves as a non-heterosexual. During this stage, a person employs coping skills in an effort to deal with feelings of alienation and difference in relation to the 'normal' world. Provided that a choice of foreclosure is not made, the individual usually contemplates making contact with other homosexuals.

In stage three, “Identity Tolerance,” the person acknowledges that “I am probably a lesbian/gay man” and “seeks out the company of homosexuals in order to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs” (Cass, 1984, p. 151). The individual is typically selective in who he or she connects with and perceives homosexual connections as a necessity. The homosexual self-image is tolerated rather than accepted at this stage. Disclosure of the homosexual identity to heterosexuals (friends, family, coworkers, etc.) is restricted and the individual maintains two separate images: a public (heterosexual) one and a private (homosexual) one.

Stage four, “Identity Acceptance” is marked by the person’s attempts to reconcile his or her inner sense of self as a lesbian or gay man. Prolonged exposure to the homosexual subculture and the construction of a homosexual support network (i.e., friends and/or lovers) promotes a more positive view of being a homosexual. It is during this stage that the person begins to disclose his or her true sexuality to more non-homosexuals.

In stage five, “Identity Pride,” the individual recognizes that the desire to fully express a lesbian or gay identity is made extremely difficult because of the dominant focus on heterosexuality. An “us versus them” mentality results and a combination of pride in one’s sexuality and anger at the injustice that exists within the world emerges. Cass (1984) explains that “anger about society’s stigmatization of homosexuals leads to disclosure and purposeful confrontation with non-homosexuals in order to promote the validity and equality of homosexuals” (p. 152).

Stage six, “Identity Synthesis” is the final stage of Cass’ sexual orientation identity development model. In this stage, the simplistic view of homosexuals as “good”

and heterosexuals as “bad” is rejected due in large part to ongoing interactions with heterosexuals who are accepting of alternate sexual identities. The person emerges from this final stage with a positive self-perception as a non-heterosexual. Additionally, the individual recognizes that being homosexual is just one component of his or her character and is able to effectively function within the current heteronormative world.

Troiden’s (1977, 1989) model of sexual identity formation involves four stages. The first stage “Sensitization” occurs before puberty. According to Troiden, “Lesbians and gay males...typically acquire social experiences during their childhood that serve later as bases for seeing homosexuality as personally relevant, that lend support to emerging perceptions of themselves as possibly homosexual” (1989, p. 51). During this stage, individuals feel marginalized and different from their same-sex peers.

In stage two, “Identity Confusion,” the individual wrestles with inner turmoil and uncertainty about his or her sexuality. The person is aware that he or she cannot fully accept the heterosexual identity that has been assigned, but he or she also recognizes the stigma that surrounds homosexuality. According to Troiden (1989), lesbians and gay males usually respond to their identity confusion through one or a combination of five strategies: (1) *denial* of their homosexuality, (2) *repair*, which involves the attempted eradication of their homosexual feelings and behaviors, (3) *avoidance* of their homosexuality, (4) *redefinition*, during which the individual attempts to justify or blame his or her homosexual feelings or behaviors on the context in which those situations occur, (i.e., “It only happened because I was drunk”), and (5) *acceptance* of their homosexuality.

The third stage within Troiden's model is "Identity Assumption" and typically occurs during or after late adolescence. In this stage, the person's homosexual identity is fully accepted and presented to others. Troiden states that "The earmarks of this stage are self-definition as homosexual, identity tolerance and acceptance, regular association with other homosexuals, sexual experimentation, and exploration of the homosexual subculture" (1989, p. 59).

The fourth and final stage of the model is "Commitment" and involves the individual's adoption of homosexuality as a way of life. This stage is often marked by the individual's entrance into a same-sex love relationship.

Coleman (1982) fashioned one of the latter models which consists of five stages. In the first stage, "Pre-Coming Out," the individual undergoes a process of "preconscious awareness of same-sex identity" (p. 150). Most individuals at this stage are conscious of the stigma associated with homosexuality and will not admit, sometimes even to themselves, that they might be homosexual. The resolution of the conflict at this stage is handled several ways. Some individuals commit suicide while others choose to hide their true sexual identity from themselves and others. Coleman asserts that "the only healthy resolution to the developmental tasks of this stage is for people to acknowledge their same-sex feelings and interests to themselves" (p. 151).

Stage two of Coleman's model, "Coming Out," involves the initial acceptance of one's homosexuality and reconciles the fact that he or she is not heterosexual. The ability to admit to oneself that he or she is gay or lesbian is the first developmental task of this stage. It is also at this stage that the individual typically first tells another person that he or she is homosexual. As Coleman explains, "acceptance or rejection [by the person

being told] at this point is critical” (1982, p. 151) as the response of the person’s confidant can have a profound impact on subsequent developmental stages.

In stage three of Coleman’s model, “Exploration,” the homosexual person begins experimenting with his or her new identity socially and sexually. The individual explores the different means by which he or she can meet other non-heterosexual people and frequent and sustained contact with the LGB community is common. Many at this stage find the notion of same-sex relations to be highly intriguing and find themselves “making up for a lost adolescence” (1982, p. 153).

During stage four, “First Relationships,” the individual develops a desire for a deeper and more lasting relationship with a person of the same sex; the allure of sexual exploration has diminished. Coleman (1982) states that intimacy becomes the central need at this stage of development. Coleman also notes that certain skills are necessary in this step to maintain the same-gender relationship in what is frequently a hostile societal environment. Given the newness of same-sex relationship dynamics, many first relationships do not last. These first-relationship failures present a dangerous obstacle as some individuals at this stage may revert to and remain with the self-concept of a sexually deviant object, unworthy of a sustained, committed relationship.

The fifth and final stage in Colman’s model, “Integration,” witnesses a synthesis of the homosexual person’s public and private selves. Individuals who attain this stage are able to perceive themselves as positive, fully capable members of society. The common developmental tasks of adulthood (i.e., middle and old age) still remain for these individuals. However, by possessing an integrated identity, many people who have

achieved this stage of development claim a higher level of confidence in confronting the tasks of adulthood over individuals who are still working on their identity development.

Both Cass (1984) and Lipkin (1999) speak to the “striking similarity” that exists among the themes of the 11 sexual-identity development models and most especially between the Cass, Troiden, and Coleman models. Lipkin states that “although they differ in some details, they [the Cass, Troiden, and Coleman models] have significant features in common: initial ambiguity, frequent questioning, disequilibrium, and information seeking” (p. 100). Due to the inherent similarity among the models, Lipkin (1999) proposes an integration of the theories into a “mega-model.” Lipkin’s mega-model is shown in Figure 1 and comprises the following five stages:

1. Pre-Sexuality (*Troiden 1*) – the preadolescent individual experiences nonsexual feelings of difference and marginality.
2. Identity Questioning (*Coleman 1; Cass 1, 2; Troiden 2*) – ambiguous, repressed, sexualized same-gender feelings and/or activities. Avoidance of stigmatized labels.
3. Coming Out (*Coleman 2, 3, 4; Cass 3, 4; Troiden 3*) – toleration then acceptance of identity through contact with gay/lesbian individuals and culture. Exploration of sexual possibilities and first erotic relationships. Careful selective self-disclosure outside gay/lesbian community.
4. Pride (*Coleman 5; Cass 5; Troiden 4*) – integration of sexuality into self. Capacity for love relationships. Wider self-disclosure and better stigma management.

5. Post-Sexuality (*Cass 6*) – a diminishment of centrality of homosexuality in self-concept and social relations. (pp. 103-104)

Concerns Regarding the Models

Both Troiden (1989) and Lipkin (1999) advise caution against applying the models too literally. As Lipkin points out, the models are “gross generalizations, ideal types into which it is not advisable to try to force-fit individual cases” (p. 104). The models do, however, provide a useful and common sequence of steps that many GLBQ people appear to traverse.

Also called into question is the linearity of the steps within each of the identity models. In response to this concern, Troiden (1989) asserts that the formation of a homosexual identity is not a step-by-step process, but rather likens itself to a “horizontal spiral like a spring lying on its side” (p. 47). Progression through the steps of each model often occurs in an oscillating, up-and-down fashion with each person transitioning through the steps of queer identity development along his or her own unique path. Regardless of the path, however, the stages are “cognitively irreversible” (Lipkin, 1999, p. 104). Once an individual masters the concepts required for a stage, it cannot be ‘unlearned’ (Lipkin, 1999).

Continuum of Pivotal Moments	Coleman's Five Stage Model (1982)	Cass' Six Stage Model (1984)	Troiden's Four Stage Model (1989)	Lipkin's Five Stage Model (1999)
Awareness of stigma	1) Pre-coming out	1) Identity confusion	1) Sensitization	1) Presexuality
Realization that 'I am different.'				
Sexualization of the sense of difference	2) Coming out	2) Identity comparison	2) Identity confusion	2) Identity questioning
Denial and resistance				
Realization			3) Identity tolerance	3) Identity assumption
Acceptance of sexual identity	3) Exploration	4) Identity acceptance		
Exploration of GLBT community		5) Identity pride	4) Commitment	
Opening up	4) First relationships			
Recognition of sexuality's place as a part of the whole person	5) Integration	6) Identity synthesis		5) Postsexuality

Figure 1. Models of Queer Identity Development

Source: Adapted from developmental models in *Understanding Homosexuality: Changing Schools*, by Arthur Lipkin. 1999. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Used with publisher's permission.

Summary

This literature review chapter began with an exploration of how today's current culture within higher education has come to pass. The second section in this chapter contained a discussion on the current culture in higher education toward GLBQ individuals. The third section presented information on student attrition and persistence research and was followed by a fourth section on intellectual development theory. The fifth section reviewed some of the most frequently cited psychosocial theories of identity development which led into a final section on the queer identity models that are available.

The information gleaned through this literature review informed this study in a number of ways. First, in order to properly comprehend the reasons why some students, whether heterosexual or not, choose to leave college, it is beneficial to possess an understanding of the culture within higher education, as well as the theories surrounding student attrition. This knowledge aided my ability to distinguish between GLBQ and non-GLBQ related reasons for attrition.

Second, the literature on intellectual and psychosocial development, as well as queer identity development theories increased my comprehension of the various stages that heterosexual and GLBQ individuals may complete during the course of a lifetime. Several parallels were found to exist between Erickson's fifth and sixth stages of identity development and the queer identity development models presented. The significance of an individual's family and his or her ability to establish a separate identity are both critical to the successful completion of identity formation (Erickson's fifth stage), as well as determining factors in an individual's subsequent propensity toward intimacy or isolation (Erickson's sixth stage).

The commonalities inherent among the various queer identity models presented (what Lipkin [1999] refers to as “Pivotal Moments”) also rely greatly on an individual’s relationship to his or her family, the ability to establish a separate identity, and the impact of that process on subsequent personal relationships. Drawing this connection between psychosocial and queer identity development models was helpful when I took into account the current culture within society and higher education toward GLBQ individuals. Additionally, I was also better able to discern where a participant was within his or her developmental processes and how prepared he or she may have been to deal with family concerns and discrimination. The next chapter outlines and explains the methodology utilized.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Life History as a Methodology

The research approach employed in this study is the life history methodology. In a life history, the researcher elicits written and/or oral narratives from an individual through which individuals describe and comment on their lives in whole or part. Through this narrative process, the researcher and reader attempt to understand how events and behaviors shaped the individual (Bertaux, 1981; Cole, 2001; Goodson, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Handel, 2000; Kouritzin, 2000; Labaree, 2006; Tierney, 2000).

The life history methodology is the most appropriate method of inquiry for this study because it not only effectively captures the lived experience of an individual, “it also produces identity” (Tierney, 2000, p. 545). The production of identity for each participant is the central challenge for me as the researcher, since my desire is to highlight and challenge the oppressive aspects of higher education that may serve to silence and marginalize some while privileging others. Tierney (2000) states that,

One certainly cannot wish away power. But the work of life history ought to try to understand the conditions in which people live and work and die, so that everyone engaged in the life history – researcher, storyteller, reader – has the possibility of reconfiguring his or her life. (p. 549)

A person's lived experience is not quantifiable and thus cannot be observed in isolation or removed from its social, educational, or familial context. The construction of a life history can, however, provide a deeper understanding of how participants were able to circumnavigate the inhospitable culture of higher education.

As stated in chapter I, my primary objective in this research was to identify the factors in a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer (GLBQ) person's life history which enabled him or her to persist through higher education and successfully obtain an undergraduate degree. To accomplish this task, personal and in-depth information related to each participant's homosexual identity formation process, familial background, and institutional culture will be obtained.

The information gleaned through this study is meant to provide new and deeper understandings of GLBQ students' lives and to raise questions regarding the accepted culture and common practices within higher education. It is my belief that a greater understanding of how GLBQ students individually think, act, and develop both socially and intellectually during their academic careers will prove beneficial for at least two groups.

First, the information obtained through this study may provide insights as to how postsecondary practitioners might approach modifications and improvements to policies and decision-making procedures that directly impact this marginalized group. Furthermore, practitioners who are so inclined may utilize this knowledge to challenge discriminatory structures within their own institutions and serve as advocates for GLBQ students.

Second, postsecondary students may use the knowledge obtained in this study as a means to better understand their own queer identity development process or that of a peer, friend, or relative. Additionally, as suggested above, the outcomes of this study may provide support for students as well who seek to challenge the “status quo” within their college or university.

A justification as to why the life-history methodology is the best means by which to obtain this information is provided in the following section.

Life History Research

Tierney (2000) describes a life history as “a culturally produced artifact in one light and an interpretive document in another. It might be defined by way of method (interviews and observations), theoretical vantage point (hermeneutics, phenomenology), or disciplinary perspective (psychology, anthropology, sociology)” (p. 539). As Tierney’s definition suggests, life history research is multifaceted and offers many potential benefits within the realm of qualitative research.

In order to better understand the fundamental nature of this inquiry method, it is helpful to consider what Cole (2001) states are the three defining purposes of life history research:

1. To ‘advance understanding about the complex interactions between individuals’ lives and the institutional and societal contexts in which they are lived.’ (p. 126)
2. To provide a voice to the experienced life of individuals, especially those voices that may be unheard, suppressed, or purposefully ignored.

3. To convey individuals' stories through their own words. In doing so, the reader is drawn into the interpretive process and 'invited to make meaning and to form judgments based on an interpretation of the text as it is viewed through their own realities.' (p. 126)

Additionally, Goodson (2001) states that life history research, when conducted in the appropriate manner, serves to disrupt the commonly held beliefs which are widely considered to be "the truth." Moreover, a "good" life history research study will require that its reader recognize, acknowledge, and confront subjective perceptions and negative discourses which serve to oppress. Kouritzin (2000) states that one potential benefit of using life histories in organizational research is the development of "contextual clarity." Due to the fact that life histories are contextualized and historically based, they enable the reader to interpret policy decisions in human terms, rather than being framed within econometrics or legal concerns.

Concerns Related to Life History Research

The five most common concerns voiced in relation to life history research have been identified by Hatch and Wisniewski (1995). It should be noted that, with regard to this specific study, some of the concerns provided below are not applicable.

The first concern surrounding life history research involves the researcher-participant relationship and the delineation of voices; put simply – will the participant feel as if his or her perspective is adequately conveyed through the life history once it is completed? This concern underscores not only the necessity for establishing trust between the participant and researcher, but also the importance of allowing participants to review and critique transcriptions.

The second concern identified by Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) is the ability of the researcher to establish a balance between an individual's story and his or her sociohistoric context. The types of questions that arise in regard to this concern are:

how is an individual's life impacted by their society and vice versa? and how was this person's life influenced by his/her society and vice versa? and how do we place the individual within his/her social context and demonstrate the powers and forces that shape her experience and also provide a rich description of his/her story, his/her shaping of his/her world? (p. 120)

The third most common concern associated with life history research is that there are no clearly defined criteria with which to make judgments regarding the quality of scholarship that was employed. Due to the nature of life histories, the traditionally held views on validity and reliability are not applicable (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Yvonne Lincoln, one of life history research's prominent scholars, states that the orthodox notions of validity, reliability, and objectivity "are simply not in the same universe [as life history research]" (Lincoln as cited in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 120).

The fourth concern identified by Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) is that the very nature of text introduces limitations to the ability of the researcher to fully represent a life as lived. This concern is due in part to the myriad nuances of lived experience and the fact that it is extremely difficult to capture the totality of an experience in prose.

The final concern identified by Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) is the one most commonly mentioned in life history literature. This concern is often referred to as the "crisis" or "criteria" of representation. The crux of this concern deals with the inherent

differences that exist between a lived life, a life as experienced, and a life story. Bruner (1984) offers a concise delineation of the three:

A life lived is what actually happens. A life as experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is.... A life told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context. (p. 7)

Because it is impossible for a researcher to share in a participant's lived life or lived experience, life historians access the participant's life through oral and/or written narrative. The subjectivity that inheres within any individual's retelling of a story and the external factors that often influence a story as told (i.e., the passage of time or loss of memory) serve as the foundation for the criteria of representation concern.

When conducting qualitative research, defining the locus of the researcher is critically important. As a life historian, I was obligated to construct accurate meanings from participants' comments obtained during interviews. My perspective, beliefs, and biases which have been formed through my past experiences (i.e., my "lens") are provided in the Assumptions section of chapter I. I endeavored to reduce the influence or effects of my lens through member-checking and peer-debriefing procedures (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Merriam, 2002) which are described later in this chapter.

Strengths of Life History Research

Rejecting orthodox notions of validity and reliability should not be perceived as a limitation of life history research, nor should the subjectivity that inheres within the methodology be perceived as a flaw in the design. Rather, these characteristics of life history add to its value as a tool through which to better understand the human condition.

“Life history and narrative approaches are person centered [and]...Far from a weakness, the voice of the person, the subject’s own account, represents a singular strength” (Ayers as cited in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 118). Life histories and oral narratives are an ancient means through which our species has facilitated a greater understanding of what it means to be human. Such narratives are found throughout history, sociology, folklore, and anthropology. Absent this subjective information, it would be impossible for a historian to know what it was like to live during a certain period of time or what an experience felt like to an observer/participant.

Participants

This study involved 6 postsecondary students enrolled in a 4-year institution in the United States’ Midwest. Bertaux (1981) states that multiple life histories “taken from the same set of sociostructural relations support each other and make up, all together, a strong body of evidence” (p. 187).

I obtained a purposeful sample of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer (GLBQ) individuals who had successfully completed a majority of their undergraduate coursework and were on target to complete their undergraduate degree within the 2008-2009 academic year. I sought participants who met two criteria; the first criterion was that they self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer. Transgendered individuals were excluded from the study because their concerns deal more with gender identity rather than sexual identity. The second criterion was that the participant was between 19 and 26 years of age. The decision to limit participants’ age was based upon the fact that this range represents the majority of today’s student enrollment within higher education.

The final sample consisted of 3 male and 3 female college students. These individuals were identified through the university's GLBQ student office director as well as through "snowball sampling" (Merriam, 2002). A life history of each participant is provided in chapter IV.

Setting

As mentioned above, participants were solicited from a public research university located in the Midwest. This institution possessed a student body over 50,000 on its central campus and an additional 8,000 students on its regional campuses. Information regarding the interview settings is provided in the next section.

Data Collection and Informed Consent

In this type of research, the protection of human subjects is of paramount importance. Acting within the best interests of the participants and to ensure their safety, all participants in the study were required to complete certain forms and procedures designed by the researcher, including a consent form that clearly delineates the (1) nature and goals of the research, (2) requirements for participation, (3) participant's rights to discontinue the research at any time, and (4) time frame involved in the study. This study adhered to the guidelines and policies put forth by the Committees for the Protection of Human Subjects at each of the participating institutions. The consent form utilized in this research study can be found in Appendix A.

I obtained the appropriate paperwork and application requirements from the public institution and requested permission to conduct this study. An approval letter was received from the institution before contact was made with anyone on campus.

From the onset of the study, I made contact with the director of the GLBQ student support office. It was believed that this individual might best serve as the “gatekeeper” through which to negotiate access to prospective participants and campus resources (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing Liao, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Given the crucial part that this individual would play in the research, great care was taken to build trust through a series of communications via phone, e-mail, and face-to-face meetings. During our conversations, I not only explained the purpose and intent of my research, but I also provided personal information related to my background and motivation to do the study. Over time, the director’s willingness to provide access to the students and his or her assistance in the removal of barriers led me to believe that trust was becoming established.

Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Futing Liao (2004) warn that “if trust is only generated with high-level gatekeepers and not with lower-level [participants] who are included in the study, the mode of securing access is likely to significantly bias the research results” (p. 3). As such, even greater care was taken to establish trust between myself and each of the participants. The initial establishment of this trust was accomplished through a number of casual meetings between the participants and me both before the first official interview and after.

The first time I met with each participant, a coffee shop or restaurant was used as the venue. During our initial meeting, I told each participant a synopsis of my own life-history. In telling my own story, I endeavored to be as open as possible about my own personal failures and feelings while in college. I also explained to each participant why I felt strongly that the research needed to be done and how his or her own story would

most certainly add to the knowledge gained. Every time I met with a participant, I stressed that the data obtained in the study were his or hers and that he or she had control over how the story was told. I proved this fact to the participants by sending transcripts and notes from each interview to them as soon as they became available and asked for any comments, corrections, or concerns they had.

Reciprocity, (Oakley, 1981) which occurs when the researcher shares personal information with the participant can be viewed as ethically questionable (Lather, 1986). However, as Goodson and Sikes (2001) point out, “it can at the same time be presented as yet another means of involving and collaborating with informants” (p. 94). Bertaux (1981) states that reciprocity leads to data “which becomes mutually shared knowledge, rooted in the intersubjectivity of the interaction” (p. 20). As explained earlier in the strengths of the life history methodology, subjectivity is required in order for the researcher to adequately understand the experiences of a participant.

Hammersley (1992) explains that “self-disclosure [when used as a research strategy] is the presentation of those aspects of one’s self and life that provide a bridge for building relationships with participants, and the suppression of those which constitute a possible barrier” (p. 43). The “building of a bridge” was of the utmost importance during my interviews with the participants and one could argue it was easier to talk with someone who has had similar feelings or experiences. Due to the delicate (sexual) nature of portions of the data, I opted to self-disclose segments of my own Queer identity formation and family history when it was deemed necessary and acceptable.

An additional component of reciprocity involved a discussion of what the participant hoped to gain from participating in the research. As the researcher, I had

already identified the likely benefits that might result; however, it was equally as important for the participants to identify their own goals. Conversations surrounding this aspect of the study typically took place before the first interview. Some of the participants indicated that they hoped to gain a better understanding of how their families influenced their lives, while others expressed a desire to help in the GLBQ “cause” in any way they could.

The study consisted of no less than three separate interviews conducted over a 1 to 3 month period with each participant. Interviews were conducted in various locations which were determined by the participants. Varying the venue for the interviews aided in the obtainment of different (or sensitive) types of information as the participants felt more comfortable in locations they chose. Additionally, flexibility regarding the interview settings also resulted in greater access to other forms of pertinent information such as photographs, memorabilia, and personal documents. Four of the 6 participants chose to conduct the interviews in their apartments. This afforded me the opportunity to not only see where and how these individuals lived, but also what they deemed valuable through furnishings, artwork, and family photos. The 2 remaining participants elected to have their interviews completed in a private office that I rented near their university’s campus.

An audio recording of each interview session was created. I stressed to all participants that they possessed unlimited access to their respective transcripts throughout the life history study. This was done for two reasons: first, I wanted to assert that each participant maintained authority over his or her texts and second, providing this

information to the participants aided in the clarification and confirmation of valid data (Cole, 2001).

Research Procedures

This research study was conducted during the 2008-2009 academic year. Multiple, one-on-one interviews, spaced over a period of time, are the most common technique used to gather life history data (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Labaree, 2006). However, Cole (2001) cautions that “there is no protocol, no neatly defined way of proceeding, no template, no cookbook for sound, innovative life history research” (p. 71). As such, participants in this study were interviewed *at least* three times during the course of their final year as an undergraduate student. Each of the interview sessions consisted of between 1 and 3 hours.

The first one-on-one interview served two purposes. The first purpose was to build upon the relationship I had established with each participant. When conducting life history research, it is imperative that both researcher and participant understand the nature of the relationship as well as what is expected (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). My first “formal” interaction with each participant established a tone for our subsequent interviews. I asked each participant if the recording device bothered him or her and if so, we talked about where I might place the device to increase his or her level of comfort. By establishing a common ground and level of comfort with each participant, I endeavored to facilitate his or her expression of personal information and past experiences. Cole (2001) asserts that, in life history research, “intimacy and authenticity in relationship are foundational to research quality and to knowledge production, which is what research is

about” (p. 27). Tierney’s (1993) contention that researchers must fully engage with their participants echoes this sentiment.

Another purpose of the first interview was to obtain general background information related to the participant’s family, education, and sexuality. The interview protocols for each session are provided in Appendix B. Initially, it was my intent to have each participant compose a written, personal narrative that outlined his or her sexual identity development; in other words, participants were asked to create their own coming out story from the beginning to the present day. However, it became clear after talking with the first two participants that this expectation was not reasonable considering the academic workload that many of the participants carried. Thus, I modified my original request and simply asked the remaining participants to create “some sort” of description that summarized their coming out story. The results of this request included brief, written narratives, outlines, simple notes, and “mental lists.”

The second interview took place following a preliminary analysis of the first interview’s transcripts. The first order of business during the second session was to clarify my synopsis of the participant’s background information. Once the background information was verified, each participant was asked to convey and expand upon his or her own personal coming out story. In addition to their coming out stories, participants were asked to reflect upon their transition into higher education; specifically, what steps did they take during their college search and selection process. Participants were then asked to identify what effects, if any, their sexual orientation may have had on their college choice and what experiences they may have had during their undergraduate career

as a result of being a GLBQ person on campus. Finally, each participant was asked to speculate upon what kept him or her in school.

The third and final interview was used to confirm the data collected and to clarify my perceptions of each participant's undergraduate experience. The final interview session also afforded the participant an opportunity to set the interview's agenda and to supply additional information where he or she felt it necessary.

Following Cole's (2001) suggestion, a significant portion of time toward the end of each interview was devoted to joint reflection on the research process as well as an explanation of what the next steps within the study would be. At the conclusion of every interview, I extended an offer to each participant to meet again if he or she thought of additional information or wanted to clarify something further.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was ensured by assigning a pseudonym to each participant at the start of the research study. These pseudonyms were used on data transcripts, external communications, and during coding procedures. Only I, as the researcher, knew the actual name of each participant. In addition, all data and coding materials were kept in a securely locked environment so as to guarantee the privacy of individual participants.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) description of naturalistic inquiry and its deviation from positivistic research elucidate the fundamental difference between quantitative and qualitative research. At their core, the two paradigms differ in their views on the nature of reality. A researcher functioning within the positivistic paradigm looks upon reality as a single, tangible and quantifiable unit. Results obtained within a positivistic paradigm are

believed to be independent of time and context and generalizable beyond the original study given a comparable population and context.

Research performed within the naturalist paradigm is predicated upon the belief that no singular reality exists, rather multiple realities are constructed and may only be studied holistically. Given this fact, the possibility of generalization beyond an original study is greatly diminished. As Lincoln and Guba explain, “inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge (each inquiry raises more questions than it answers) to that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes although some level of understanding can be achieved” (1985, p. 37).

Denzin (1994) asserts that the tools commonly utilized to gauge the value of quantitative research are simply inapplicable to qualitative inquiry. Instead, Denzin suggests the concept of trustworthiness when assessing the value of qualitative research. Trustworthiness has been associated with the following: credibility, dependability or reliability, adequacy, and confirmability (Denzin, 1989, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998, 2002).

Credibility

The credibility of qualitative research is based largely upon the assumptions of the researcher and the methods used within the study’s design (Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide five techniques that can be used to increase the credibility of a qualitative study; these are:

1. *Activities to increase the probability that credible findings will be produced* such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation of data.

2. *Peer debriefing* in which the researcher opens himself or herself and the research to scrutiny and/or critique by a professional colleague.
3. *Negative case analysis* or refining the working hypothesis as new information is made available.
4. *Referential adequacy* achieved through the comparison of results against archived, raw data.
5. *Member checking* during which participants are asked to review and critique the researcher's findings and theories.

Credibility of the transcribed data, interpretations made, and life histories created was established through member-checking with the participants and peer-debriefing with colleagues who are familiar with this study's topic.

Dependability or Reliability

The dependability or reliability of a qualitative research study is founded upon the researcher's ability to establish that the research design possesses integrity (Denzin, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The dependability of a qualitative study is typically accomplished through peer debriefing with other colleagues within the field of interest who judge the soundness of the researcher's design and processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another strategy that increases the dependability or reliability of a qualitative study is the triangulation of data. Merriam (2002) explains that triangulation involves the collection of data "through a combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis" (p. 25). Additionally, the utilization of multiple researchers also increases the dependability of the study's results.

The use of an audit trail further increases the dependability or reliability of a qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that “an inquiry audit cannot be conducted without a residue of records stemming from the inquiry, just as a fiscal audit cannot be conducted without a residue of records from the business transactions involved” (p. 319). The audit trail of a qualitative study provides a description of the data collection procedures, coding and categorical analysis, and the various methodological decisions that were made (Denzin, 1998; Merriam, 2002). This information may be recorded in the researcher’s journal or as a series of memos during the study.

To increase the study’s level of dependability or reliability, I maintained extensive notes in my researcher journal. The information contained in this book included my own thoughts and reflections following each participant interview, random notes related to the study, as well as a record of my interactions with participants and key individuals. Additionally, I remained in close contact with several individuals familiar with this study’s field of interest and spoke with them at great length about my thoughts and the themes I identified.

Adequacy

The notion of adequacy involves the amount of data collected by the researcher and whether that amount is sufficient for the researcher to have arrived at the study’s findings (Denzin, 1994). *Saturation* is a term commonly used to denote that the researcher has spent an adequate time collecting data and that further data collection activities would most likely fail to provide new insights (Merriam, 2002).

Adequacy was assured in this study through multiple interactions between the participants and me. These interactions included informal meetings, one-on-one

interviews, telephone conversations, and e-mails. Adequacy was further enhanced through an iterative data analysis process wherein I reviewed the transcribed data numerous times until I was no longer able to identify additional common themes among the participants' stories.

Generalizability and Transferability

Positivistic scholars argue that there is little value inherent in the knowledge of the particular and that, absent the power of generalization, such research is futile. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refute this viewpoint and assert that, on the topic of transferability, things need not be so black-and-white; alternative interpretations of generalizability and transferability exist for qualitative research results.

Yin (2008) states that “a fatal flaw in doing [qualitative] case studies is to conceive of statistical generalization as the method of generalizing the results of the case study” (p. 38). The alternative to statistical generalization that Yin proposes is *analytic* generalization, wherein the results of a qualitative case study are compared to a previously developed theory. According to Yin, when two or more cases support the same theory, a researcher may claim replication, further substantiating the argument in favor of transferability.

Merriam (1998) advocates the use of thick, rich descriptions in qualitative research and to provide “enough descriptions so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (p. 211). To this end, whenever possible, I provide the reader with direct quotes from the participants containing “thick, rich descriptions” of their respective stories.

Ethics

According to Merriam (2002) “a ‘good’ qualitative study is one that has been conducted in an ethical manner [and] to a large extent, the validity and reliability of a study depend upon the ethics of the researcher” (p. 29). Most often, ethical issues arise during the data collection process and the reporting of results and while a researcher may be cognizant of ethical guidelines, “the burden of producing a study that has been conducted and disseminated in an ethical manner lies with the individual investigator” (Merriam, 2002, p. 30).

To ensure that the data obtained in this study were ethical, each participant was provided with copies of his or her interview transcripts and he or she was asked to identify discrepancies or areas of concern. Additionally, each life history presented in chapter IV was reviewed and approved by its respective participant.

Data Analysis

The digital audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by an individual outside the University and external to the study participants. The interview data were also double-checked for accuracy by the researcher. Grounded theory analysis of the qualitative data was accomplished through the stages of open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Schumacher and McMillan (2001) explain that “qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing the data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among the categories” (p. 479). A detailed account of the coding and thematic analysis process is supplied in chapter V.

Summary

This qualitative study utilized a life history methodology to explore the past experiences of GLBQ postsecondary students who attend and are on track to graduate from a public research university in the Midwest. Each participant completed a series of in-depth interviews which served as the primary source of data collection. A number of steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Additionally, concerns related to the trustworthiness of the research were presented and addressed. A life history for each of the 6 participants is provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANTS' LIFE HISTORIES

Introduction

This chapter presents the life histories of 6 GLBQ postsecondary students currently enrolled in a Midwestern public research university. In order to construct these life histories, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. What follows is a life history for each participant composed from participants' interview transcripts. In each case, a pseudonym has been used to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, any specific, identifying information has been omitted.

To the reader, I offer a caveat regarding the “tone” or “style” utilized in this chapter. In the telling of a life history, a certain amount of “overlap” or confusion regarding the boundaries of researcher and participant may occur. Handel (2000) offers the following explanation regarding this overlap:

As a researcher (1) I try to recognize implicit meanings and make them explicit; and (2) I reframe both implicit and explicit meaning by considering them in terms of categories and questions that are important for efforts to arrive at understandings of the life course and human development. I try to understand the meanings by which [a participant] lives his [or her] life but I am likely to express them in ways that he cannot because of the background that I bring to the task and the questions I am addressing. (p. 101)

Consequently, there may be times when the reader experiences confusion regarding where, exactly, the participant “ends” and the researcher “begins.” Even though I endeavored to delineate the information presented as much as possible, there may still be sections in which the prose does not “flow” as smoothly.

Donna

The first participant of the study was Donna, a 21-year-old female majoring in political science. Donna was born in the northern part of the state to a middle-class family, has one older brother, and lived the majority of her life in a suburb. “Sporty dyke,” the term Donna used to describe herself, captures her obvious aesthetic features and manner of dress. Donna has blond hair, is height and weight proportionate, and states that she is most comfortable in casual clothing such as t-shirts, jeans, and shorts.

Upon our first meeting, my initial impression of Donna was that, while she aesthetically fit within the “young, female college student” stereotype, the young woman also possessed a great amount of strength and determination. Since Donna was the first participant I solicited for the study, our first and second interview sessions were somewhat rigid. Part of the reason for the rigidity was my own level of comfort with the interview protocols – I was learning about my role as a life historian and the pertinence of my questions as much as I was learning about Donna’s past.

Donna’s mother and father were divorced when she was very young and both have since remarried. Donna’s father works as an engineer but possesses no college degree. She described her relationship with her biological father as “strange” and stated that she believes that they began growing apart shortly after he remarried. When Donna

was younger, however, her father did play an active role in many of her sports related endeavors as a coach or supporter from the sidelines.

Donna was raised primarily by her mother who works in the criminal justice field. She also remarried, when Donna was 9 years old. According to Donna, her mother has a “big personality” and typically likes to be the center of attention. While possessing some very caring and giving traits, Donna stated that her mother is also quick to anger – displaying a bad temper when provoked or under the influence of alcohol. Donna’s closest family relationship is with her mother and she believes that their personalities are very similar. Donna attributed much of her work ethic to her mother, who often worked two jobs to support the family.

Donna’s stepfather has, in many ways, been more of a dad to her in recent years than her biological father. Donna’s stepfather is a blue-collar worker and is described as “pretty loud” and a “party animal kind of guy.” Donna loves her stepfather a lot and genuinely feels that he considers her one of his own daughters; they are very close. Growing up, Donna’s biological father was not very financially supportive and thus, she spent a majority of her time living with her mother and stepfather whom she calls “Dad” in front of her friends.

Donna’s brother is a few years older and has just completed his master’s degree at an alternate university within the state. Donna perceives her brother’s personality to be very similar to her biological father’s which may be why he moved out of her mother’s house when he was 13 to live with his father. Consequently, Donna has been raised as an only child for the latter-half of her life. Donna described her brother as selfish and self

absorbed, a hard worker who is more interested in material possessions and monetary gains than in personal relationships or connections. Donna often talks via phone with her brother and said that she tries to see him periodically.

The family environment that Donna was raised in was more often than not turbulent. Donna matter-of-factly described her mother as an “alcoholic” in our first interview together and through subsequent conversations it became apparent that her mother’s alcoholism has had a significant impact on her life. Donna stated that her mother and stepfather fought a lot and that most of the fights were a result of their “mutual partying” or her mother’s excessive drinking. Growing up, Donna explained that “it was really hard when I was a kid. I mean, I would go to bed alone sometimes at night. I always worried about them driving home drunk and stuff like that. It was scary and they’d get into arguments.”

In addition to the late nights and frequent fighting, Donna’s mother was also an “angry drunk.” Donna remembered being called “ungrateful” and other derogatory terms many times growing up. Given her hostile home environment, Donna never wanted to have friends over to her house and often felt embarrassed by her mother. One positive result of this unfortunate situation is that Donna possesses an increased sense of caution toward alcohol and will often play the role of designated driver for her friends.

Donna freely admitted during our first interview session that she is not a person prone to expressing emotion. However, during the latter half of our second interview, I took note of Donna’s body language when she spoke of her mother’s alcoholism. As we discussed her mother’s drinking, Donna pulled her legs up off the ground and squeezed

her knees to her chest. This posture remained until the topic of discussion changed. When we stopped talking about her mother's drinking, Donna's body visibly relaxed; her legs were released and her shoulders lowered slightly.

Because of her body language during our second interview, I asked Donna if we might discuss her mother's alcoholism a little more during our third meeting and she agreed. The conversation that took place during our last "formal" interview proved to be our most emotional exchange. While reflecting back upon the experiences she had due to her mother's drinking, Donna's body language became tense again and eventually she began to cry (something she states rarely happens).

The extent of Donna's pain and its relation to her mother's drinking became obvious to me as I listened to her recollection of seeing her mother arrested for drunk driving, the embarrassment of not wanting to bring her friends home for fear of them seeing her mother drunk, and the fear that her mother and/or stepfather might be hurt or killed while driving home from the bars.

Donna's maternal grandparents have also played a significant role in her life. When she was younger, her grandparents often took care of Donna in her mother's absence. Donna stated that a series of mini-strokes has changed the relationship she has with her grandmother who is no longer mentally and physically capable of taking care of herself. Donna's relationship with her grandfather, however, is still very strong; she clearly loves him, thinks he is "awesome," and tries to call him at least once a week.

From her description, Donna's childhood and adolescent years were fairly typical for a younger White female in a Midwestern suburb. Donna's primary interest growing

up was sports; in middle and high school she played softball, soccer, basketball, and volleyball. Theatre also played a significant role in Donna's high school years. When asked to identify the significant people in her past, Donna included her theatre/drama teacher along with her mother and grandparents.

Donna's high school theatre teacher showed a great amount of support during hard times and took a true interest in the lives of her students. Most of Donna's closest friends and greatest memories were made in her theatre classes. This positive theatre experience prompted Donna to take a number of public speaking classes in high school, a choice that has proven fruitful given her political science interests.

Donna's mother always stressed the importance of money and encouraged Donna to work at a job since she was 9 years old (a paper route). Donna's mother explained that if she wanted certain material items, she was going to have to work for them. In hindsight, Donna is grateful that her mother did this because it gave her a better appreciation for managing her assets, something very few of her peers seem able to do effectively.

Donna does not subscribe to any one organized religion and states that "God is not that big of a thing" in her life right now. She does not prescribe to any particular religious dogma, but rather conducts her life through a series of moral codes; she considers herself Agnostic. She enjoys the study of different religions, but still finds it hard to believe in "the idea of God."

Donna's schooling and education were very important growing up. She explained that "Mom wanted me to go to the best college I could, so it was always very important

to do well in school.” From her statement and other conversations during our interviews, it was evident that Donna’s parents always expected her to get good grades and attend college.

Donna said that she has a “Type-A” personality: very organized, determined, and logical. Her preference is to take charge of situations and to function as the leader on projects and in groups. She likes to set goals for herself and her life and works hard to accomplish those goals.

Donna stated that her no-nonsense, “Get Over It” approach to life can make her, at times, appear cold and that she has been told on more than one occasion by friends that she lacks emotion. Donna said that she does not perceive showing emotions as a weakness; however, she definitely prefers to control what is seen by those around her.

What transpired between Donna and me during the third interview session in which she cried about her mother’s alcoholism and subsequent conversations greatly impacted my perception of her. Donna is strong but not void of emotion, she chooses to control her feelings. It is my suspicion that this choice, whether conscious or not, may be a natural defense mechanism against the pain she has experienced in her life.

Donna identifies herself as a lesbian, but also sometimes uses the term “gay” to describe herself when in “mixed company” (i.e., when she is around individuals who may not understand the differences that exist between the terms “gay” and “lesbian”). She perceives gay and lesbian as interchangeable terms, but views lesbian as more of a label and gay as more of a sexual identity. Donna stated that she is not apt to question herself and that, consequently, she never experienced an identity crisis surrounding her sexuality.

The realization and acceptance of her homosexuality occurred during her senior year in high school and has benefited Donna's overall identity as she explains, "I'm a little more confident in myself now that I've kind of established who I am."

Donna stated that she never dated seriously in high school, but remembered making out with another girl during her senior year. In hindsight, Donna has always felt an attraction toward other females but believes that her coming out process actually started around the age of 17. At first, Donna was very secretive about her sexuality and explains that "I was secretive about stuff 'cause I didn't - I guess I was trying to figure it all out and then, like, I didn't want to tell my parents at first 'cause I didn't know how they would react." Donna also explained that she never really had anyone to talk to or resources about coming out until she entered college. It was during her freshman year that Donna connected with another lesbian who helped her through the initial stages of coming out.

The first people that Donna revealed her homosexuality to were close friends – all of whom were very accepting. Donna came out to her mother in February of her freshman year and explains that her mother's initial reaction was not positive: "Well, she kind of flipped out badly into the whole like 'You're going to hell' sort of thing." Donna's mother personalized Donna's disclosure of being homosexual and asked "How could you do this to me?" and "Why would you tell me this?" Her mother instructed her not to tell anyone else in the family. Due to her mother's negative reaction, Donna feared that others would react similarly.

Fortunately, Donna's mother approached her the following day and apologized for her negative reaction and told Donna that she loved her. Since that time, Donna's mother has told her stepfather and brother about her being a lesbian. Donna's stepfather has not seemed to care and will casually joke with her about other "pretty ladies." A similar reaction was received from Donna's brother. The only individuals in Donna's immediate family who are not aware of her homosexuality are her grandparents. This is a choice that Donna, herself, has made because her grandfather, being a devout Lutheran, would probably not react well to her announcement. Donna knows in her heart that her grandfather is very proud of her and cherishes the close relationship she has with him. She does not feel that her homosexuality is something that needs to be discussed with them, "I don't really care, 'cause it's not like he'd ever change his mind, so I just don't worry about it."

At 21 years of age, Donna has been 'out' for a little over 3 years and believes that she has moved past the point of seeing herself as just a "gay female." Rather, Donna's sexuality is just one component of her total composition. She reported going to the local gay bars in her area during her coming out process, but has since lessened the amount of time she spends in those places. Donna explained that "I feel like I've never been, like, everything, totally gay. I mean, I can see that some of my friends were like that, but not me." Donna stated that she is more interested in gay issues from a political perspective and would rather focus her energies toward making things better for gays and lesbians politically instead of "partying" all the time.

This political component of Donna's personality has led her to become active in her campus' local ACLU chapter, GLBQ student programming board, and speakers bureau. Donna stated that, other than in some of her extracurricular activities, being a lesbian has had very little impact on her educational journey. When Donna considered where she wanted to attend college, being a lesbian never played a part in the equation. As a senior now, Donna believes that most people her age are more accepting of gays and lesbians; one possible reason for this increased acceptance is that more individuals her age feel comfortable expressing their non-heterosexuality. Donna stated that "there's actually more people – I've heard of more people in my high school coming out."

Following graduation in the next few months, Donna plans to attend law school and would like to secure a career that deals with constitutional law.

Tony

The first male student identified for this study was Tony, a 22-year-old majoring in political science. Tony was born in the northern part of the state to a middle-class family of Hispanic decent. Tony's parents were married for 32 years until his father's death in 2007. He has two siblings – an older brother and sister.

Tony's style of dress is fashionable and his mannerisms are expressive, but neither is overly exuberant. During our conversations and interviews, it became obvious to me that Tony was comfortable with himself as a person and also with what society would stereotypically refer to as his "feminine" side. Tony is not effeminate; rather, his communication style is a balanced blend of stereotypically "feminine" and "masculine" traits.

Tony's father was a blue-collar worker and Tony attributes much of his work ethic to watching how hard his father worked over the years in order to provide a better life for his children. Tony had a very close relationship with his father until he passed away. Tony described his father affectionately as an "extremely loving, caring, and dedicated family man who enjoyed life and loved to laugh." His father's favorite vacation spot was sitting at home, spending time with his family. Tony suggested that he is much like his father; he has an infectious and booming laugh.

Tony's mother is a daycare worker and is very similar to his father in her love of life, orientation toward the family and propensity to laugh. Tony's mother, however, was the less lenient of the two parents and most often fulfilled the role of disciplinarian. Tony said, "Mom was the one that you never wanted to make angry. Yeah, my dad was definitely the more lenient one when it came to punishments. Mom was very easy to ground, to yell at you and scold you." Regardless of her strict hand growing up, Tony feels closest to his mother and calls her at least once per day simply to "check in." Often, these conversations last no longer than a few minutes, but Tony considers them an integral part of his daily routine and "therapeutic" in many ways.

Tony's parents knew each other from a young age, both sets of Tony's grandparents were close friends, and thus his mother and father grew up together. Eventually, Tony's mother and father became high school sweethearts and were married soon after graduation. When I asked Tony to describe his parents' marriage, a grin stretched across his face and he responded that they were always "disgusting saps around

each other.” From his stories, it was clear that his parents’ marriage was nearly perfect – at least from the children’s perspectives.

Both verbal and physical affection are shown in Tony’s family and he refers to them as definite “huggers and kissers.” His parents were also extremely affectionate with each other in front of the children. While in no way inappropriate, Tony always knew that his parents’ love life was “quite healthy.” More evidence of their loving relationship was provided through a photo that Tony kept in his apartment – it is of his parents kissing. Problems did occur, of course, as Tony explained, “they would argue about little things, but you know, at the end of the day it was clear that they were in things together.”

Family traditions are extremely important to Tony and his family. He described his father as a “big tradition person” and felt that his parents never really wanted to change things. Attendance at family holidays and gatherings was also very important. Tony stated “if somebody wasn’t there, it was kind of a big deal just because we all wanted to be together at that time. Most weekends are holidays for us because we’re always getting together anyway.” Since both sets of grandparents had children who eventually married someone in the other family (Tony’s father’s brother married his mother’s sister), the immediate family is quite large and family dinners typically involved 30 to 40 people.

Tony credits his parents for many of his good qualities and considers them to be the most influential people in his life. Whenever Tony spoke of his parents, I frequently detected a sense of pride and affection. Tony explained, “watching them be hard workers

kind of shaped my perspective on, you know, working hard to get what I want out of life. Hopefully one day I can take care of them the way they have taken care of me.”

Tony considers himself “lucky” and says that he has felt safe the majority of his life. Tony explained “I had a wonderful set of parents that loved me, looked after me, and that loved each other and you know – no matter what happened, stuck things out and to the end, still loved each other.”

As mentioned earlier, Tony has two siblings, the oldest of which is his sister who is 10 years older than he. Tony’s sister is an elementary school teacher and is his closest sibling. Growing up, Tony said that “she and I just always had a really close relationship. We have just always been able to figure each other out.” Part of the reason for this could be that Tony’s personality is similar to his sister’s; both are strong extroverts.

Tony’s relationship with his brother who is 5 years older than he was not very good while they were growing up; however, their relationship has gotten better within the past few years. As children, Tony and his sister would always play together, but his brother is extremely introverted and was more apt to keep to himself. Tony’s brother works in a blue-collar field and has moved back into the parents’ house to help their mother since Tony’s father passed away.

Tony’s family is Catholic and Tony considers himself a Catholic. When I asked if his being gay has had an effect on his religious views, he replied “I am Catholic still, I never really got rid of it. I’m very comfortable being Catholic and I’ll probably keep the tradition going when I have my own family.” Tony also indicated that his Catholicism has gotten more important to him as he matures, “as I get older I find that it’s more

important to me.” Consequently, Tony has begun looking for a Catholic church in his area that is accepting of GLBQ people.

Throughout Tony’s childhood, he has always felt more comfortable with and related better to females. Tony said that one result of this tendency is that the majority of his friends, even now, are females. Tony participated in many common high school activities like choir and student clubs. He also played tennis during much of his high school tenure.

Tony’s courses and grades have always been extremely important to his parents who set high educational expectations for all their children. Tony explained that, “college was never a question as far as whether or not I was gonna go. It was ‘You’re going – period.’” The same expectations regarding college were communicated to his brother and sister as well. Tony’s sister does possess a college degree, but his brother quit after his first year and never completed a degree.

Tony said that his parents were “significantly” more strict with Tony than they were with his siblings. Part of the reason for this may have been that Tony’s brother began drinking at an early age and Tony suggested that his parents may have feared that he would make a similar poor choice. Another possible reason Tony attributes to this disparity is that he was his parents’ “last baby” – the youngest and so they were more protective of him. This frustrated Tony because he never participated in underage drinking and was rarely in trouble.

Tony identifies himself as gay and said that queer “confuses him because there is really no set definition.” He considers himself to be past his “extreme gay” phase, which

he says only lasted for a short time. Tony stated that, now, he feels “more comfortable in his own skin.” Tony explained, “I think there are more facets to my personality and myself than just being a gay man, so, it’s not like a driving force that I stand behind.”

Tony had to come out to his parents three times, twice for his mother and once for his father. The first time occurred when Tony was 14 years old; he wrote a letter to his mother and left the house to take a walk. When Tony returned, he did not get the reception or reaction he expected from his mother. Tony recalled that the exchange was “painful” and his mother said, “Who put you up to this? You’re too young to know what you want. And what about HIV and AIDS?” This reaction closed Tony off emotionally from his mother for a period of nearly 6 months.

The second coming out experience with his mother occurred a year later when she found a number of gay-related Web sites in the history files on the family’s personal computer. Tony smiled as he recounted that his mother approached him with the history records and asked “What are these?” Tony replied that he tried to tell her a year earlier about his non-heterosexuality, but that she would not listen. Tony explained to his mother “It’s not a phase, mom. And it’s not going anywhere, so” Following this conversation, things between Tony and his mother gradually got better as she grew to understand and accept his homosexuality. Tony happily reports that, now, his mother and he talk about guys and sex openly – their relationship has gotten closer.

Tony wanted his mother to tell his father, but she refused and so Tony waited an additional year before coming out to his father. On the day of Tony’s 16th birthday, his parents took him out for a nice dinner and stopped at a department store to look around.

Tony knew that he wanted to tell his father, but he was extremely nervous. Tony laughed and said sarcastically that his mother helped him by saying “Hey! Your son wants to tell you something” to Tony’s father and then walked away. Tony is able to laugh about it now, but he stated that, at the time, he was shocked – so shocked that he just blurted things out in the middle of the store. Tony’s father began to cry and simply asked, “What do you want me to say?” Tony replied that he wanted to hear that his father still loved him, and his dad said “Yes, I love you.” Tony smiled as he told me this story.

Following that initial exchange, Tony’s mother then became a resource for his father on topics related to gays and lesbians as well as the coming out process (since she had learned about Tony earlier). Today, Tony believes that his family is completely fine with him being gay and that the only concerns they originally had were not related to religion or accepting him, but rather that society might treat him poorly. Tony said that it was not a reaction of “Oh my God, you’re going to hell,” but rather “Oh my God, how are you going to be treated by society?”

Tony came out to his siblings shortly thereafter; to his sister when he was 17 and to his brother at age 18. His sister’s response was exactly as Tony expected it to be – “she was like, ‘why did you wait so long to tell me?’” Tony waited the longest to tell his brother due to the homophobic comments that Tony heard him use over the years. Tony explained, “I remember when Matthew Shepard died, he made some derogatory comment about him and I was like ‘Well, shit – I can’t tell him’.” But when Tony finally decided to tell his brother, he was shocked to learn that his brother already knew to some extent and that he was accepting of Tony’s sexuality. The relationship between Tony and his

brother has since gotten much better. Tony said that his brother's attitude toward the "whole gay thing" now is "If anyone ever hurts you, I'll kill them." His brother is very protective and the two can now trade jokes with each other that include gay content.

Tony now feels comfortable bringing whomever he may be dating at the time home with him to meet the family. Tony stated that he felt lucky in that he has not lost anyone, friend or relative, as a result of coming out. When I asked Tony to identify where he resides on the various models of homosexual identity, he stated that he feels "more normalized" than anything else; being gay is just one component of a much larger whole. Tony wants to have a husband and children at some point in the future and hopes that his relationship mirrors that of his parents.

When asked to reflect back upon his college choice process, Tony stated that being gay had nothing to do with his decision. In fact, Tony had not even seen the University's campus until his first day of classes. The desire to connect with other gay students and GLBQ groups on campus did not appear until Tony was in his sophomore year of college. Since that time, Tony has become very active in a number of GLBQ organizations on and off campus.

Tony has had thoughts of dropping out during his time in college, mostly around the time of his father's passing. Tony explained that, "I didn't know if it was the right time, 'cause I had a lot of pressure from my family to come back to school immediately and so I did and I don't regret that decision." When Tony decided that it was time to return to campus, he found himself behind in his studies and Tony stated that it took a great amount of effort on his part to complete the numerous late assignments.

Tony obtained assistance through the student advocacy center on campus and he stated that with the center's help and his strong work ethic and sense of determination, he is "back on track" to complete his degree within the next few months. Tony's plans are to apply for graduate school and pursue a career in Student Services following his graduation.

Kathy

The second female to join the study was Kathy, a White, 21-year-old who was born in the northern part of the state and is a pre-med major. Kathy grew up in a middle-class family situated in a typical suburban city. The word "flowery" comes to mind if I were asked to describe Kathy's aesthetic appearance because she exuded a happy and jubilant personality. Kathy's genuine nature was clearly communicated to me during the first 15 minutes of our initial meeting.

Kathy's parents are still married and she has one sibling, a sister who has recently completed college. Kathy's father is a blue-collar worker and his relationship with the family is rather strained. According to Kathy, her father "acts very different around our family than when he's around other people. He's like #1 Dad to everyone outside our house, but has never really understood how to make a connection with his children." Consequently, Kathy feels as though she has never really had a typical "Daddy's girl" relationship with her father.

Kathy's mother holds a job in finance and serves as the closest connection for Kathy to her family. Kathy's mother completed her college degree when her two children were both young and currently works in a job where Kathy said her mother is

undervalued and underpaid. Due to her work environment, Kathy's mother is quite unhappy with her job. Even though Kathy considers her mother the closest individual in her family, she is reluctant to talk with her mother about problems or issues that she is experiencing. Kathy explained that "I'll tell her little things, but if something's really bothering me, I won't tell her right away 'cause, like, I don't want to make her nervous." Kathy does, however, confide in her mother on the "big things."

The marriage between Kathy's parents has been tumultuous over the years. Kathy said that her parents fought a lot over money, discipline, and day-to-day issues. Eventually, the two parents arrived at a point where they no longer talk at all to each other. Recently, Kathy's mother asked her father for a divorce and Kathy is not sure whether or not they will see it through.

Kathy remembered a few rather bad arguments between her parents when she was younger and said that she felt quite alone during those times. Neither of her parents spoke with their children about what caused their fights unless they were drunk. Kathy joked that if she ever wanted to know something, she would wait until there was alcohol involved, "if you get either of them drunk, they'd talk." Kathy never insinuated that either parent had a problem with alcoholism, but rather – intimated both parents were more likely to open up if they were slightly inebriated.

Kathy's only sibling is a sister who is 2 ½ years older and works as a school teacher. Kathy stated that the majority of people who meet her family initially assume that she is the eldest because her sister "acts very immature at times." While Kathy stated that they are somewhat close, she does not talk to her sister often. Part of the

reason for the lack in communication between the sisters may be due to the fact that Kathy's sister lives two states away.

Kathy's family is not physically affectionate. Kathy remembered her mother verbally communicating her affections to the children growing up and occasionally holding them when watching TV, but she cannot recall her father ever saying or showing how he felt about her and her sister. Even though Kathy commented matter-of-factly about the absence of her father's affection, her nervous laughter and lack of eye connection were clues to the sensitivity of this topic. Kathy suggested that this home environment is one possible reason for the troubles she faced during her adolescent years in her relations with peers and especially boys.

In addition to the typical adolescent challenges that most young people experience, Kathy was forced to deal with a very mature topic – discrimination on the basis of sexuality. Around the age of 10, one of Kathy's classmates started a petition around her school which stated that Kathy was gay and therefore anyone who signed it would ostracize her. As would be expected for children that age who do not want to appear different in any way – most of her peers signed the petition and thus virtually ignored her for the majority of that school year.

Kathy said that she went through a period of about 6 to 7 months during which she had no friends. I could tell from her comments and mannerisms during this period of our interview, that this experience had a significant impact on her childhood. Kathy stated that she was extremely hurt by her peers' actions and suggested that her lack of a

positive self-image during this period of her life was due in large part to the discrimination she faced.

A few years later, Kathy became extremely depressed around the age of 13. She never felt close to boys and thus most of her friends were females. Kathy described herself at this stage in life as “insecure” and explained that she attempted to deal with her feelings of insecurity by being funny. Unfortunately, many of her peers perceived her comedic behavior as weird and this eventually left her feeling alienated by most of the other students.

During our second interview, Kathy stated that middle school was “absolute hell” and that she fell into a deeply depressed state that eventually led to several self-destructive behaviors such as underage drinking and a brief period of cutting herself. When I asked Kathy to elaborate on her “cutting,” she explained that “a lot” of her female friends were doing it as a means of control in middle school and that she had picked it up from them. As she told me more about this period in her life, Kathy’s body language suggested that she was uncomfortable or perhaps somewhat embarrassed; she looked down at the table (avoiding eye contact) and fidgeted in her chair.

When asked to identify the significant individuals in her life, Kathy names her mother and one of her theatre directors who made her parents aware of Kathy’s rejection by her peers, deep depression, and harmful behaviors. A bright smile appeared on Kathy’s face when she spoke about the theatre director and the significance of this person was clear to me.

Kathy's family is Catholic, her father more devout than her mother. Kathy jokingly described her mother's idea of religion as very "granola" and explains that "my mom is just a big advocate of just treat people kindly and that everything that will happen should and sort-of mother earthy." Kathy considers herself a Catholic, but feels more in line with her mother's thoughts on religion.

Kathy's Irish heritage is very important to her and her family. When asked, Kathy said that St. Patrick's Day was probably the most important holiday in her family. Birthdays have also been especially significant during Kathy's life because her mother always did the "most awesome" birthday parties. Kathy explained,

We definitely had the best birthday parties out of all our friends. Like my mom always put a lot of thought into them and planned activities. Like one time she strung yarn all through our entire basement and made a HUGE spider web and each kid had to follow their own color of yarn to a prize. She was, like, really creative.

Other similarly caring and creative tales of her mother peppered my conversations with Kathy.

Kathy described herself as fun, determined, and motivated. She believes that she genuinely cares about people which has probably led to her current job working with the elderly. When asked whether she identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer, Kathy laughed and answered "Yes. I mean, I think I'm like predominantly lesbian but also bisexual." Kathy dated boys during high school and also within a few months of our first

interview, but having experienced her first “real relationship with a girl” in the past year, Kathy was unwilling to assign herself a particular label.

Kathy realized her sexual “difference” around the age of 9 when she sexually experimented with other kids – all of whom were females. In addition to this primarily homosexual experimentation, Kathy almost always assumed the male role in imaginary games with her friends. Furthermore, Kathy said that she was just never very interested in hanging out with boys when other girls her age were present.

Looking back, Kathy now attributes a great amount of the awkwardness and depression she experienced in middle and high school to her negative self-perception which, she believes, originated from her internalized homophobia. Kathy explained,

Looking back it had a pretty big effect on me, I would say. ‘Cause after, from fourth grade on I was just not feeling comfortable. I think I was just processing in my head that I was actually gay.

In Kathy’s eyes, at that young point in her life, gay meant all things “bad.”

Kathy believes that each person goes through a number of different coming-out processes and feels that she has “come out to so many different audiences.” For Kathy, each one of these audiences entailed a separate coming-out experience. Of all the coming-out experiences thus far, Kathy believes it was hardest to come out to herself because of the fear involved with not being heterosexual and being “different.” Self-acceptance was, for Kathy, the largest obstacle to overcome. But having completed that initial step, Kathy said that she feels happier now than she ever has been.

Kathy began her coming out process during college and has found the friends she has made through sports on campus to be very helpful. One of those sports teams contained individuals who knew Kathy's sister and suggested to her sister that Kathy was a lesbian. So one day, 2 years ago, Kathy's sister called her up and asked if she was gay. When Kathy answered in the affirmative, her sister's response was very supportive. The choice to divulge her sexuality to the rest of her family took time, but Kathy was encouraged by her sister. Kathy's mother was also very supportive of her coming out, which occurred shortly after she told her sister. Kathy was shocked to learn that her mother already knew about her non-heterosexuality and that she was waiting for Kathy to tell her on her own terms.

Kathy said that her relationship with her sister has improved greatly since her coming out. In one conversation Kathy had with her sister about their improved relationship, Kathy's sister provided an explanation for their distance growing up – "I just realized how much more normal you've [Kathy] become now that you're gay. It just makes so much more sense. All the weird shit you did when you were little."

Kathy has chosen not to tell her father for two reasons: (1) she has no desire to tell him due to the lack of connection they have and, (2) she feels that she will only experience negative repercussions from telling him. Kathy's mother is not completely supportive of this decision and has told her that, while her father may be "anti-gay" in some ways, he will still love her no matter what.

Since her official coming out, Kathy dated a man over her summer break. When I asked whether the short relationship might have been a test of her non-heterosexuality,

Kathy answered that “it was partially that. And, I think it was partially me still having an aversion to being gay.” When she looks around society, Kathy feels that it is simply “easier” to be in a heterosexual relationship.

Kathy also stated that she has distanced herself from a number of people since coming out. She explains,

‘Cause it’s like, I don’t want to deal with people’s bad reaction. I went to an all Catholic high school and when I see them I’m like “I know you’re just looking at my Facebook [page] and being like, ‘Oh – she’s a lesbian now.’”

Kathy admitted that she is more distrusting now since she has come out and fears being ostracized or becoming an outcast again. Her non-heterosexuality is not something that she freely talks about with other people. Kathy explained, “I don’t want that to be the first thing that people see, like, my sexuality doesn’t define me, so I don’t want them to define me by my sexuality.” Gaining more of an understanding as well as comfort with her sexuality every day, Kathy places herself in the position of exploration within the GLBQ community and total acceptance of her sexually identity.

Kathy was similar to Donna in that she never took into consideration her sexuality when deciding upon colleges. Her ultimate college choice had more to do with the fact that her sister had not attended the institution (thus reducing the chances of sisterly competition). She also attributed some of her college choice to the level of comfort she felt during her initial visit.

Until her senior year of college, Kathy had never considered dropping out. Now, she admits that quitting college had come to mind on more than one occasion. Kathy

believes that a large part of this feeling stems from “senioritis,” a term commonly used to describe the lack of motivation many students experience as they get closer to graduation. One other reason for her thoughts of leaving is that she has begun to question her career choice. Kathy has decided, however, that no matter what she is feeling, she is going to push through and complete her degree.

Kathy’s plans following graduation are to take a few semesters off and figure out exactly what she wants to do in life. While she is fairly confident that she will work in the healthcare field, she is uncertain as to what her career choice will be.

Charlie

The second male participant to join the study was Charlie, a 21-year-old majoring in business finance. Charlie was born in the northern part of the state and said that he does not know who his father is. According to his mother, Charlie was conceived while his mother was in Europe, but Charlie’s father never attempted to contact him and his mother cannot recall his father’s name. Charlie is quite tall for his age and very slender. An initial shyness that I sensed at the beginning of our interviews immediately faded once we entered closed quarters and Charlie’s comfort level increased. He was, by far, one of the most open about his life history and his sexuality.

Charlie jokingly calls himself “the lucky one” as his mother had two abortions before he was born and one additional abortion after he was born. Charlie provides a harsh explanation for his luckiness, “my mother probably felt guilty after she killed two babies and saved me. After she had me, she was like ‘I can’t have another’ and so she killed another.” This comment is indicative of Charlie and his relationship with his

mother. First, Charlie is extremely open and blunt; very few things are off limits to talk about with him. Second, the relationship between Charlie and his mother is not very close and his view of her is not positive.

It was apparent through our conversations and the anger conveyed through Charlie's comments that Charlie feels justified in his perceptions of his mother since she, in essence, abandoned him at a young age. Charlie stated that he was raised primarily by his maternal grandmother. Between his birth and age 8, Charlie lived with his mother and grandmother. During this time in his life, even though his mother was physically present, Charlie was raised by his grandmother.

Around the age of 14, Charlie moved south with his grandmother and aunt. At the time, his mother promised to join them, but as Charlie explained with some anger in his voice, "she never, of course, moved down. Like a lot of things, she never followed through." Charlie's grandmother took care of him from age 8 until he was 14.

Charlie's closest family connection is to his grandmother whom he described as an extremely caring person who worked all the time to support the family. Whenever we spoke of Charlie's grandmother, a smile always came to his face. Charlie said "she would give her last dollar to a loved one that needed it – that's how she is." Charlie has always felt support from his grandmother and to this day, he considers her in many ways to have been more of a mother to him. He said "my memory is like very sparse of [mom] ever taking care of me. Like I don't remember her ever coming to anything."

Charlie's grandmother worked as a cook, often on the graveyard shift. Much of Charlie's work ethic is derived from watching how hard his grandmother worked. His

grandmother was also very strict about certain things like school, grades, and the friends Charlie hung out with. Charlie explained that

oh, my grandma is the cutest! She's, like, about 5 feet tall, but she definitely kept me in line. She's no-nonsense. She's the one who taught me about ethics, like what's right from wrong. Even when it came down to speaking, she wouldn't let me speak improper English when I was little. Like I would always have the best grammar.

Throughout his younger school days, Charlie was always at the top of his class. His grandmother would not permit him to play sports because he might be hurt or that they might detract from his studies.

Regardless of the feelings that Charlie held for his grandmother, he always wanted to be back in the state in which he was born, living with his mother. Charlie said he "got his wish" when he was 14 years old and he moved back to live with his mother. Unfortunately, things did not turn out as well as Charlie had hoped. He explained, "I always wanted to live with my mom, but when the chance came and I moved in with her, it took me about 2 months to realize, like, what the fuck was I thinking?" Charlie recalled that he really missed his grandmother and that the situation in his mother's new home with her new husband was not good.

Charlie's description of how he felt living with his mother and new stepfather was somewhat flippant, he explained "She had a husband, I was there." Looking back, Charlie believes that his mother married his stepfather because she needed health insurance; he described their relationship as "completely loveless." In addition to this

dysfunctional environment, Charlie's new stepfather was not kind to him and frequently failed to provide for the family; various utilities in the home were turned off on more than one occasion. After a few years of weathering the constant fighting between his mother and stepfather and having the heat, electricity, and/or water shut off, Charlie decided to move out and into the house of a friend of the family.

Charlie's family is Baptist and he was raised in that denomination, but he is not quite sure what he believes at this point. Charlie admits that he still abides by many of the same notions and ideals from his religious upbringing, but he now sees God as implausible in many ways. When I asked what his beliefs were regarding an afterlife, Charlie replied "I'll find out one day." This answer fits his logical and no-nonsense approach to life.

Charlie endeavors to be as self-sufficient as possible and stated, "I don't put my problems on anyone else for the most part unless I need advice. I always deal with my issues on my own." This self-sufficiency might be attributed to the fact that Charlie was often left alone during the evenings and at night when he was younger. As was mentioned earlier, Charlie's grandmother worked a graveyard shift and he was on his own a lot.

Charlie did not self-identify as gay until he was 19 years old. Through most of his adolescence, Charlie explained that "gay was yucky." Charlie's first gay experience occurred when he was about 9 years old and happened with another boy who was about 3 years older than he. Being gay was a huge issue for Charlie as he explained, "gay has always been an issue especially since I was raised as a Christian. Wrong, wrong, wrong, going to hell, blah, blah, blah. It was never really a big issue in the house though." It was

a significant issue for Charlie though and he would never search for the word “gay” on the Internet for help or resources; he always used terms related to it. Charlie said that he never wanted to consider himself gay because that was the “worst thing.” This belief stemmed mostly from society and not his family.

Charlie decided to tell his mother about his sexuality around the age of 17 after what he considered to be his “first real” experience with gay sex. Charlie explained, “after I had sex with him is when I was like, ‘Alright, I’ve got to tell mom otherwise I won’t feel comfortable.’” When he approached her, he said “Mom, I have something to tell you. Promise that you’re not going to hate me.” Charlie told her that he was bisexual and she did not initially believe him; her response was “No you’re not! Whatever. You’re kidding.” When Charlie explained that he was not joking, his mother began to cry and sat down; what followed next really hurt Charlie. His mother simply said, “You’re gonna get AIDS and die.”

Since Charlie was not living with his mother at that point in his life, he left after hearing her response regarding his bisexuality. His mother’s negative response did not incapacitate Charlie, his response was “fine. Fuck it. I told her, now she knows. I’m gonna keep on living my life.” It took some time after that exchange before Charlie’s relationship with his mother regained a sense of normalcy. Charlie bluntly told his mother, “Mom. You have to realize that this is none of your business – this is my business. You just happen to be related to me, I’m sorry.” To this day, however, Charlie’s mother tries to change the topic of conversation whenever something gay related comes up or Charlie talks about a romantic relationship.

Following Charlie's initial coming out, his mother asked him not to tell anyone in the family, but then promptly told her sister about her conversation with Charlie. Being an extremely religious person, Charlie's aunt took it upon herself to talk with him about God's views on homosexuality. It was at this time that Charlie informed his family, through his aunt that he was not sure that God existed. Charlie said, "that kicked it off further. We ended up having a three-hour phone conversation."

Charlie still abided by his mother's wishes and did not tell his grandmother until a year or so later. When Charlie told his grandmother about his sexuality, she replied "Baby, I don't care. You could be gay, straight, bi, whatever - as long as you do well in school. I still love you. Baby, it doesn't matter." Charlie said that his grandmother's response only made him love her more and that he wished he had told her sooner.

During the first quarter of Charlie's freshman year, he identified himself as bisexual. It did not take long, however, for that label to change. During his second quarter in college, Charlie came-out to his friends and roommates through an on-line socializing site. He changed his status message on October 11th of that year to say... "Oh, its National Coming Out day, guess I should do my part - I'm gay!" The response he received from his friends about his sexuality was positive and has continued to be a non-issue. Charlie said that he now has a number of straight, male friends who are all totally fine with his sexuality and even joke with him about the difference that may exist between "straight" versus "gay" sex. Charlie does not recall losing anyone (friend or family) as a result of coming out.

Charlie feels that he is still currently working on his self-realization of what it means to be gay. He said that being gay is just one component that makes up who he is as a person and that “I’m a lot of other things. I have a lot of other things on my plate. My sexuality is just, basically, who I like to fuck – who I’m going home to. That’s it.”

Being gay had no impact on Charlie’s college decision. He stated that the decision had more to do with the amount of scholarship money he received and the programs and courses that were offered. Charlie will graduate this year with three majors: international business, finance, and Spanish. During his time on campus, Charlie has served on a number of student committees and held leadership positions within numerous organizations. Some of these committees and organizations have been GLBTQ centered.

Charlie said that he has never once considered leaving college because he sees a college degree as a way of making money. The significance of his degree may extend beyond that, however, since he was also proud to point out during our interview that he will be the first person in his family to graduate from college.

Charlie was not entirely sure of what he is going to do following graduation. His original plan was to immediately enter his chosen field of finance, but considering the current state of the economy, he is rethinking things. Charlie plans to live overseas for the second half of his senior year, something that is possible only because he has already completed his coursework.

Melanie

Melanie was the third female to join this study. She was born in the western portion of the state to a lower-middle class family, is White, 24 years old, and is majoring

in women's studies. Melanie's choice in clothing is what would stereotypically be classified as "masculine" (dark-colored sports t-shirts, jeans, etc.) and she has a number of facial piercings. Consequently, Melanie said that most people consider her style "alternative or rough" due to her outward appearance. Melanie's personality, however, was not dark or rough. If asked, I would describe Melanie as somewhat timid and she conveyed a warmth and gentleness in all of our interactions and conversations.

During our first initial meeting, Melanie's mannerisms and body language conveyed a sense of nervousness which I initially attributed to our having just met. However, over time, I came to realize that Melanie's level of anxiety is constant and that it is due in part to what she has experienced as a queer person. Because of Melanie's nervousness and tendency to not make eye contact, I found it challenging to discern when a topic of our conversation was significant or not.

Melanie considers her family middle class growing up and states that she was raised in a "typical" suburban neighborhood. Her biological parents divorced when she was 2 years old and both have since remarried. Melanie's father was a blue-collar worker, but is no longer employed and collects disability due to a work-related accident a number of years ago. Melanie described her father as a very loving and caring person; however, her relationship with her father is not a very good one.

Melanie cites two possible explanations for their distant relationship: First, Melanie's father has been addicted to pain medications since his work injury occurred and that when he chooses to abuse these medications, he becomes completely detached from the entire world. Melanie recalled a specific period of 5-6 years during which her

father was completely absent due to his drug and alcohol abuse. Second, Melanie's father suffers from an extreme case of bipolar disorder and has failed to obtain the appropriate help and treatment for his condition. From the inflections in her voice, I detected a clear sense of sadness from Melanie as she described her father and his condition.

Melanie has spent some time with her father and stepmother and said that she likes her stepmother a lot and does not understand how she deals with her father's less than desirable behavior. Melanie's stepmother possesses a number of qualities that she admires – a strong yet caring personality and a “tell-it-like-it-is” approach to communication.

Melanie was raised primarily by her mother and stepfather. Melanie described her mother as a strong, “go-getter” sort of person who is interested in “bettering things for women” and thus runs a professional women's organization. Melanie's stepfather works for the government and is described as a nice person who “doesn't like children.” When I asked Melanie to explain, she said that her stepfather was always distant to her growing up and it took a while to realize that it was not due to her, but rather his dislike of children in general. Due to the indifferent feelings her stepfather conveyed, Melanie tried to visit her maternal grandmother as much as possible. Melanie said that the relationship with her stepfather has improved over the years; however, as she has gotten older and he is better able to relate to her.

Melanie has two younger brothers: one who is 23 years old and a stepbrother who is 9 years old. Melanie has a very good relationship with her younger stepbrother and described him as a “typical 9 year old.” Melanie expressed a lot of concern, however,

over her oldest brother who she said “has a hard life.” Her brother, like most of the people in her immediate family, has a serious drinking problem which is exacerbated by his occupation as a bartender. In fact, Melanie’s father, mother, and brother have all completed jail time as a result of driving under the influence (DUI) convictions. In addition to his drinking problem, Melanie’s brother suffers from an addiction to gambling.

Melanie’s brother has never been able to sustain a long-term relationship and she cannot remember him ever bringing someone home to meet the family. One possible reason for this behavior, Melanie explains, is that her brother has always been vilified by her family. When asked to explain more, Melanie said that when they were growing up, her brother was not very good in school and, consequently, he was made to feel dumb and that he would never amount to much in life. Melanie’s parents made it clear to her that good grades and attending college were an expectation. Her parents did not, however, hold those same expectations for her brother who Melanie said was basically permitted to do whatever he wanted while he was growing up.

Melanie said that her mother is her closest family connection and described her as strong and hardheaded, but capable of being loving. Melanie recalled that her mother (or stepfather) never really paid attention to her or her brother while they were growing up and that her mother was often emotionally absent because “she always had her head stuck up [her stepfather’s] ass.” A prime example of the disparity in her mother’s attention was that she typically cooked the stepfather a well-balanced dinner while the children were prepared lesser meals that came out of a box, were not very nutritional, and were chosen

more for the speed with which they could be made. From the tone and slight sarcasm in her voice, I got the sense that Melanie still holds some anger toward her mother for her actions during this period of Melanie's childhood.

Melanie has always struggled with her weight and her mother has not been especially helpful in this regard. When Melanie was younger, her mother was always putting her on a diet and frequently made fun of her weight. For instance, Melanie said "if I would get up to get a second helping of food during dinner, my mom would like make pig noises at me." The pain that her mother's actions and comments caused was evident in Melanie's body language and behavior when she talked about this portion of her past; her eyes quickly diverted to the floor and tears welled up in her eyes.

In addition to the pain that Melanie felt, another unfortunate result of her mother's actions is that Melanie went through a manic exercise period when she was about 18 years old. During this time, Melanie began running six miles a day and was basically starving herself to become thin. Melanie's body became slightly tense as she explained that "I just did it because I was tired of everyone looking at me and my mother's comments." Melanie said that her mother has "gotten nicer" over the years but that she still continues to struggle with her weight, a problem that has been further exacerbated by the behavioral medications that Melanie takes because, like her father, she has recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Melanie said that she is currently "between spiritual beliefs" and is not entirely sure that God exists. She attends church and appreciates the sense of community that it provides to her, but Melanie is not completely sold on many of the traditional Christian

beliefs she has been taught. Melanie has, however, reached the conclusion that heaven and hell do not exist and that there is no afterlife.

Melanie attended a small school that was primarily White and said that she was a member of the “in betweeners,” a term that she went on to explain “we were in between, like, the popular people and the nerds and the geeks. We didn’t fit into one specific stereotype.” Melanie has suffered from a low sense of self-esteem for as long as she can remember and I could see through her body language and mannerisms that, even at this point in her life, she still struggles with a poor self-image.

Being different was and continues to be important to Melanie. When she was 18, Melanie got her first facial piercing and explained “I wanted to stand out. Different was better for me because, when you grow up with the same people all your life, it gets boring.” This same desire to be different may partially explain Melanie’s preference to identify as queer. Melanie explains “I consider and identify myself as queer to those who know what queer is. So sometimes I consider myself queer and sometimes I consider myself a lesbian.” When I asked Melanie to define what queer means to her, she explained “Queer is an umbrella term that describes a person or group of people who choose to identify with the non-heteronormative ideals of what sexuality is.” From this definition and subsequent conversations with Melanie, I came to understand that she perceives “lesbian” is a term that deals primarily with sexuality whereas queer deals with sexuality and anything related to one’s existence or day-to-day activities, feelings, or decisions as a non-heterosexual.

Melanie remembered her first same-sex attraction occurred in elementary school, but that at the time she did not exactly understand what her feelings meant. She explained that later, in middle-school, “I felt like a freak because I had been taught that attraction between two females is not, like, appropriate.” Melanie attributed her negative view of homosexuality during middle-school to what was communicated by society and from her peers; her mother or stepfather never actually sat her down and told her that being gay was “bad.”

Melanie’s self acceptance of being a lesbian occurred around the age of 14 and when she reached that point, there was no turning back. “I was just basically like ‘Wow. This is it. This is what I am. This is what I’ve always been. And this is what I will be and I’m 100% sure.’” Melanie compared this revelation to herself to a weight being lifted from her shoulders and that it brought a sense of peace. She said “it made my adolescent years so much better than I could have ever imagined it being without the realization. It made it better because I had always thought that I was a bad person.”

The choice of when to come out to her family was not made by Melanie. When she was 15 years old, Melanie’s brother accessed one of her e-mail accounts which contained romantically natured messages to another female. Her brother immediately told her mother who sat her down and asked her if she was gay. When Melanie answered in the affirmative, her mother suggested that she just might be bisexual because “she really wanted me to be with a man.” Melanie believes that her mother has since told her father, but is not sure because she has never had a talk with him about it and she is fairly certain that he would not care either way.

Following her coming out, Melanie's brother made occasional derogatory remarks about her sexuality, but those have since stopped. Most of Melanie's friends were fairly accepting of her coming out, but some of the students within her small high school ridiculed her because she was the only "out" student. This opposition did not dissuade Melanie from expressing her newly realized identity, she recalled incidents like "I wore a t-shirt to school that said 'Lesbo' on it, but the lettering looked like it said 'Legos.'"

As mentioned earlier, Melanie prefers to self-identify as queer, rather than lesbian, whenever possible. When I asked her to explain, she answered "that's just me. I'm not really a lesbian. I'm more queer than I am a lesbian because lesbian just doesn't fit my identity." This statement is affirmed by the type of clothing that Melanie chooses to wear and her gender non-conformity. Her refusal to abide by society's widely accepted stereotypes regarding how males and females should dress has led to hostile reactions and feelings of alienation. For instance, Melanie has grown cautious about which bathroom facilities she uses in public and on her university campus because she has received negative comments from other females who question whether she knows it is a women's restroom. Aesthetically, there is no way to mistake Melanie as a male and thus she believed that these comments were, no doubt, meant to be offensive. While Melanie said that she believes such discriminatory actions stem from pure ignorance, she also said with tears in her eyes that they "still hurt" on some level.

Being queer did have an effect on Melanie's college choice. When she researched the various institutions within her home state, Melanie's ultimate decision was based not only on the fact that her university has a diverse student population, but that it was also

located within a “gay-friendly” locale. Being a postsecondary student has helped Melanie open up more to other people about her sexuality and queer identity; she finds herself playing the role of an activist frequently on campus.

Melanie’s activist role and queer identity have influenced her extracurricular activities. During her time in college, Melanie has chaired a GLBQ student mentoring group and worked on a number of GLBQ student-focused committees. Melanie is also active in GLBQ groups and initiatives off campus.

The choice to persist has been difficult for Melanie due to issues and circumstances she has experienced over the last few years that have, no doubt, been a result of her undiagnosed bipolar condition. There have been many times over the course of her college career in which Melanie has wanted to quit. When asked what has kept her going, Melanie began to cry and said “I don’t know – I just can’t quit,” but I could tell from her strong, emotional reaction that her postsecondary journey has not been easy. Melanie also points to a past girlfriend or a sense of obligation to her family as two reasons why she has not dropped out of college. Through our interview conversations, however, it became clear to me that her own sense of determination and perseverance has also played a significant role in her decision to persist. Now that Melanie has officially been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and is obtaining the appropriate medications, she believes that, academically, things will get a little easier. Her concern now is not whether she will graduate, but how much she will be able to raise her GPA before graduation.

Melanie's plan, following graduation, is to apply for a graduate degree program in women's studies. Eventually, Melanie would like to obtain a doctorate degree and teach within a college or university.

Austin

Austin was the last male participant to join the study. Austin was originally born in a southern state, but his family moved to the Midwest when he was 2 years old. Austin is now 23 and is about to complete a degree in engineering. A "whirlwind of energy" might be the best phrase to summarize Austin as he is extremely bright, energetic, and constantly on the move. When we first made contact with each other, Austin provided me access to his on-line calendar which was absolutely packed with appointments and classes. I was fortunate to find a free space amongst his various obligations and we met for the first time 2 weeks later. Like the other males in this study, Austin's flamboyant personality and mannerisms may be interpreted by some members of the general public as more gay than straight. However, "effeminate" would never be a term that I would use to describe Austin because he comes across as extremely confident and strong. Also similar to the other male participants of this study, Austin exuded a level of comfort in who he is, where he is from and the direction his life is headed.

Austin's mother and father have been married for 24 years and he described his family as upper-middle class. Austin has two younger sisters, one who is a year younger than Austin and the other who is 18 years old. Austin was raised in an affluent neighborhood in the northern part of the state and he attended a public school growing up.

Austin's father holds a degree in engineering and has served as a top executive for a number of companies within the Midwest. Austin described his dad as "wonderful" and as a businessman who is still very much a family man. His father is ambitious and very driven in his career, but "laid back" in social settings. Austin's father taught all of his children to understand and work with technology as much possible and he held high expectations for each one of them. Austin explained that "we [the kids] were all expected to not do drugs, go to college, and do something useful with our lives." The latter part of Austin's statement reverberates throughout his life. The desire and need to be a highly-functioning contributor to society comes through in listening to Austin.

Perhaps like his father, Austin holds very little patience for those he perceives to be "slackers" in society. Austin also holds a palpable disdain for anyone, especially peers, who fail to improve themselves or society. Whenever he spoke of such "losers," Austin's body language became agitated. As an observer, I was struck by the amount of frustration Austin exhibited through body language whenever he spoke of individuals who fail to reach their potential.

Through conversations with Austin, it was clear that he has a strong relationship with his father. Austin works as a consultant for his father's business and consequently, they speak at least once a day regarding the business.

Austin's mother is his closest family connection. She holds a degree in English, but was a stay-at-home mom when her children were young. When Austin and his sisters completed high school, his mother opened a retail store on her own and has since become part-owner of another store. Austin described his mom as "the classic mini-van driving

mom” who is “very nice and sweet,” but also very strict. Growing up, none of the children were permitted to have pop or candy and his mother made sure that they always maintained a balanced diet.

Austin described his parents as “hard asses” and said that his mother and father always collaborated on issues regarding their children. Austin can remember one of the first times that he attempted to manipulate them by going to his father for something that he wanted after his mother had already said no. The result of this common childish maneuver was that Austin got caught, was pulled into a room with both parents and disciplined, and was then grounded for some time. Austin, and his sisters, quickly learned that what one parent said went for the other as well – his parents clearly spoke in “one-voice.” Austin considers this collaborative parenting trait as one of the many things now missing in homes today. Austin went on to suggest that parents are simply more prone to manipulation by their children and that this condoned manipulation is what has produced an increase in the number of “bad kids” within society.

Both of Austin’s sisters are now in college. His oldest sister, the middle-child, attends the same institution as Austin. Austin’s younger sister chose to enroll in a different university in the southern part of the state. In regard to personality, Austin is more like his younger sister than he is the older one and, as children, Austin and the younger sister would usually gang-up on the middle child. Austin is close to both of his sisters, but he feels the strongest connection to the younger of the two.

Austin’s family has had a very pragmatic approach to the children’s initial occupation and college choice. He explained that “it was part of our parents’

expectations, they looked at our skills and what we liked doing and narrowed down the choices for us. When the decision was made, they were like ‘O.K. that’s what you’re gonna do.’”

Physical and verbal affection were freely shown in Austin’s family, he explained “my mom and I hug and kiss all the time. My dad and I hugged and kissed up until the point where I realized that it wasn’t cool anymore (laughter) and now we only hug.” Austin described his parents’ marriage as “perfect” and stated that they never yelled; conflicts and arguments were always dealt with in a calm and civilized manner.

In addition to the typical Christian holidays, Austin’s family always celebrated birthdays. Austin said that “all birthdays were celebrated and birthdays with family were very important.” Attendance at these celebrations were a requirement for the children – no matter what, everyone got together. Austin’s parents were also strict about “family time”; his parents would regularly arrange outings or activities for the entire family and participation was not an option. Looking back on these (sometimes mandated) occurrences, Austin is thankful that his parents did this. At the time, however, Austin would get extremely frustrated when he was not permitted to go out with friends because his parents had randomly decided that they would hold a “family night.”

Austin’s family is Presbyterian and has attended the same church for most of Austin’s life. Even though it is described as “extremely conservative,” Austin loves his family’s church because he has always felt welcome there. This feeling has not changed since Austin revealed that he is not heterosexual. In fact, Austin still searches for a similar church in his current city, but has been unsuccessful thus far in locating one.

Austin's first inclination, when presented with an issue, is to learn as much as he can about the topic; this proved to be a problem during the initial stages of his coming out process. Austin remembered that he tried very hard to locate information on-line about being gay or coming out, but what he was able to find was mostly advertisements for sex Web sites; very little information was available for him to learn about what it meant to be gay or what steps were involved in coming out.

Austin's coming out process began when he was 16 years old and he decided that he was bisexual. When I asked which of his parents he told first, Austin replied that while he verbally told his mother, "telling mom was telling dad too – they didn't keep secrets," so both parents found out at the same time. Austin chuckled when he reflected back on how and when he told his parents; he smiled and said "I did everything I wasn't supposed to do." Austin explained that most of the current literature on the process of coming out to parents suggests that teens who are coming out should not make the announcement during a time where they are in trouble – this is exactly what Austin did.

Shortly after Austin obtained his driver's license, he received a speeding ticket. It was also during this time that he began dealing with a lot of emotions related to coming out and was fearful of how his family would react. The emotions that Austin was feeling, he believes, caused a period of poor judgments and he received a second speeding ticket within a few months of his first infraction. Austin's parents were very worried by his behavior because up until that point in his life, he was a model son who rarely got into trouble.

The court system took Austin's license after the second speeding ticket and when his parents talked to him about it, he announced his bisexuality. Austin explained, "I figured that since I was already in deep shit, I might as well tell them everything" and so he did. Austin recalled that his mother initially "freaked out over it" because many of the gay friends she had in school had since died from AIDS and she did not want that to happen to him. His dad had never met a gay engineer and thus was unable to see how Austin would be successful in life being a gay male in engineering.

Austin's parents decided to put him in counseling; not for being gay, but for the emotions he was dealing with that led to his bad behavior and the distance he was putting between him and the family. Austin explained, "[the counseling] was not really about me being gay or straight. It was more of I had a harder time communicating with my parents. I think the gay issue really complicated that because I just didn't know how to handle it." And so, for a while, Austin communicated to his parents through a counselor as they worked things out. He said that "at first, I felt pushed away. But in reality, it was probably my perception, not what was actually happening." Austin also recalled the counseling sessions as a time of personal growth because he was forced to deal with the emotions related to his sexuality. He said, "I was like 'Oh, crap!' I have to get in touch with my touchy-feely side. Now where in the hell did I put that?"

Austin received a mixed response from his siblings when he told them that he was not heterosexual. As expected, his younger sister was very supportive and told him that she loved him regardless of his sexual orientation. Austin's middle sister, however, did not approve and sent him a number of hostile e-mail messages which suggested that his

declaration was “tearing the family apart.” Austin said that, in hindsight, he should have expected that type of response from his middle sister as she is typically the most dramatic of the three children. His sister has since expressed her approval of his sexuality and it is no longer an issue between them.

Austin said that he was introduced to much of the GLBQ community through friends’ parties and going out to the local bars. He recalled going through a “Yay – Gay” phase during which he flamboyantly stated “I was so gay, I would burn down buildings.” Austin described himself as the “stereotypical nerdy engineer” and said that he no longer places as much weight on the gay component of his overall identity. Austin explained,

I have started to put more of a focus on developing myself as a person in leadership and professionally. And professionally, I am not a flaming homosexual. The fact that I am gay in engineering is just like if I was straight – so what?

Austin said that when it is brought up, he identifies as gay, but not queer. When I asked about his feelings regarding queer, the following “engineer-like” explanation was given,

yeah, I see queer as an umbrella term, but for me it’s weird because I see how people change their language. But I don’t follow that, I don’t understand why. It just seems like you’re making synonyms for each word and it’s like, especially in engineering, why would I have two terms for one thing? That doesn’t make sense to me – you’ve got to be efficient.

Austin believes that he currently resides in what queer identity literature refers to as the “normalizing phase” of his sexual identity development where “I’m just an engineer, I’m not a ‘gay’ engineer.”

Among other things, Austin also described himself as a fairly independent person who does not, typically, confide in other people. In fact, the need to confide is perceived by Austin to be more of a weakness than anything beneficial. He believes that emotional issues or problems should be dealt with in the most efficient means possible and that disorder of any kind should be avoided.

During his time in college, Austin has served in leadership positions on a number of GLBQ committees and organizations. Austin attributes much of his extremely strong work ethic to his parents. He stated, “there were days when I would wake up and my dad would have already left for work. And then, I would go to bed before he got home from work. He also worked a lot of Saturdays. A lot.” Austin’s mother also served as another example of a hard worker; both as a mother of three and then later as the owner of her own business. Whether through genetics or by example, Austin exhibits his parents’ same level of drive and determination.

Austin has already secured a job at a nationally-known engineering firm and he will move to its location immediately following graduation. Austin said that he wants a husband at some point in the future, but that children are not a part of his life plan; he prefers to play the part of a “gay uncle.”

Summary

In this chapter, I presented life histories for each of the participants in this study. These life histories were constructed through data obtained during numerous, in-depth, one-on-one interviews and subsequent, less-formal conversations. Through an iterative, consistent member checking process, the participants and I functioned as co-creators of the life histories. The next chapter describes the coding and analysis of these interviews in detail.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter contains the analysis of the life histories and transcribed data from the interviews. It includes the primary and secondary themes which emerged from the historical contexts and experiences of the participants, as well as their thoughts and perceptions related to coming out as a non-heterosexual to family and friends including where they fall along the most widely accepted sexual identity development models.

Determining Themes from Interview Data

The life history methodology enables the conveyance, documentation, and analysis of a person's lived experience, a recollection of the past and its effect on his or her life, as well as his or her perceptions of the social contexts he or she occupies (Bertaux, 1981; Cole, 2001; Denzin, 1989; Goodson, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995).

The grounded theory analysis of the life history data obtained in this study employed the use of qualitative coding procedures and thematic analyses (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2005). As Patton (2002) explains, "grounded theory focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content" (p. 125). Through a constant comparative method, grounded theory utilizes steps and procedures as a means of connecting induction and deduction, resulting in emergent concepts. Each

interview was transcribed by an independent transcriptionist who possessed no knowledge of the participants' true identities. The completed transcriptions were then sent, along with my interview notes, to each participant for review and modification if and where they deemed it necessary.

The life history profiles presented in the preceding chapter were composed from the 18 "formal" interviews, as well as subsequent communications between the participants and me in more casual settings, such as a restaurant or coffee shop and through e-mail and/or phone. Once an initial draft of an individual's life history was complete, I sent the draft to that person for review and comment. In some cases, minor changes were made as a result of the feedback that I received back from the participants. Overall, all of the participants stated that they were satisfied with the stories created.

Following the recommended course of action in qualitative data analysis, I read and re-read each of the transcripts numerous times. As I read through the transcripts and began the coding process, I experienced tension between etic and emic categories and themes. I struggled to maintain an inductive position throughout the coding process. At times, there was a fine line between having an inductive stance and a deductive one. Through an iterative process I identified categories which emerged directly from the data. Using spreadsheet software, I created a separate "sheet" for each category. A list of these categories is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Categories that Emerged from Life History Data

Categories		
Mom	Dad	Parental union
Grandparents	Siblings	Step-parents
Family traditions	Self-perception	Persistence
Growing up	Sexual identity	Religion
Conflict & resilience	Social activities	College choice
Campus activities	Campus resources	Campus climate
Significant people or experiences	Participants' choices, interests, views, traits	

As I repeatedly read through the interview transcripts, I recorded the open codes related to a category on its respective spreadsheet. Many of these open codes consisted of segments of text which encapsulated the participant's meaning. Codes identified on each category's spreadsheet were color coded based upon the participant from whom they originated. Doing this enabled me to easily review, sort, and identify themes within each category. Additionally, the corresponding transcript and page number for each open code was recorded allowing me to easily locate the exact origin of a code when needed.

Within each category, I isolated themes that emerged by reviewing each list a number of times over the course of 3 to 4 months. Each theme represented a possible response or a component of the overall responses to the research questions framing this

study. I maintained a researcher journal throughout the research process which included my own thoughts and personal reflections related to the participants, their histories, the themes I identified within each category, and the possible connections that may exist between these data. My research journal not only served as a means of documenting my actions and thoughts, it also assisted me in the theme building process.

As was discussed in chapter II, I composed the life histories by functioning as one part of a mutual dialogue between researcher and participant. To that end, I situated myself on the same “level” as the participants and refrained from assuming an authoritative position during the interviews.

Since every person’s reality is fundamentally their own and to ensure that the themes I identified truly represented the participants, I conducted a thorough process of member checking in regard to the interview transcripts, themes identified, and life histories created. Member checking enables the researcher to not only verify the account of what a participant said, but also the intended meaning of his or her words. This process adds to the overall confirmability and reliability of the study (Creswell, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002).

The member checking process was iterative as I began to link categories and themes together. All of the participants were solicited to provide me with their feedback on the emerging themes and their assistance facilitated my arrival at a final set of common themes which ultimately addressed my research questions.

I experienced a significant amount of tension during the composition of some of the life histories due to the extremely personal and sensitive nature of our conversations.

There were many times wherein I wrestled with what constituted an “appropriate” amount of details to include. All of the participants invested a great deal of trust in me and I did not want to betray their trust. At each point during the creation and editing of the life histories, the participants were given copies to review and provide comments. All of the responses I received were incorporated into the final versions that are provided in chapter IV. Thus, it was through frequent contact and iterative member checking that the participants and I functioned as co-creators of their life histories.

Themes Identified in the Participants’ Life Histories

Many themes and similarities were found to exist among the participants of this study. However, of these similarities, only 10 were common to all participants. In the following sections, the common themes (i.e., factors, traits and/or experiences) which may have contributed to each student’s choice to persist in college are presented and exemplars within these common themes are provided.

High Behavioral Expectations During Childhood & Adolescence

Each of the participants stated that he or she was raised in a “strict” home and many attributed their current way of life to this fact. Whether raised by a biological parent, step-parent or grandparent, all of the participants spoke about the rules that were enforced in their homes growing up. From the descriptions of his childhood, Austin’s parents were among the strictest.

Growing up, we never had pop or candy. We always had, you know, a balanced meal. I think that that’s the one thing I see in my parents that I don’t see in a lot of other parents is that they always collaborated and were strict. I remember one

time I went and asked my dad to do something and he said, “No.” I went and asked my mother to do the same thing, she said, “Yes.” I went outside to start doing what I wanted and then I was called back in and I was grounded and punished for going between the parents. And, I never did that again. (laughter) I see all these kids and their parents, you know, ground them or something and, like, 5 minutes later they’re not grounded. With my parents, you were grounded. And you weren’t doing anything other than maybe reading your school books or something like that.

While both of Austin’s parents collaborated on discipline and other choices affecting their children, Austin’s mother was the toughest.

I think that our society stereotypes the dad as being, like, the hard ass one and then mom being, like, the real soft one. But looking back on it now and, like, learning about all the stereotypes that’s really not how my parents were. They’re both hard asses, but I think that my mom is more strict than my dad.

The rules placed upon Charlie growing up were enforced by three women: his mother, his aunt and his grandmother. Each of these women was strict about different things. As a young boy, Charlie’s mother would not permit him to play sports, as he explained “My mom was always very overprotective when I was little, and she didn’t let me really go out and play many sports.”

Charlie’s aunt supplied most of the corporal punishments he received whenever he misbehaved. He explained, “My aunt is one of those no-nonsense types of people and

she was always the one to discipline me, like, physically which I totally respect her for because I did some stupid shit. And, she definitely kept me in line.”

Charlie attributes much of his moral compass to his grandmother who was also strict about the friends he associated with and the manner in which he spoke.

My grandma’s the one who taught me about ethics. To believe, like, what’s right and what’s wrong because even when it comes down to speaking, she wouldn’t let me speak improper English when I was little. Like, I would always have to have the best grammar.

Donna’s mother was similarly concerned about the people with whom she associated, her behaviors with friends, as well as the value of money.

My mom always would worry if I was hanging out with the wrong crowd. I never really did though. I mean, my mom didn’t, like, want me to drink in high school or anything like that. I didn’t really; just a few times in high school, but nothin’ major. And my mom always made me work in high school. I’ve probably been working since I was, like, 9. I had a paper route when I was 9 to 13 and I got my first, like, real job when I was 14 at a restaurant down the street. My mom pretty much was like, “You need to work if you want anything.” Like, I saved money for my car and like, any fun stuff, like going out or special clothes.

All of the participants indicated, in one way or another, that they now appreciate the fact that their guardians were strict about certain things. Additionally, 5 of the 6 participants suggested that part of the reason why so many people their age and younger

are currently getting into trouble is because their parents were not strict and they lacked a structured home environment.

A Strong Family Connection

Every participant in this study pointed to a parent or grandparent as their closest personal connection. This individual served as a resource for guidance, support and encouragement of the participant at various times in their life.

Kathy identified her mother as one of the most significant people in her life and said,

My mom is definitely the closest person to me. I always tell her the big problems, but I don't necessarily tell her little things all the time 'cause I don't want to worry her. The things that have happened in my past that, like, just seeing how concerned she's gotten and like, I don't ever want to disappoint her.

Melanie also chose her mother as the closest member of her family and said that she maintains almost daily contact with her. "My mom is very loving and very strong. I try to talk to my mom almost every day."

Tony's connection to his mother is also very similar as he explains, "My mom was always the first person that I would go to um, regardless of whether or not it was bad." And since his arrival to college, Tony said that he talks with his mother at least once per day.

It started when I was a freshman in college - she just had to hear my voice, you know, even if it was for like 10 seconds; just so as long as she knew I was okay. So it just started from there and then, you know, whatever I'm doing now - I set

aside 5 minutes of whatever time I have to make sure I call her just to check in and see how things are going. It's kind of therapeutic 'cause we talk about our days, you know. (laughter) I mean, sometimes things don't really change or we don't have much to talk about, but uh, I really enjoy talking to her.

In addition to the close relationship with his mother, Tony is also fortunate in that he possesses a strong connection to most of the people in his immediate family.

Charlie's grandmother has played a similar role in his life. As he explains, "My grandmother was all that I really had growing up. We have a special dynamic because she basically raised me." Consequently, Charlie considers his relationship with his grandmother to be his closest familial connection and is happiest when he can bring joy and pride to his grandmother through his accomplishments. Charlie refers to his mother by her first name and said that he has realized over the years that "she's [Charlie's grandmother] definitely my real mom in my life."

A Strong Work Ethic

Whether instilled directly or indirectly as a result of watching their guardians while growing up, all of the participants possess a strong work ethic. Evidence of this fact was apparent not only in the comments made by participants but also in the way they prioritize and conduct their lives.

Donna's mother made it clear to her at a young age that, if she wanted something that her mother deemed superfluous, she would need to work for it and earn the money. Donna said,

My mom always pushed me toward being able to support myself and, like, you know, work as a kid. She wanted me to make my own money and be responsible with money. So, she always taught me to work hard. She's like, 'I'm not gonna always give you stuff or be there to take care of you.'

Donna's mother also conveyed the importance of working hard through her actions. She worked two jobs to support her family after she divorced Donna's father. In addition to her full-time job, Donna's mother also volunteers her time at church.

Evidence of Donna's strong work ethic can be found in the fact that she has not only maintained a full class load while in college, but she has also worked a part-time job. Moreover, Donna has participated in a team sport throughout her college career and held leadership positions in numerous student and community organizations.

Charlie is similar to Donna in that he has maintained a full-time class schedule while working a part-time job. Another similarity is that Charlie has also participated in a number of student groups on campus and held leadership positions within those groups. Charlie attributes much of his work ethic to his grandmother who worked as a third-shift cook in order to support herself and her family.

Reflecting back on his childhood, Charlie remembered many nights when he would go to bed alone in the house because his grandmother had to work. He also recalled that there "was never much family time. My grandma and I used to talk all the time though when she was home from work. But she worked a lot to support her kids."

Tony's work ethic has been influenced by many of the elders in his immediate family. His parents come from a long line of migrant workers, and Tony viewed most of

them as extremely hard working. Tony attributes a lot of his work ethic to his father as he explained,

My Dad was very driven. Just kind of a hard worker I guess. So, yeah. I guess I derived a lot of my work ethic from watching him growing up and just how he was just kind of the, the backbone to the family. He always worked and took care of us kids.

Tony's mother is also a hard working person and, like his father, she did whatever was necessary to provide a good and loving home for her family.

The value Tony places on hard work can be seen not only in the fact that he has worked a part-time job while in college and participated in a number of groups, but also in the way he handled his courses following his father's death. Getting back to school and continuing his coursework was important to Tony and his family. Tony explained,

I actually thought about dropping out when my dad passed away. Just because I didn't know if it was the right time or whatever. But um, I had a lot of pressure from my family to come back immediately, and I did. And, I don't regret that, but I didn't really have too much time to adjust; and it was a really hectic time 'cause I was doing two quarters at the same time. 'Cause I had a certain time limit in which I had to finish the previous quarter while I was in the current quarter. So, I was taking about seven classes at the same time technically. Like, studying for finals for three classes while taking four classes. I'm like, 'This is crazy.'

It should also be mentioned that, in addition to his studies during this time, Tony also returned to his part-time job.

Of the 6 participants in this study, Austin's work ethic may very well have been the strongest. When I first contacted him about the study, Austin informed me that the best way of connecting with him was to access his on-line calendar. Upon accessing his schedule, I was shocked by the number of obligations this young man had. There was little more than one hour free on most weekdays and many of Austin's weekends were also booked with extracurricular activities.

I was able to schedule time with Austin and quickly learned why his calendar was so full. Austin pushes himself hard not only as a student, but also as a professional. In addition to his studies as an engineering major, Austin held three separate leadership positions within large student groups on campus. One of these student groups was founded solely by Austin and now boasts a membership of nearly 100 students.

In addition to his academic pursuits, Austin has also worked to establish himself within his profession. He has completed a number of engineering co-op assignments and has done so well for the companies that he already has a job lined up following graduation. Austin also works part-time for his father's company as a consultant, which he jokingly said helps to justify some of his "expensive tastes" in computers, software, and clothing to his parents.

Austin suggested that he obtained his incredible sense of drive and determination from his parents. Growing up, Austin recalled that his mother was extremely hard working – always making sure that the house was in order and that her children had what they needed. Austin's mother was a stay-at-home mom until just before her last child

graduated from high school. She then decided to open her own franchise store and has since become a partner in a second store.

Austin's father has also served as an example of a strong worker. Austin said that "there were days when I would wake up and my dad would have already left for work. And then, I would go to bed before he came home. And that happened A LOT - including Saturdays." When I asked whether this bothered him growing up, Austin said no and that he knew he could always count on his father and that Sundays were always set aside for family time.

High Educational Expectations

Without exception, the caretakers of every participant in this study communicated in one form or another that good grades and school were important and that going to college was expected.

Melanie's parents communicated their expectations regarding education and college not only verbally, but also in the way that they structured her evenings. Melanie explained that "getting good grades and college were always an expectation for me. I was expected to do my homework before I did anything else. And I always just knew I was going to college."

Melanie's grandmother also made it clear that getting good grades in school and attending college was an expectation. Melanie said that her "grandmother always nagged her about school, but I always knew it was because she wanted me to be well. And, she wanted me to succeed." Melanie also explained that she felt loved by her grandmother

partly because of the expectations placed on her. “She always believed in me and I needed that growing up.”

Donna’s mother was the driving force behind her educational expectations. She also made it clear to Donna that college would be the next step following high school, School’s very important – I mean, education was very important. Um, I always wanted to do well. You know, “A’s” were best and is what I was expected to get. Um, my mom always knew I worked hard and I did. But it was definitely expected. I mean, my parents weren’t very disappointed if I got a “B,” but they would be like, “Do you know why you got a “B” and not an “A”?” My mom was always proud of me and she wanted me to go to, like, the best college I could. So, it was always very important to do well in school.

Donna considers herself to be a fairly determined student and considers her 3.6 GPA to be “alright” but wishes that it was a little higher.

Charlie attributes his educational performance and expectations to himself and his grandmother. Charlie said,

My grandma started teaching me how to read, like, when I was 2 and 3. So I learned how to read and write before I got into school, and I was always ahead of everyone else. Like, I always had the best grades.

When asked whether his grandmother was overly strict about his studies, Charlie said that she never needed to be. “It was just kind of expected that I do well. It never really came up.” However, in talking with Charlie about his grandmother, he made it clear to me

through his comments that excelling in school and obtaining his college degree would mean a lot to his grandmother and that he wanted to make her proud.

For Austin and his siblings, education has always been extremely important. Austin said that “we all were expected to go to college and do something useful with our lives. Be active members of the community.” The value of an education was so important to Austin’s parents that it helped to determine where they lived. Austin explained,

That’s actually the reason why we moved into the area. It was because of the school system - it was a national school of excellence or something like that. So, school was very important to my parents, and they expected us to do well.

When it came time for Austin and his siblings to choose a college and career, his parents took a similar, proactive approach with the children. Austin said, “It was part of that whole ‘parents have expectations’ stuff, and so they kind of looked at our skills and what we liked to do and said, ‘O.K., well this is what you’re gonna do.’”

Guardian’s Acceptance of Sexuality

Another similarity that exists between the participants of this study is that all of their caretakers reached a point where they acknowledged and accepted the participant’s non-heterosexuality. For some of the participants, this acceptance came to fruition slowly, while others experienced almost immediate approval.

Kathy was one of the more fortunate participants in this study. Her mother not only knew of her bisexuality before Kathy was able to verbalize it, she waited until Kathy was ready to tell her on her own and on her own terms. Kathy said,

One time, on the way home I just said, we were having a conversation, and I just sort of stopped in the middle of it like, “Mom, I might be gay. By might I mean I am.” and she was like, “Okay. I sort of already knew that.” One of my roommate’s best friend’s mom is my mom’s best friend. I guess my friend's mom had said something before and my mom was like “Well, I’m not gonna ask her about it. That’s for [Kathy] to tell me on her own terms.” So, yeah, she’s okay with it.

It meant a lot to Kathy that her mother waited for her to verbalize her bisexuality. Kathy now feels comfortable talking with her mother about romantic relationships, and Kathy is very grateful to have this openness with her mother.

Charlie had a similar experience with his grandmother. During the early stages of his coming out process, Charlie told his mother; unfortunately, her response was not positive. Charlie’s mother asked that he not tell anyone else in the family, and he abided by his mother’s wishes for a while. One day, however, Charlie received a phone call from a friend of the family who was also gay and mentioned that his grandmother already knew Charlie was gay. Charlie explained,

He said, “Yeah, your grandmother showed me a picture of you and said isn’t he, isn’t he so adorable. And, like, guess what? My baby’s gay.” Just like that. My grandmother probably would say it just like that - I could picture her saying it. Anyway I was like, I gotta call you back. So, I called my grandma and, like she definitely took it the best out of anyone - didn’t scold me for anything. She just said, “You know, baby I love you. And, as long as you keep doin’ well in school,

and you're happy, I don't care if you're gay, bi, straight, whatever. As long as you're happy." And at that point I was like, "Uh, tell the world!"

Charlie's grandmother was the most significant parental figure in his life and having her unconditional love and support made it much easier for him to come out to the rest of the world.

Not every participant in this study, however, was as fortunate as Kathy and Charlie. Donna, Melanie, Tony, and Austin each had to deal with at least an initial negative reaction from their parents. Donna recalled that her mother "freaked out" upon learning that Donna was a lesbian.

I told my mom in February of my freshman year [in college] and uh, she didn't react very well. I told her, 'cause I thought she'd have a better reaction. She always, like, she'd listen to, like, the gay radio station on Sirius; and she always laughed about it, and like, she didn't really have a problem. She always thought it was kind of funny - she thinks of gay guys as, like, comedic I guess.

When Donna told her mother that she was a lesbian, her mother's response was, "You're goin' to hell." Her mother also yelled at Donna as she recounts,

She yelled at me and said "How could you do this to me?" Like, "Why would you tell me this?" And I was like, "Well, you're my mom." So then she was like, "Well, we're just not gonna tell anyone right now," and I was like, "Okay - that's fine. If I, if you're gonna react this way, I don't want anyone else to react to me."

Donna said, in hindsight, she should not have been that surprised by her mother's reaction, since "she pretty much blows up about everything at first. If something upsets

her, she'll, like, have a big negative reaction and then she'll calm down. So, the next day she apologized and was like, 'I love you.'" Donna believes that her mother has come to the point of accepting her homosexuality, but she still does not speak with her mother about the topic very often.

Tony's experience coming out to his family was similar to Donna's in that he expected a much more positive response from his mother than what he received. Tony said,

I came out to my mom TWICE - the first time I actually wrote her a letter 'cause I was so afraid. And I was just really confused as to, you know, should I tell her? Should I just keep it a secret for a while? Or, um, you know, I just, I remember growing up, you know, in that little, small, honky-tonk, little, conservative town um, so yeah, I wrote her a letter and then I went for a walk. When I got back, we had this heated argument; basically she was yelling at me like - not the reaction I was hoping for and absolutely not what I was expecting. She was like, "Who put you up to this," kind of deal, like, you know, "You're too young to know what you want," since I was only 14 and like, "What about HIV? What about AIDS? What about society?" And, she just wanted to know, like, where I got this from. Like, you know, it's just a phase, you'll grow out of it.

The reaction from Tony's mother closed him off to her emotionally for about 6 months as he explains,

She and I just weren't as close as we had been. Like, I was forcing myself to talk to her and not be pissed off at the situation 'cause I understood what she was

saying, but at the same time I felt really hurt that she wouldn't just talk to me rather than, like, yell at me, and like, accuse me that someone had put me up to this. She and I were really close. But yeah, for about 6 months, she and I struggled just to communicate and not fight all the time. And then I came out again when I was 15. She apparently saw some gay Internet sites that I had been looking at on our computer and she was like, "What are these?" And I was like, "Well, remember, you know, a year ago, when I kind of, we had that little session?" I was like, you know, "It's really not a phase. It's not going anywhere, so."

After their second conversation, Tony's mother reacted better and their relationship began to heal. His mother began driving Tony to a GLBQ youth group meeting 45 minutes from their home. Today, Tony feels comfortable talking with his mother about dating issues and she has met some of the people Tony has dated while in college.

Involvement in GLBQ Activities on Campus

All 6 of the participants in this study connected with the GLBQ student population on campus through some form of activity. As I will discuss below, some of the participants chose to connect via sports groups while others utilized academic and socially focused GLBQ student groups and committees.

In her second interview session, Kathy explained that in hindsight she now believes she may have chosen to join one of the university's sports groups, at least partially, on the basis that it contained a significant number of lesbian members. She said, "Well, I joined the team when I was a freshman and there was, obviously, a lot of gay people on the team. I think I may have done that on purpose."

This particular sports team introduced Kathy to other lesbian peers for the first time in her life and proved over time to be a valuable resource in Kathy's sexual identity development as her first "real" girlfriend was another player on the team.

Donna described a similar experience on one of the university's sports teams and mentioned that many of her friends, both GLBQ and heterosexual, were past teammates. In addition to sports, Donna also became involved in a number of GLBQ student groups on campus. Donna explained that,

I'm more and more interested in, like, gay issues especially on the political agenda, and stuff like that. I think last year I was more into, like, going out to the gay clubs or the bars, and stuff like that 'cause it was fun, and I was single. But then, I just started to not care about going out so much. So now, I think I focus my energy on more political stuff, like, I helped plan a state-wide GLBT conference on campus this past year; and I've gotten more involved with the [GLBQ] student programs on campus. I like just getting people together on campus and uh, making the community more visible to everyone and making people more comfortable with it.

Donna has tailored her GLBQ activities on campus toward her political career goals and believes that these experiences will be a definite advantage since she perceives same-sex political issues as more prevalent in today's society.

Similar to Donna, the remaining participants have endeavored to align their academic and career goals with the various GLBQ groups and activities on campus.

Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin have all held leadership positions within student organizations on campus.

Both Austin and Charlie sought out opportunities to interact with the other GLBQ students within their own academic departments. Austin was a founding member of his department's GLBQ student group. Additionally, Austin served as a board member for the on-campus chapter of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a national GLBQ lobbying organization.

Austin's activities were not limited to GLBQ groups as he explained that his interests became more diversified during his college experience. Austin said,

I've done a couple of things. I was in a number of engineering clubs on campus that competed nationally on projects. I'm also a member of the open source student group on campus because I'm a nerd, and I love Linux. Um, but those clubs and organizations didn't get nearly as much attention at the beginning as the gay ones. I started to kind of get away from that and started putting more of a focus on developing me as a person in leadership, and professionally. You know, like more of a business person that you see at a business meeting or whatever. And, the fact that I'm gay is just like, not a big deal. Professionally, it shouldn't matter if I'm gay or straight.

All of the participants in the study echoed Austin's experiences and perspective regarding sexuality. The GLBQ clubs and activities on campus became less significant to the participants as they matured and developed their sexual identity. This is further discussed in the next section.

Sexuality as a Component of the Whole Person

As mentioned above, the fact that the participants were GLBQ became less of a defining factor in their overall identity over time. In the beginning of their college experience, the participants relied heavily on the support and resources they found in the GLBQ groups. As the participants matured and began to gain comfort with their sexual identities, however, the fact that they were GLBQ became less important; and they focused their energies more toward growing as a professional. All of the participants exhibited and/or communicated this level of comfort regarding their sexual identities in some way.

Tony spoke of the change he has experienced regarding his sexuality and its importance in his life,

I honestly think it's just one component of me now. You know, there's other pieces to that and sometimes I put my sexuality in the back seat. Like, it's always there but I don't use my sexuality to get ahead or to get where I want to be. It's just kind of there and I know it's there, but I don't, like, try to use it to my advantage or anything like that.

Tony went on to explain that his family and cultural heritage have become more significant as he matures.

I think, as I'm getting older I find that I have more attachment to my family and like, cultural background. Because I wanna carry those traditions on as much as I can, so that I don't lose, well, so that my family doesn't lose its identity from

where we came from. So, yeah, my family and, like, cultural background, I think, is more important and more prevalent than my sexuality now.

Kathy also indicated that her sexuality is not as significant as the other portions of her personality. In fact, Kathy attached very little value at all to the labels of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. She explained,

I mean, I'm pretty okay with being gay and I like it, but I still consider myself bisexual. I'm, like, comfortable with either idea. I don't really know what I am (laughter). And, I don't really think it's that important. I feel like I'll fall in love with whoever I'm supposed to.

Part of the reason for Kathy's views is that she does not like the idea of being defined by any label.

I like people to, like, meet me and know me before I tell them, like, "I'm gay." I don't want that to be the first thing they consider. My sexuality doesn't define me, so I don't want them to define me by my sexuality. There's a lot more to me than that.

The comments made by Charlie also conveyed this notion of sexuality being less significant in the grand scheme of life. In regard to being gay, Charlie said,

I definitely have it as an integral part of me, but not all of me. It's just part of me is being gay. I mean, I'm a lot of other things. I have a lot of other things on my plate. My sexual identity is just, basically, who I like to fuck. Like, who am I going home to, you know?

When I asked Charlie whether he was “out” at work, he explained that he does not hide anything, but he also does not flaunt it. “It’s none of anyone’s business.” From Charlie’s perspective, being gay should have no impact on his job performance or productivity. Therefore, he does not feel compelled to discuss his sexuality in professional circles.

Austin spoke of his own process of “coming to terms” with his sexuality and that of his other GLBQ friends. Austin believes that family and college has played a critical role in the process,

Most of us [Austin and the friends his age] are at the point where being gay is just a component of our self. And one thing that I see that’s very similar between us is that our family is very important to us. And I think that that has really helped.

When I see friends that are still maybe in that, like, gay versus straight phase, they’re typically not very close with their parents and they might only talk to their parents on a very limited basis.

According to Austin, acceptance of sexuality as just one component of a larger whole is occurring even faster with people younger than he. Austin said, “With the younger gays, I think that it’s much more accepted now and the family connection is important, and I think they normalize much faster than we do.”

Austin’s college experience has also helped him “normalize” through the interactions he has had,

I guess you could say um, it’s [college] helped a lot in that a lot of the people here have been, like, “Oh, you’re gay. Who cares?” Which is really, like, the ideal

case, I guess, you would call it and so it's probably helped me a lot in my normalization phase, or, at least, getting to there.

Proof of this acceptance by peers can be witnessed in the interactions Austin has with his numerous straight, male friends in engineering. Austin said,

we always teased the hell out of each other because, you know, straight guys – they do some things that are like, *really* gay. And so, I always point those out to them and they're like, “Ha, ha. Silly fag. Dicks are for chicks” (laughter).

Self-confidence and Autonomy

Each participant exuded a sense that they felt confident in who he or she is as an individual. It was also clear that they all preferred to conduct their lives in a self-sufficient manner. Their self-confidence was communicated through the openness in which they spoke in classes about their sexuality, as well as in the choices they have made in college.

Melanie's level of comfort in her identification as queer has increased while she has been in college. She attributes this increase, at least in part, to the experiences she has had in her women's studies courses. Melanie said, “As far as my sexuality is concerned, I'm able to express myself more now that I'm in college, which is big. I mean, which is huge, because I was never able to express my sexuality in high school.”

Melanie has found herself playing the role of an activist many times on campus. This may be due to the alternative look that Melanie has chosen in her clothes and facial piercings. Melanie explained,

Being queer in college has allowed me to open up more. Um, it's allowed me to play more of an activist role on campus because the term queer is so confusing for some people who are straight, and they may not understand it. So, I find myself having to explain it a lot. But, that's good that I'm explaining it a lot because making people more aware of what queer is, and like, that there are queer people, and that that's how we identify is important. They need to know that it's not a negative derogatory term anymore.

Some of the other participants also credited their level of self confidence to their own coming out experience and the fact that they have to deal with being GLBQ on campus. Donna alluded to this,

I never had, like, an identity crisis or anything like that and I never really questioned myself that much either. That's not really my personality. I think I'm more confident in myself now that I've kind of established who I am. You know, I'm comfortable with myself and my sexuality because of what's happened in college.

Donna is not overly concerned whether people accept her sexuality or not. For instance, when I asked whether she had come out to her grandfather yet, Donna said,

I don't really feel like I need to; I mean, he's proud of me. And, like, I have a good relationship with them, so it doesn't really bother me that he doesn't know 'cause it's not like he'd ever change his mind or feelings about gays. So, I mean, I don't really care.

Donna's sense of independence stems from the lack of support she felt from her mother. She explained,

Yeah. I try to be as self-reliant as possible. Just, 'cause when I was younger I never talked to my mom, she's like an alcoholic and I was like, you know, I didn't really feel close to her. So, that's just kind of grew with me that, like, I don't really share personal feeling with her or other people.

Donna's desire to hold things inside has resulted in some of her friends calling her "unemotional" and "hard."

In my conversations with Charlie, he made it clear that he does not like to rely on other people for financial support and that it is very important for him to have his own space in all relationships. About money, Charlie said,

I have financial problems sometimes. But, I always take care of them myself. It's like I've never asked anyone for money. And, anytime my grandma has ever tried to give me money, I always gave it back to her. Like, she's never been able to give me money.

Charlie also takes pride in the fact that he has helped his mother out financially many times in the past.

In regard to friendships and/or romantic relationships, Charlie is reticent to commit most of his time or space. He explained,

I mean, I get annoyed if I'm with someone for too often. Like, as far as relationships go – I need my own space. It's like, so I can see you maybe one day

or 2 days or 3 days a week, I don't want to see you the other 4. You gotta go and have a life. I've got to have it that way.

Charlie has completed several abroad programs while in college and has planned another trip to occur during his final quarter in college. He enjoys and appreciates the distance that these opportunities provide.

Tony's level of self-confidence and autonomy is made obvious by the number of leadership roles he has performed and in his relationships with friends. As a leader, Tony has spoken in public on many occasions to large groups of people about his sexuality and the role that politics play in sexual orientation discrimination.

Tony has served as a GLBQ mentor to a number of first-year students over the years. Through these relationships, Tony has helped his younger peers navigate the coming out process with friends and family. He has also assisted his mentees with their professional development as a GLBQ individual and takes pride in the fact that the university's mentoring program has seen a significant increase within the past few years.

Tony also conducts his life independently in his friendships and romantic relationships. Tony ended his last relationship with his boyfriend months before our initial interview and, while he said he does like to date, he is not in a hurry to find another steady partner. In our interactions together, Tony did appear quite comfortable being single and stated that "there's really no hurry. I'm really fine being single at this point in my life."

Resilience and Self-care

All of the participants exhibited resiliency when approached with a challenge or problem. Additionally, each of the participants also included some form of self-care as a component of their resilience.

I was repeatedly struck during each of my interviews with a “deal and move on” mentality from the participants. Whether they decided upon this viewpoint consciously or subconsciously, none of the students were prone to feelings of self-pity. On the contrary, every one of the participants made it clear that, no matter the obstacle, they intended to move forward in their plans.

Donna and Austin were the loudest in communicating this “deal and move on” mindset. Donna attributed it mostly to her mother and said,

My mom had a kind of “buck up and deal with it” attitude. She’s like, you know, “Get over it. Deal with it. And, move on.” That’s her mentality and so, like, I kind of have the same mentality now.

Donna’s mother was a harsh critic of weakness in any form. Donna explained, “I guess I’m kind of reserved about my feelings ‘cause, like, if I would cry about something my mom would yell at me and um, that would upset me even more, you know? She viewed crying as a weakness.”

Austin conveyed this same sense of resiliency in life. Austin’s parents, however, are not the source of his “move on” approach to adversity. When I asked Austin who he confides in when he is stressed out or facing a problem, he laughed at me and responded,

Confide? I'm sorry - that's a weakness. (laughter) Seriously though - I just never needed to do that. And, I think that it has a lot to do with my personality. I'm a fairly independent person, and I don't need someone to hold my hand. My parents are like, "Hey! Make sure this is done." And I was like, "Pft. I'm done." So, I never really felt the need to confide in someone.

Austin's preferred approach to problem solving is to confront problems directly. He first analyzes the situation, gains as much information as possible, researches his possible solutions, and then acts. Rarely does Austin question himself once a decision has been made, and he has a very low tolerance for whining or failure. Austin holds himself to a high standard and expects those around him to do the same.

All of the participants mentioned that some form of exercise or sports was part of their stress-relief program. Five of the 6 participants specifically said that they utilized the student recreation facility located on their campus at least three to four times per week and considered it an important step in taking care of themselves. Three of the participants incorporated a daily exercise plan into their class schedules, oftentimes working out during the early morning so they could still make it to class on time.

Four of the participants, 2 male and 2 female, reported that they had visited the university's counseling center at least once over the course of their college experience in order to get through an extremely difficult period in their lives. Some of these difficulties stemmed from family issues, concerns related to coming out, and/or the typical stressors related to college.

Tendency Toward Planning and the Possession of a Post-Graduation Course of Action

All of the participants established personal, academic, and professional goals for themselves and endeavored to achieve those goals through some form of a plan.

Austin stated that he started thinking about career and life goals for himself in high school, but that they did not take shape until later in college,

I think in high school it was on a kind of shallower level. It was kind of just like, you know, this is what I want to do with my life. These are the kinds of goals that I want to have. I mean, it wasn't that detailed. And, it probably didn't start getting that detailed until around my sophomore year in college.

Completing his degree and obtaining a job immediately after graduation has been Austin's primary focus for the last 4 years and nearly every step he has taken has been with this set of goals in mind.

Austin believes that his sense of determination and focus originates mostly from his parents who instilled in him a deep need for personal fulfillment. Austin also feels that being a contributing member of society is extremely important. Part of this belief is what motivates Austin to push himself so hard and to live his life in the best way possible. Austin wants to provide a good role model to other GLBQ students on campus. He said, "I think that setting a good example for them is very important. I didn't have that when I started out."

Donna echoed this desire to establish and work toward goals in life. She described herself as "extremely motivated" and also suggested that her personality played a large

part in her tendency to plan. Donna explained, “I think my personality makes me pretty driven to, you know, set goals for myself and accomplish my goals.”

Donna also wants to have a positive impact on the world and to be a good role model for other GLBQ students. She said,

I’ve been really involved in the campus’ American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) group. I’ve done a lot of volunteer stuff for them, and I go talk to high school students and classes about why they should know their rights, and like, the Bill of Rights. For me, it’s like all about protecting the Bill of Rights and I’m really interested in that and, like, Constitutional Law.

Donna’s work with the ACLU chapter on campus and her various leadership roles on student committees are all part of her plan to enter law school following graduation. She has made a conscious decision to focus her energy toward career and political concerns rather than recreational activities centering on alcohol.

Melanie, Kathy, Charlie, and Tony each conveyed a similar story wherein they have established a career goal, formulated a plan to attain that goal, and endeavored to incorporate their GLBQ identities into their plans wherever possible.

All 6 of the participants have some type of post-graduation plan already in place. For Austin and Charlie, this plan entails the acceptance of a new job in their chosen field. Kathy intends to work a year abroad, possibly in the Peace Corps, immediately following graduation, and the remaining 3 participants plan to enroll in graduate studies. Donna has already begun her law school application process and is awaiting decisions from three

institutions. Melanie and Tony are enrolling in a master's program within their academic fields.

Summary

This chapter began with a detailed explanation of the thematic coding process. Twenty categorical similarities were identified between the 6 participant interviews and of these 20 categories, 10 common themes were discovered. Examples within each of the 10 themes were provided and discussed.

The 10 common themes identified through the grounded theory data analysis process suggest that it is important for an individual to possess a strong sense of self, actively seek opportunities for personal and professional growth, and maintain a resilient composure in the face of adversity. All of the participants experienced some form and level of rejection as a result of their non-heterosexual identity and yet, these individuals upheld their true internal feelings and were steadfast in their challenge toward the hegemonic beliefs and structures within their respective families and society.

In the next chapter, I begin with a cursory review of the study. Then, I relate the 10 identified themes back to this study's central research questions. I conclude the chapter by providing recommendations for future research, implications to practice within education, and my own personal reflections.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The first portion of this chapter includes a review of the study's purpose, methodology, participants, and research questions. The second section of the chapter presents a list of responses to the study's research questions and the third section provides my personal reflections as the researcher. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the implications gleaned from this study and their application to future research and professional practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the common factors that exist which enable a GLBQ student to persist in spite of the significant attrition rates for that subpopulation. Correlations surrounding sexual identity development, past experiences, and positive and negative contextual variables were investigated.

Methodology

A life history methodology was utilized to identify the common attributes and experiences that exist among persistent GLBQ postsecondary students. The life history methodology was most appropriate for this study as it enables a researcher to capture and analyze a participant's past experience, the meaning attached to his or her historical experiences and the impact it has had on the individual's life choices (Bertaux, 1981;

Cole, 2001; Denzin, 1989; Goodson, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995).

Life history data were obtained through a series of 18 one-on-one interviews that were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded theory approach. A total of 6 individuals, 3 women and 3 men, participated in this study. Each of these participants provided a detailed account of his or her family and childhood, experiences coming out to family and friends, the factors that influenced the choice of a college, and what has enabled him or her to persist through challenging times.

Participants

A “snowball” technique was used to identify and solicit participants for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Life history information was obtained through several one-on-one interviews, as well as numerous subsequent conversations that were held in more casual locations such as campus coffee shops or restaurants that were familiar to the participants. All of the participants attended the same university; however, each of them differed in his or her educational and career goals. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and any identifying information was disguised or removed in order to ensure confidentiality.

Research Questions

One central research question and three sub-questions framed this study. The central research question was “What factors in a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer person’s life history enable him or her to persist through higher education and successfully obtain an undergraduate degree?” and the three sub-questions were: (1) At

what level of personal development, within commonly cited Queer Identity formation theories, do the persistent GLBQ students reside? (2) Are there elements within their respective familial and higher education cultures that serve to support GLBQ students and, if so, what are they? and (3) Are there elements within their respective familial and higher education cultures that serve to hinder persistent GLBQ students and, if so, what are they?

Grounded Theory Analysis of the Data

Each of the above research questions was kept in mind as I conducted interviews with the participants. As the data were analyzed for similarities in the participants' transcripts, 10 themes emerged that appeared common to all participants. These common themes were presented and discussed in chapter V. An outline of the themes and their brief descriptions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Common Themes of GLBQ Postsecondary Students Who Choose to Persist

Theme	Explanation
High behavioral expectations during childhood & adolescence	Parents or guardians of the participant maintained high behavioral expectations (i.e., “strict rules”) in the home.
Strong family connection	Participants’ strongest personal connection is to their primary caretaker (parent, grandparent, guardian, etc.).
Strong work ethic	Participants’ caretakers instilled a strong work ethic.
High educational expectations	Participants’ caretakers established high expectations regarding school and grades.
Guardian acceptance	Participants’ caretakers accepted GLBQ sexuality.
Involvement in GLBQ activities on campus	Participants were involved in GLBQ activities on campus.
Sexuality is a component of the whole person	Participants perceive their sexuality as just one component of their entire identity.
Self-confidence and autonomy	Participants exude a strong sense of confidence in themselves (they know who they are) and they prefer to be self-sufficient.
Resilience and self-care	Participants are able to deal with whatever life hands them by taking care of themselves and continuing forward.

Table 2 (continued)

Common Themes of GLBQ Postsecondary Students Who Choose to Persist

Theme	Explanation
Tendency toward planning and the possession of a post-graduation course of action	Participants establish plans or goals and then strive to meet them. To that end, all participants have a course of action laid out following the completion of their bachelor's degree.

Relating the Themes to the Research Questions

To better address the primary research question, I begin with the three sub-questions that framed this study:

At what level of personal development, within commonly cited Queer Identity formation theories, do the persistent GLBQ students reside?

As discussed in chapter II, a number of queer identity development models have been developed which endeavor to explain the step involved in the coming out process. Lipkin (1999) contends that the majority of these models share a common set of "pivotal moments" in each GLBQ person's life. These moments include:

1. Awareness of the stigma – the individual learns through friends, family, and/or society that there is a stigma associated with being a GLBQ person.
2. Realization that "I am different" – through interactions with friends, family, and society, the individual realizes that an innate part of his or her persona is different from others in some way.
3. Sexualization of the sense of difference – the individual comes to the realization that the difference he or she has felt is due to his or her sexual orientation or feelings of same-sex attractions.
4. Denial and resistance – because of the learned stigma associated with being GLBQ, the individual resists the notion that he or she is not heterosexual and denies the existence of non-heterosexual feelings or interests.
5. Realization – the individual realizes that he or she can no longer ignore or dismiss his or her same-sex feelings and arrive at the realization that he or she is GLBQ.

6. Acceptance of sexual identity – the individual finally accepts the fact that he or she is GLBQ.
7. Exploration of the GLBQ community – the individual begins to explore the GLBQ community through friendships, romantic relationships, and social groups or establishments.
8. Opening Up – As the individual becomes more comfortable with the idea of being GLBQ, he or she begins to divulge his or her non-heterosexual identity to others.
9. Recognition of sexuality's place as a part of the whole person – the individual reaches a point wherein being GLBQ is no longer the defining factor in his or her existence, but rather a component of overall identity.

During the interviews with each of the participants, I explained that these queer identity models existed and also shared the composite model presented in Figure 1 of chapter II. I asked each participant to indicate where he or she resided on the continuum. All of the participants indicated that they had moved beyond the “Opening Up” stage of their queer identity development and were at the point where they viewed their sexuality as just one of many components that account for their overall identity.

Sexuality is a component of the whole person. Each of the participants stated that he or she felt being GLBQ was simply a component of his or her overall identity and that it did not define who he or she was as a person. Kathy said it most succinctly, “My sexuality doesn’t define me, so I don’t want to be defined by my sexuality. There’s a lot more to me than that.”

All of the participants indicated that they were more concerned now with their academic and professional goals than they were about being GLBQ. The participants also attributed this fact to experiences they have had in college. Austin explained,

I think my education and college experiences have helped a lot in the normalization phase of my development. I mean, it's helped a lot in that a lot of the people there are, like, "Oh, you're gay. Who cares?"

Many of the participants suggested that what they were able to find in college is now available for younger GLBQ students in high school through gay-straight student alliances and community GLBQ youth support groups.

According to the participants, a result of the increase in sources of support for GLBQ high school students is that more are entering college having already opened up about their sexuality and are thus, farther along in the sexual identity development process. There is research to support the participants' perceptions and the contention that an increase in society's level of acceptance toward the GLBQ population has made the coming out process easier, at least for some individuals ("Class of 2001 more open to gays," 2001; Drasin et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Challenges to the queer identity development models. An additional theme related to the most commonly cited queer identity development models emerged from the data. Donna, Kelly, Charlie, and Tony all stated that they never experienced a significant period of GLBQ "Pride." Additionally, when I asked whether they had experienced an "us versus them" period toward heterosexuals, they replied in the negative. A comment

made by Kathy was indicative of the other 3 participants; she said, “I never really looked at the decision about my sexuality as important. It’s just who I was.”

One possible explanation for the absence of this “pride” phase is that many of the participants rarely felt “at odds” with their peers. In fact, during their time in college, most of them have created social networks that consist of all sexuality types. Charlie, Donna, Kathy, and Austin spoke of enjoying various activities with their heterosexual friends and how their heterosexual peers are not as concerned about their sexuality.

Austin suggested that the lack of an “us versus them” or extreme “pride” period could be due to the fact that younger people do not see being GLBQ as that “big of a deal.” Consequently, members of the younger GLBQ generation no longer feel as strong a need to bond with the GLBQ community or to proudly express their non-heterosexuality.

Are there elements within their respective familial and higher education cultures that serve to support GLBQ students and, if so, what are they?

High behavioral expectations during childhood & adolescence. All of the participants indicated that their parents held strict rules during their childhood. As such, the participants were raised with an expectation that they would conduct themselves in a positive manner. Additionally, caretakers of the participants maintained clearly defined boundaries regarding each student’s friends as well as their recreational activities.

Being raised in this type of an environment, the participants were less likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol. The participants also indicated that they felt as if they

“mattered more” because at least one parental figure cared about their lives and invested time and effort in their upbringing.

Strong work ethic. Each participant possessed a strong ethic in regard to his or her work and studies. This trait was instilled by their parents or guardians in various ways. Some participants learned to work hard by simply watching their caretakers’ actions while growing up. These people served as role models because they worked long hours to provide for their families and the participants recognized and appreciated this fact.

Other participants indicated that they were verbally told by their parents or guardians that it was an expectation they work hard in all endeavors. For most, this expectation was communicated at an early age and thus became a way of life for the participant.

High educational expectations. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) assert that family is one of the strongest motivating factors regarding a student’s college aspirations. All of the participants stated that their parents or guardians held high expectations for them regarding education. Each participant was expected to complete his or her homework every night, to obtain good grades in school, and to enroll in a college or university immediately following high school graduation. Consequently, there was never a question of whether each participant would go to college or not, but rather what institution he or she would attend. The following quote by Tony is representative of the other participants’ comments,

In my house, you did your homework and college was never a question as far as whether or not I was gonna go. It was, “You’re gonna go.” My mom and dad

were, like, “You go to school so you can have a good job, so you don’t have to do the manual things that that we’ve had to do,” like, working a factory and stuff.

All 6 participants stated that they maintained good grades in school and were generally viewed as academically successful by their family and peers. This information would appear logical since research related to the effects of parental expectations on student success and educational achievement suggests that a positive correlation exists between a parent’s expectations of his or her child and the level at which a child performs (Gill & Reynolds, 1996; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; McGrath & Repetti, 1995; Seyfried & Chung, 2002).

Strong family connection. Every participant in the study identified at least one parent or guardian as his or her strongest relationship in life, and this individual served as a source of emotional support, encouragement, and guidance when needed. This finding is important since research indicates that family support has a significant impact on the success and persistence of students (Castillo & Hill 2004; Conley, 2008; Hand & Payne, 2008; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008; Saggio & Rendón, 2004).

Due to the critical nature of this relationship, all of the participants stated that coming out to this person was extremely difficult for fear of what the response would be. As will be discussed in the next section, being accepted by this person as GLBQ had a profound impact on each participant.

Guardian acceptance. All of the participants had revealed their GLBQ identity to at least one person who had raised them (i.e., a parent or grandparent). That person, while

perhaps not initially, had arrived at a point where he or she accepted the participant's non-heterosexual identity. The positive response of each participant's parent or guardian is significant since research suggests that parental acceptance of a child's GLBQ identity has a profound impact on his or her health and well-being (Edwards, 1997; Freedman, 2003; Griffin, Wirth & Wirth, 1996; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz & Sanches, 2009)

All of the participants said that they felt a strong need to tell their parent or guardian and that being accepted by that person had a significant effect on their sexual identity development. For most of the participants, coming out to their primary caretaker was the most anxiety-laden step in opening up. Tony had always felt loved and supported by his parents and yet he was terrified to tell them he was gay. Tony's fear was due in large part to the coming out stories he had heard about other GLBQ youth. Tony said, "It scared me 'cause I was worried that I would lose everything that I had 'cause, you know, I had heard horror stories where kids got kicked out of their house and disowned and things like that."

Once the participants finally told their parent or guardian that they were GLBQ and they were not disowned, it felt to them as if a huge weight had been lifted from their shoulders. Charlie's description was indicative of all participants. He explained that once he told his grandmother and she answered that she did not care whether he was gay or straight and that she loved him no matter what, he felt like he could "tell the world."

Involvement in GLBQ activities on campus. Research has shown that there is a relationship between a student's involvement and participation at the postsecondary level and the perceived value of his or her college experience which impacts the student's

decision to persist (Berger & Milem, 1999; College Experiences, 2007; Derby, 2007; Tinto, 1990, 1993; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising that all of the participants were involved in some sort of GLBQ activity on campus and suggested that this involvement had assisted in their sexual identity development in some way. Melanie said the following in regard to her GLBQ activities on campus,

I think it's had a really good impact on me. I feel like I'm a better person now. I'm able to recognize diversity and inclusion and, I guess it's, like, opened my eyes.

I've been able to see other gay people and interact with them.

The ability to connect with other GLBQ students on campus provided the participants with a foundation of support as they came out to friends and family. Involvement also aided the participants in seeing that they could be GLBQ and still be successful in life.

Resilience and self-care. All of the participants exuded a “deal with it and move on” mentality regarding issues and obstacles they experienced while in college. While some participants attributed this mindset to an innate component of their personality, most credited their parents or guardians for their approach to life. What became clear from the interviews was that a person’s resiliency has many points of origin and that the possession of a non-heterosexual identity is just one of those possible points.

Donna, Austin, and Charlie all classified themselves as having a Type A personality. As such, they believed that they were more inclined to see things in a more logical and analytical way. These 3 participants also suggested that responding in an overly emotional way to a problem or issue was more of a hindrance than a help in challenging situations.

The remaining 3 participants suggested that their resiliency stemmed from watching their parents work hard to overcome whatever obstacles they faced. Melanie, Kathy, and Tony grew to respect and value these traits in their parents and endeavor to emulate them as much as possible.

All of the participants indicated that they used some form of self-care or personal maintenance as a means of being resilient. Activities such as exercise and psychotherapeutic counseling helped them deal with stressors and work through any major issues they faced.

Tendency toward planning and the possession of a post-graduation course of action. Every participant was inclined to establish goals in life and formulated plans to attain those goals. For each participant, completion of his or her bachelor's degree was a paramount goal in life. Additionally, many of the participants set personal goals in areas related to weight management, behavioral health, spiritual growth, and financial security.

All 6 of the participants maintained some course of action immediately following the successful completion of their college degree. Austin and Charlie have both secured employment within their chosen fields and plan to begin their professional careers as soon as they graduate. Donna, Melanie, and Tony plan to continue with their education and are set to enroll in a graduate degree program following graduation. The final participant, Kathy, has made plans to work and study abroad once her bachelor's degree is completed.

Are there elements within their respective familial and higher education cultures that serve to hinder persistent GLBQ students and, if so, what are they?

No common themes related to this sub-question were found. However, in various combinations, a majority of the participants mentioned similar issues or concerns that hindered their development or progression in college as GLBQ individuals. These are discussed below.

More resources and information needed to help young individuals in the coming out process. Five of the 6 participants indicated that when they first began the process of coming out, they were unable to locate satisfactory materials or resources. Most of these participants attempted to locate GLBQ information through the Internet, but none were successful. Tony and Austin explained that when they searched for common terms such as “gay” or “bisexual,” the results they received had more to do with on-line pornographic material than they did helpful information.

A few of these participants surreptitiously attempted to locate information on coming out at their local library, but none were successful. Most of the books found at these libraries focused on either fictional GLBQ stories or on “conversion therapy” wherein an individual endeavors to shed his or her homosexual or bisexual identity and “become” heterosexual.

None of the participants had convenient access to a GLBQ youth support group. Tony was the only individual who participated in one of these groups, and his group was over 40 minutes away from his hometown.

Melanie, Austin, Tony, and Charlie also voiced a concern over the scant amount of material specifically related to transgendered individuals. According to these 4 participants, the transgender population is in even greater need of help and support in dealing with their identity formation process.

A majority of college students lack GLBQ information. While none of the participants in this study felt that they had been a victim of homophobia, a majority of them said that more GLBQ information needs to be conveyed to *all* postsecondary students. The participants felt that the information would be most beneficial if it were taught during the first or second term of the freshman year and if it covered “the basics” of what GLBQ meant.

Tony stated, “Some students will have a gay roommate and may have never met or known a gay person in their life before college.” Melanie also suggested that most students come into contact with at least one GLBQ person during their college career. Melanie and many of the other participants assert that if a heterosexual student possessed even a basic understanding of the GLBQ population, it would assist him or her in his or her level of comfort and acceptance.

Identification of GLBQ students is a problem. Due to their respective leadership roles on campus, Donna, Melanie, Tony, and Austin all mentioned that early identification of GLBQ students is a problem. According to the 4 participants, many students may be questioning their sexuality during the first few years of college but, due to the stigma associated with being GLBQ, they are afraid to seek out information and resources on the topic.

While a few institutions have begun adding a GLBQ “self-select” option on their applications, self-identification on college paperwork is also not effective since many students complete these forms in the presence of their parents or guardians. Students who are truly questioning their sexuality and are feeling confused may not feel comfortable or knowledgeable enough to answer the GLBQ-related questions truthfully.

What factors in a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer person’s life history enable him or her to persist through higher education and successfully obtain an undergraduate degree?

The common themes that emerged from the interview data have been discussed in chapter V and again in relation to the above sub-questions. Rather than explicitly restating the themes once more in an effort to answer this study’s central question, what follows is a discussion of the linkages that I believe exist among the themes, as well as the impact of those linkages on the intellectual and sexual identity development of the participants.

Parental acceptance & a strong family connection. Of first and foremost importance to the development of the participants was the acceptance of their sexual identities by their parents or guardians, as well as the existence of at least one strong connection to their family of origin. The significance of these conditions cannot be overstated as there is a copious amount of research that supports the critical role family plays in an individual’s intellectual (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Gesell, 1925; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Piaget, 1954, 1967; Spock, 1946) and sexual identity development process (Adams, 1998; Adams & Jones, 1983; Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000; Blustein & Palladino, 1991; Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985, 1988;

Marcia, 1983, 1988, 1993; Nelson, Hughes, Handal, Katz, & Searight, 1993; Papini, Micka, & Barnett, 1989; Rice, 1990; Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994). Stated simply, the participants of this study would not be as developmentally evolved as they are were it not for their family's love, support, and acceptance of their entire identity.

Involvement in GLBQ activities on campus, sexuality is a component of the whole person, & self-confidence and autonomy. The involvement that the participants had with GLBQ organizations, committees, and groups on campus was a benefit in at least two ways. First, these activities provided an opportunity for the participants to meet other GLBQ individuals; the opportunities included university faculty and staff, as well as peers. Through the participants' interactions with faculty, staff, and peers, each gained a better understanding of what it means to be a GLBQ individual. Consequently, the participants were afforded the ability to discern what characteristics, behaviors, and traits "felt right" to them and what did not. This process aided in the growth of each participant's positive self-perception as GLBQ, thus facilitating his or her sexual identity development and resulting in his or her ability to see sexuality as just one of many components to the overall self. Recognition of sexuality as a component of the whole, or the "normalizing" phase, is the final stage in most queer identity development models and signals the highest level of development possible (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Lipkin, 1999; Troiden, 1989).

Second, the leadership opportunities provided through the GLBQ activities supported the growth of each participant's sense of self-confidence. As Donna, Kathy, Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin grew to understand themselves better, their self-

esteem increased, and their orientation to the world became more autonomous. That is to say, each participant developed an ability to make decisions for himself or herself based upon the meaning assigned to past experiences and knowledge gained. What is described here serves as the very definition of self-authorship. Therefore, I assert that each of the 6 participants in this study exhibited, on some level and at various times, fourth order consciousness. This is further discussed in the following section.

Third and fourth order consciousness. Kegan's (1994) "Orders of Consciousness" were outlined and discussed in chapter II. All 6 of the participants exhibited evidence of consistent third order consciousness. Donna, Kathy, Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin all spoke clearly about their points of view on the world and on being GLBQ, as well as on the values and ideals they held. Their statements served as evidence that each of them had attained a clear sense of their own identity. Each of the participants also spoke of various situations in which he or she subordinated his or her own needs for the benefit of others. One example of this was the realization by each participant that he or she needed to "give back" to the GLBQ community on campus through mentorship programs and volunteering time.

It is also my belief that the 6 participants showed, at various times, evidence of fourth order consciousness or self-authorship. Kegan (1994) states that attending college "can provide a new evolutionary medium that recognizes and cultures the moves toward self-authorship" (p. 186). The hallmarks of self-authorship include: a clear sense of identity, self-regulation, and autonomy. Donna, Kathy, Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin conveyed these traits in their interview statements and behaviors.

Thus, I believe that each participant's ability to act as a self-author of his or her own life played a significant role in the decision to persist when approached with a challenge or obstacle in college. In other words, rather than relying on someone else to frame and address their problems, successes, and failures, the participants are able to depend upon their own set of internal values and ideals. This is the essence of self-authorship and the first requirement in fourth order consciousness.

Generated Hypotheses

Tierney (2000) states that the work of a life history is to increase the understanding of the conditions in which people have conducted their lives, so that "everyone engaged in the life history—researcher, storyteller, reader—has the possibility of reconfiguring his or her life" (p. 549). To that end, I offer the following hypotheses regarding the contexts and experiences of GLBQ students who choose to persist through postsecondary education:

1. The coming out process is occurring, for some students, before their graduation from high school.
2. Many GLBQ individuals are normalizing their sexualities earlier than past generations due to an increase in society's level of acceptance.
3. The coming out process and postsecondary educational journey is smoother when a GLBQ individual's caretaker is accepting of his or her non-heterosexual identity.
4. Participation in GLBQ activities and groups on campus supports the sexual and intellectual development of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer students.

5. The utilization of self-care measures increases the likelihood that a GLBQ student will persist through his or her postsecondary degree.

Recommendations for Future Study

Rationale

This study served as a scholarly examination of life histories obtained from GLBQ postsecondary students who choose to persist. While much information has been gleaned from this study, it has also produced a number of additional questions as well as identified areas that require further research.

Post-doctoral study. A goal of this study was to identify what themes exist within the life histories of GLBQ students who choose to persist at the secondary level. As such, the life histories presented in this study provided a great amount of information regarding the influence of family as well as the importance of GLBQ resources for young individuals. Future studies related to this topic should endeavor to increase the sample size in order to obtain even more information regarding this subpopulation of postsecondary students.

Further research on the coming out process at younger ages. This study indicates that the age at which individuals self-identify as GLBQ may be decreasing as the result of a positive shift in society's perceptions regarding the GLBQ population. While a small body of literature has been written on this topic (Drasin et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005), this study reinforces the need for additional research related to younger GLBQ individuals and the support systems and resources that may or may not exist.

Further research on the decrease of GLBQ pride and “us versus them”

perception during sexual identity development. As mentioned earlier, the comments made by a majority of the participants suggest that some younger GLBQ individuals do not experience a phase of GLBQ “pride” or an “us versus them” mentality toward heterosexuals during the coming out process. Additional research should be conducted to establish the validity of this observation and to confirm whether or not the increase in society’s acceptance toward GLBQ people is the cause.

Additional studies on the importance of a parent’s acceptance of his or her son’s

or daughter’s GLBQ identity. Much of the research that has been conducted on the effects of parental acceptance on a GLBQ son or daughter pertains to the potential negative outcomes a person may experience as a result of being rejected or disowned. There is already a significant amount of research which suggests that a negative parental response increases a GLBQ child’s chances of abusing drugs and alcohol, attempting suicide, and contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Kiedman, 2002; Marshal et al., 2008; McDaniel, Purcell, & D’Augelli, 2001; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Rhee, 2004; Rutter & Soucar, 2002; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanches, 2009; Westefeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001; Wright & Perry, 2006). However, more research is needed that specifically investigates the impact parental support has on a GLBQ individual’s level of self-actualization. Stated another way, this research would explore whether a negative parental reaction significantly impedes a GLBQ child’s intellectual and professional development.

A study on the importance of GLBQ groups, activities and resources to the sexual and intellectual development of GLBQ postsecondary students. More research is needed that focuses on the importance of GLBQ groups, activities, and resources at the postsecondary level. Whereas many of these initiatives are geared more toward socializing and networking, centering on mentor relationships and professional development as a GLBQ individual may be more beneficial to students.

A longitudinal study. The participants of this study had already successfully completed the majority of their coursework and were on target to complete their bachelor degrees within the academic year. Future research might follow a cohort of GLBQ students throughout their college journey. Such a study would provide even greater detail regarding the importance of an institution's environment as well as the potential impact of family and peer interactions.

Life histories of GLBQ students enrolled at a private institution. The participants of this study were enrolled in a large, Midwestern, public research intensive university. Future studies might examine the life histories of GLBQ individuals enrolled in private institutions. This research could identify positive or detrimental similarities or differences between the types of institutions.

Recommendations for Practice

Rationale

The life histories obtained from the 6 participants of this study provide not only an account of their history, but also document the effects that their family, friends and education have had on their lives thus far. This information should be useful to

administrators within education, especially at the postsecondary level. What follows are conclusions that were drawn as a result of this study, as well as a list of recommendations for practice. These statements are offered as an addition to the public discussion that already exists surrounding GLBQ students within higher education; they are not meant to be perceived as universally applicable “truths.” Every student, institution, and circumstance is unique and, thus, there are no “concrete” solutions.

Higher education has served as a vehicle by which heterosexist and homophobic “norms” have been inflicted upon GLBQ individuals. The life histories presented in this study are an important addition to the dialogue that should be taking place within higher education regarding improvements that are necessary for all non-normative groups. Additionally, these stories help to clarify the responsibility of colleges and universities to support GLBQ students, faculty, and staff who may lack the familial and social support structures that facilitate positive identity development. To that end, educational practitioners must remain cognizant of the fact that every GLBQ student stands as the culmination of his or her past experiences, hardships and triumphs.

Practitioners should be vigilant in their scrutiny of policies and procedures, ensuring that none exclude or discriminate one group in favor of another. Stated most simply, GLBQ students deserve, at a minimum, the same amount of recognition, respect, and support as their heterosexual counterparts.

Governing bodies of postsecondary institutions need to evaluate the institution-wide policies and procedures that may affect GLBQ students. Additionally, these doctrines must ensure that the institution provides a welcoming and affirming

environment wherein a student is able to locate and connect with the appropriate resources and opportunities that facilitate his or her sexual identity formation process.

While the participants of this study have been able to successfully navigate the challenges encountered along their college journey, the success of those who follow in their path may be more easily obtained as a result of the suggestions that follow.

Increased visibility on campus. Even though society's views on the GLBQ population have improved over recent years, some GLBQ youth are still unwilling or unable to reveal their sexual identity. As was discussed earlier, the addition of a GLBQ option or "check box" on admission paperwork is not sufficient for reaching this closeted sect of students. Therefore, postsecondary institutions should consider increasing the level of support and opportunities for visibility given to GLBQ groups on campus.

Colleges and universities would better serve their students by making sure that anyone interested is able to connect with GLBQ organizations anonymously and through confidential channels. This might entail the use of an institutional Web site whereby students are able to self-select information on groups and activities related to the GLBQ population on campus.

Inclusion of GLBQ information and resources in new student orientations. Most colleges and universities now require that all new students attend some type of orientation program. These oftentimes mandatory courses or seminars provide an opportunity for institutions to convey their expectations regarding inclusion and respect for diversity in all forms. To that end, postsecondary institutions should consider the inclusion of GLBQ information in their orientation programs. Additionally, the

institution's non-discrimination policy should be reviewed and discussed during orientation so that every student is made aware of its contents, as well as the ramifications that can result from infractions.

Creation and support of GLBQ mentoring programs. Many of the participants in this study were fortunate in that they had an opportunity to take part in a GLBQ mentoring program. These individuals stated that their mentoring relationship had a significant, positive effect on their college experience and professional development. These types of opportunities, however, are not available in all colleges and universities.

Institutions lacking GLBQ student mentoring initiatives should consider the establishment of such a program and encourage their GLBQ faculty, staff, and administrators to participate.

Establish GLBQ living-learning communities on campus. Four major types of learning communities have been identified by Shapiro and Levine (1999). These include: (1) cohorts involved in large courses or first-year experiences; (2) paired or clustered courses; (3) courses that are team-taught; and (4) residential learning communities (also called "living-learning" communities). While the first three of these categories focus primarily on an institution's curriculum, the fourth type pertains more to a student's experience outside the classroom.

Living-learning communities have been shown to possess many benefits to students (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006; Muntz & Crabtree, 2006; Soldner &

Szelénia, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Zeller, 2008). According to The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (2007), the effects of these communities include:

- Greater use of residence hall resources
- Improved student study habits
- An easier social transition to college
- Increases in critical thinking and analysis abilities
- Greater levels of confidence regarding academic and professional success
- Students feel less overwhelmed by their coursework
- Students feel a greater sense of belonging
- Students exhibit a deeper appreciation for diversity
- Increases in college grade point averages

Given their potential benefits, institutions should seriously consider establishing living-learning communities specifically for GLBQ students on campus. These programs would most likely assist new GLBQ students in connecting with their older peers, increase students' participation in GLBQ activities and groups that are available on campus, and serve as a resource for support in the process of queer identity formation.

Researcher's Reflections

Background

The impetus for this research stemmed from my own personal experiences as an undergraduate student. When I first began the process of coming out to myself, it was an anxiety-filled time because I was unsure of how my family would react. As I had feared,

when I told my mother about my gay identity, I was disowned; this occurred during the latter part of my freshman year in college.

I was not prepared for the amount of emotional turmoil I would experience as a result of losing my closest family connection. Consequently, it took me far longer to complete my bachelor's degree; and I would be lying if I said that my family situation still does not affect me to this day.

From the outset of my doctoral experience, I knew that I wanted to explore the factors that enable GLBQ students to persist; and I had a strong suspicion that family and parental support would be a major component. Thus, I was not overly surprised by the critical role family played in these participants' academic success. I was, however, taken aback by the strong feelings and personal growth I experienced as a result of conducting this research.

As I listened to the life histories of each participant, I became keenly aware of my own subjective lens (Bertaux, 1981; Cole, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Handel, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). I maintained a researcher journal throughout this study not only for documentation purposes, but also as a means of working through my own thoughts and feelings, as well as to analyze my perceptions and potential biases.

In addition to maintaining a researcher journal, I also reviewed the interview transcripts and audio recordings numerous times as it was important that I captured the intended meaning and emotional significance of what each participant said. I included each participant in the review of transcripts through a series of member checks performed in person and via written communications. Participant involvement in the review process

was crucial in facilitating my understanding, and the member check process enabled each participant to take ownership of his or her own words; this is an important step in the life history methodology (Cole, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Composing the life histories of Donna, Kathy, Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin proved challenging because I had to determine what information should be included in the research findings due to the confidential nature of the material, as well as what I deemed significant. A portion of what I identified as important within each participant's story resulted from my own personal experiences and awareness of the heteronormative structures within higher education and society. Whereas another life historian may have focused upon alternate topics or events in each person's past, I chose to bring any and all heterosexist components to the forefront.

I recognized and remained cognizant of the fact that it would be impossible for me to fully capture the totality of my participants no matter how much I wrote. This is due to the fact that each person's experience is uniquely his or her own and the meaning attached to that experience is also relative. Retelling the participants' stories through my own lens added an additional layer of subjectiveness and thus, no single, "true," or definitive life history could ever be possible. However, through collaboration with the participants themselves and my professional colleagues, I did strive to make each life history as comprehensive as possible.

My Reflections

I felt a personal connection. I was not prepared for the intense personal connection I would grow to feel toward most of the participants. I gave of my own

experiences and feelings during the interviews, and the participants responded in kind. By the second or third interview, a level of comfort and sense of safety was attained with each person.

The creation of a virtual “safe space” enabled the participants (and me) to be vulnerable in many ways. I was honored and felt privileged to hear tearfully-conveyed stories of painful events that occurred in some of their pasts. The female participants of the study were more forthright about their emotions than the male participants and their openness allowed me to witness and feel some of the pain they had experienced.

I felt fortunate and a great amount of gratitude toward the participants as I learned about each of their families, looked through photos of their loved ones, heard stories containing painful memories of past experiences, and listened to their dreams and aspirations for the future.

I felt a sense of pride. In listening to the myriad activities, committees, and leadership roles the participants took part in, I felt proud of the participants. The amount of self-motivation and commitment required to meet their obligations was obvious to me in the interviews.

Many of the participants felt a desire to “give back” to their campus’ GLBQ community. Recognizing the need for positive GLBQ role models on campus, most have made a conscious decision to serve in this capacity for younger classmates. I found this decision to be remarkable for someone at the participants’ age and especially someone who has had to deal with a significant amount of personal challenges due to his or her sexual orientation.

I felt a sense of obligation. Similar to the participants, I too felt the need to “give back.” My sense of obligation, however, was directed toward the participants themselves. Donna, Kathy, Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin literally opened their lives, told me stories of their (sometimes painful) past, and welcomed me into their homes. It was for this reason that I felt a great need to reciprocate and to ensure that I told their stories to the best of my ability. In doing so, I felt that I remained true to our mutual agreement and desire to supplement the content for public discussion related to GLBQ postsecondary students.

I learned many things about the younger GLBQ population. As I conducted this study during the early part of my 30s, I had considered myself to be somewhat knowledgeable about the GLBQ culture and had also deemed myself a reasonably “hip” person. I learned through my interviews that this perception, however, was not entirely accurate.

In the early 90s, when I first came out, the primary venue to meet and interact with other people like me was in the local GLBQ bars. This, as I have come to learn, is no longer the case. Now, the queer bars play a lesser role in the social interactions of young GLBQ individuals. Part of the reason for this cultural shift is that there are a greater number of GLBQ groups and activities available which do not center on the consumption of alcohol.

While all of the participants in this study have visited a queer bar at least once or more in their life, the bars have lost their monopoly on the GLBQ population. This is

largely due to the fact that younger GLBQ individuals now feel just as comfortable meeting in heterosexual establishments as they do in a queer locale.

Another major change in GLBQ life has resulted from the advent of the Internet and social networking Web sites. Just like their heterosexual counterparts, younger GLBQ individuals are now able to connect and stay in touch with each other in virtual environments. All 6 of the participants in this study mentioned the impact that these on-line utilities have had on their personal and dating lives.

This research experience has been transformational. I have been irrevocably changed as a result of meeting these 6 individuals. As I listened to the participants and constructed their life histories, I was inspired to reflect upon my own coming out process and undergraduate experience.

Listening to their stories and journaling about my own feelings regarding the past was therapeutic in many ways. I remembered small details or events related to those years and realized that some of what I thought was insignificant back then proved to be vitally important later in life. Specifically, I realized that many of the friendships I forged during my college years became a surrogate family after I was disowned.

I would be lying if I said that I did not feel jealous of these young adults on more than one occasion. Hearing how their families were able to move beyond the negative stereotypes conveyed by society about GLBQ people made me wish that my own family had been able to surpass that same stage of ignorance. However, from comments that many of the participants made regarding my own personal, academic, and professional successes, the experiences I gained through this research has helped me realize that I

have done very well for myself considering the obstacles and challenges I have faced and overcome.

I have learned that resiliency, and the choice to persist in college (or life) is perhaps not a trait that one is inherently born with; nor can it be gleaned from one, singularly defining moment in a person's past. Resilience has many origins and the ability to deal with life's challenges and society's pressures is a skill learned over time and, for those who are lucky, with the support and guidance of others. The foundation of perseverance consists more of a conscious choice made every day by a person to believe in one's strengths and aptitudes.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have met Donna, Kathy, Melanie, Tony, Charlie, and Austin and I know that I have been granted a number of friendships that will last for years to come.

Summary

This study provided a grounded theory analysis of the life histories conveyed by 6 GLBQ postsecondary students who attended and were on target to complete their bachelors degree at a large, public, research-intensive university located in the United States Midwest. The goal of this study was to identify the similarities that exist amongst persistent GLBQ students as well as to identify the factors that support or hinder their degree completion process.

The life history one-on-one interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for emergent themes. Ten themes emerged from the data. These were: high behavioral expectations during childhood and adolescence; a strong family connection;

strong work ethic; high educational expectations; guardian acceptance; involvement in GLBQ activities on campus; sexuality as a component of the whole person; self-confidence and autonomy; ability to deal with life's obstacles while taking care of themselves and continue forward; tendency toward planning and the possession of a post-graduation course of action.

All of the participants remarked that they found the life history process to be beneficial as it provided them with a clearer understanding of their past and contexts as well as the reasoning behind many of their life choices.

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Appendix A

Appendix A

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: LIFE HISTORIES OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND QUEER POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS WHO CHOOSE TO PERSIST.

Researcher: James Olive, Doctoral student

Purpose of Research: The purpose of this research study is to identify factors that may exist among GLBQ students which enable them to successfully complete their postsecondary degree. If found, what implications for decision making and policy design can be derived from these factors?

Expected Duration of Study: This research study will last between 6 and 12 months. During this period, you would be asked to complete between 3 and 4 interviews-each lasting between 1 and 2 hours.

Procedure: Through a series of interviews with the researcher, you will be asked to orally respond to a series of questions. **These interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy.** Additionally, you will be asked to reflect upon past experiences and to record those reflections.

Alternative Procedures: No alternative procedures exist in this research project.

Anticipated Risks and / or Discomfort: There is no physical risk to participants of this study. There is a moderate privacy risk to the participant since a great deal of background and demographic information will be obtained during the interview. Participants will review material for content, and will be provided with the opportunity, if they wish, to comment on the transcribed interviews.

A list of the participant and their respective pseudonym will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the researcher. References made to the participant within the researcher's final paper will utilize a pseudonym and life history information (i.e., background, employment, etc.) that could lead a reader to the true identity of the participant will be slightly modified when/if necessary.

Due to the nature of some of the (sexuality) questions posed during the interview process, there is a small mental health risk to the participant. In the event that a sensitive subject or memory is brought forth, the participant may experience discomfort and/or anxiety. To address this possibility of a mental health risk, contact information for mental health and GLBT support services available in the area is provided below:

Midwest mental health resources:**Netcare Access** (###-###-####)

Netcare Corporation offers two 24-hour crisis centers, located at [REDACTED]. Netcare's specialized services are available to anyone, regardless of the ability to pay.

Kaleidoscope Youth Coalition (###-###-####)

Kaleidoscope Youth Center is a safe haven specifically for GLBQ youth. Kaleidoscope Youth Center serves GLBQ youth and their allies (aged 12-20) regardless of status: gender identity and expression, HIV infection, parental custody, educational enrollment, handicap, race and ethnicity, or income.

GLBT Student Services (###-###-####)

A unit of the Multicultural Center, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Student Services (GLBTSS) provides support, advocacy, and programming for GLBT students, staff, and faculty.

Benefits to the Participant: By participating in this research, you will gain a better understanding of the factors that may have influenced your decision to persist in higher education and resulted in the successful completion of your undergraduate degree. Through the debriefing at the end of your participation, you will learn about this particular area of research.

Confidentiality: No records of your participation in this research will be disclosed to others. You will be assigned a pseudonym and your name will not be revealed in any document resulting from this research. A list of the project's participants and their respective pseudonyms will be kept in a securely locked environment.

Contact Person for Questions or Problems: If a research-related injury occurs, or if you have questions about the research, contact Jim Olive, [REDACTED]. Questions about the rights of the participant should be addressed to the Chair of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Dayton.

Acknowledgment of interview protocol: A copy of the interview protocol (questions) should have been provided to you prior to signing this informed consent form. Please indicate, by signing your initials in the space provided below, that you have been given a copy of the interview protocol for review.

_____ I certify that a copy of the interview protocol (questions) have been given to me. I have reviewed the proposed interview rubric and consent to this line of questioning.

Consent to Participate: I have voluntarily decided to participate in this research project. The investigator named above has adequately answered all questions that I have about this research, the procedures involved, and my participation. I understand that the investigator named above will be available to answer any questions about experimental procedures throughout this research. I also understand that I may refuse to participate or voluntarily terminate my participation in this research at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am entitled. The investigator may also terminate my participation in this research if he feels this to be in my best interest. In addition, I certify that I am 18 (eighteen) years of age or older.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Interview #1

Objectives

1. Establish a relationship between the participant and the researcher.
2. Obtain general background information related to the participant's family, education, and sexuality.
3. Following completion of the interview, ask participants to create a personal narrative in written form which outlines their sexual identity development from the point at which they first realized that they might not be heterosexual to their ultimate acceptance; in other words, participants were asked to outline their 'coming out' story from the beginning.

Statement on Participation (to be read by the researcher to the participant)

“As the researcher, I would like to remind you that your participation in this study is totally voluntarily. You may refuse to participate or terminate your participation in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Please also remember that there are support resources available in your area in the event that you experience a negative effect from today's interview [at this point, the researcher will provide a list of the support/counseling/crisis centers available near the participant]. If it is alright with you, I would like to call you tomorrow just to check on how you're feeling after the interview. Is that o.k.?”

Questions

Family & Background

- Full name
- Place and date of birth
- Father's name, place and date of birth, occupation. What was he like? How did he spend his time at home?
- Mother's name, place and date of birth, occupation. What was she like? How did she spend her time at home?
- What language/s did your parents speak? Was it different at home from in public?
- How did you get along with your parents? Did they show affection? How? What sorts of things did they disapprove of? How did they show this disapproval?
- What sort of marriage do you think they had? [good/bad things?]
- What sort of things did your family celebrate? [Christmas, birthdays, etc.]
- Describe a typical family Christmas/birthday and/or another appropriate family gathering
- What sorts of things were your parents strict about? How? Why?

- Did your parents tell you the ‘facts of life’? What did they tell you? If they didn’t tell you, who did? What did they tell you?
- What would you say religion meant to you as a child? And later on?
- Did you have any spiritual beliefs? If so, how did they affect your life growing up?

Childhood

- Where did you grow up?
- Describe the house you lived in [number of rooms; what the rooms were used for; who used them; have your own room?]
- What was your childhood neighborhood like? Did you have many friends your age to play with?
- Describe the games you played as a child [not only sport but things like skipping, marbles, etc.]
- Was there significant/influential [e.g., family, friends, mentors] in your childhood? If so, how were they significant? [repeat for adulthood]

Education

- Where did you go to school?
- How many children in the classroom?
- Did you have any favorite teachers? Why did you like her/him?
- Were there any teachers you disliked? Why?
- Describe the games you played at school
- How old were you when you left school? What did you do next?
- **Ask the same questions about middle & high school.**
- Growing up, what was your parents’ attitude toward education?

Leisure

- What did you do in your spare time growing up? [clubs/youth organizations/sports/games/dances/hobbies/etc.]
- Did you go out in the evenings? What was a good night out when you were young?
- Did you stick to a group of friends?
- Did your parents expect to meet your friends?
- Did your parents disapprove of any of your activities? If so, why?
- How do you spend your leisure time now?

Identity

- How would you describe yourself?
- Why do you call yourself that?
- Does it affect the way you behave? In what ways?
- Has your family’s identity changed from when you were a child to how you consider yourself now? In what ways?

General

- Tell me about a place which is special or precious to you. What makes it so?
- Would you say you live in a community? How would you describe it?

Interview #2*Objectives*

1. Clarification of my synopsis of their background information.
2. Request that participants expand on their own coming out story.
3. Discuss transition into higher education
4. Discuss impact of sexual orientation on college search and selection process.
5. Reflect upon past experiences on campus being queer.
6. Speculate on what kept the participant in school.

Statement on Participation (to be read by the researcher to the participant)

“As the researcher, I would like to remind you that your participation in this study is totally voluntarily. You may refuse to participate or terminate your participation in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Please also remember that there are support resources available in your area in the event that you experience a negative effect from today’s interview [at this point, the researcher will provide a list of the support/counseling/crisis centers available near the participant]. If it is alright with you, I would like to call you tomorrow just to check on how you’re feeling after the interview. Is that o.k.?”

*Questions***Expansion of Coming-Out Story**

- When did you first realize that you might not be heterosexual?
- What effect did that realization have on your childhood and adolescent years?
- Please walk me through your coming out story.
- What types of responses did you receive [from family/friends]?
- How do you identify yourself? Has this changed over time?
- At what age did you experience your first same-sex romantic encounter [dating, kiss, etc.]?

Transition into Higher Education

- How did your acknowledgment as GLBQ affect your educational development?
- Where you out to anyone before you started looking at colleges?

Collegiate Experiences Being Queer

- How has being GLBQ impacted your experience while in college?
- Have you experienced anything negative as a result of being GLBQ?
- Do you feel that your college’s campus is GLBQ ‘friendly’? On what do you base this judgment?
- Are you a member of any GLBQ student groups/clubs?

- Has the fact that you are GLBQ ever been brought up in class? If so, please describe the situation and how the instructor handled it.
- Have you dated anyone since your arrival to college? If so, has the person been a member of the same or opposite sex?
- Are you sexually active? If so, is it with a person of the same or opposite sex?
- How open about your sexuality (and perhaps, same-sex relationship) are you with your heterosexual friends?

The Choice to Persist

- Have you ever taken advantage of the services or support systems available to students on campus?
- Have you ever considered dropping out of college? If so, why?
- What kept you from leaving?

Interview #3

Objectives

1. Confirm the data collected.
2. Clarify my perception of each participant's collegiate experience and confirm that he or she thinks it is valid.
3. Debriefing and wrap-up.

Statement on Participation (to be read by the researcher to the participant)

“As the researcher, I would like to remind you that your participation in this study is totally voluntarily. You may refuse to participate or terminate your participation in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Please also remember that there are support resources available in your area in the event that you experience a negative effect from today's interview [at this point, the researcher will provide a list of the support/counseling/crisis centers available near the participant]. If it is alright with you, I would like to call you tomorrow just to check on how you're feeling after the interview. Is that o.k.?”