

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE COMING-OUT PROCESS FOR  
LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL INDIVIDUALS

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## ABSTRACT

As individuals move through life, there are developed and identified areas referred to as social networks that provide support and assistance. It is through these social networks that identity formation occurs, these broad categories are highly influential in defining self-concept, which is developed through an affiliation (whether it be positive or negative) with the following groups: family, peers, education, spirituality, and the broader community/society. For those individuals that identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB) there are challenges that exist in their development that are unique to them as compared to what the general population experiences.

LGB individuals are an extremely vulnerable subset of the population, particularly given the degree of homophobia in our society. Adolescents who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation face incredible challenges and lack many of the fundamental support systems available to their heterosexual peers (Gonsiorek, 1988). All of these identified social networks of this developmental period lend themselves to the overall identity formation of each adolescent. A positive identity must integrate one's sexual identity into it (Baker, 2002). For LGB individuals who are struggling to identify, define, and make sense of feelings of attraction toward members of the same sex, adolescence may be a particularly challenging time in their lives.

This qualitative study consisted of 18 participants that discussed their coming-out process in the context of supportive and non-supportive social networks. It explored the difference between the high school and college environments, identifying risk and protective factors that impacted this important milestone in their sexual identity development. Several themes were

identified around the process of coming-out; these were fear, shift of social networks (high school to college), and search for community and acceptance. Throughout these identified areas there was further acknowledgement of factors within the social networks that impacted the coming-out process, that are explored further in the following narrative. Identifying non-judgmental environments where both high school and college students can explore the possible intersection and acceptance between their religion/spirituality and their sexuality would minimize many of the issues that surround the fear that is associated with the coming-out process and lead to a more affirming, supportive environment for the LGB individual.

This dissertation is dedicated to the many students that have touched my life that have struggled because of their minority status. Your search for affirmation and understanding provides the fuel behind the fire to create an environment of acceptance. Thank you for allowing me in your space to hear your stories, it is both an honor and privilege to be here with you.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Problem

The transition from adolescence to early adulthood in general, is a challenging time in the life of any individual. Many issues exist for what society considers “normal” behavior for a teenager. When an individual identifies with a minority culture, such as Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB), this increases the struggle during this developmental time-period. These challenges tend to increase risk factors for these individuals, which include poor self-esteem, isolation, and depression. Other adverse consequences mentioned by Pilkington & and D’Augelli (1995) are physical injury, behavioral and somatic reactions, interference in interpersonal relationships, self-blame, heightened internalized homophobia, disruptions of the coming-out process, and diminished feelings of trust, security, and self-worth.

LGB individuals are an extremely vulnerable subset of the population, particularly given the degree of homophobia in our society (Weinberg, 1972; D’Augelli, 1994; Goldman, 2008; Troiden, 1993). Those individuals who struggle with issues of sexual orientation face incredible challenges and lack many of the fundamental support systems available to their heterosexual peers (Gonsiorek, 1988). The anxiety that comes with the realization of belonging to a group that is despised and victimized in society can create an identity crisis. The crisis of self-concept occurs because the gay adolescent “senses a sudden involuntary joining to a stigmatized group” (Anderson, 1994, p. 15). The stigma occurs because of the undercurrent homophobic attitudes of the larger society; that is, homophobia, which is an unreasonable or irrational fear or hatred of homosexual or homosexuality (Weinberg, 1972).

Social networks, which are defined as family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater community play an important role in the overall identity formation of each adolescent (Turner,

2010). A positive identity must integrate one's sexual identity into it (Baker, 2002). For those individuals that identify as LGB, it is important to understand how a negative source of support could possibly be detrimental to the individual. According to the literature identity formation, involves several key themes that are considered influential social support networks for LGB youth. These broad categories within the social network system of each individual highly influence self-concept, which develops through an affiliation (whether it be positive or negative) with the following groups: family, peers, education, spirituality, and the broader community.

The Human Rights Campaign completed an extensive survey of 10,000 LGB individuals across the United States that identified several key factors in the social networks that affect the lives of LGB adolescents; these networks include family, peers, and the larger community (HRC, 2012). The following comments were made with regards to whether or not the individual was affected either positively or negatively:

- access to affirmative support and services
- negative experiences such as verbal harassment, cyber-bullying, exclusion from activities
- connection to a religious community
- level of optimism about the future

This extensive study indicated a decline in optimism amongst LGB adolescents in all key areas of life, all because of the homophobic attitude of the environment (HRC, 2012).

Burn (2005) suggests that this type of attitude may lead to an internalized homophobia, a form of self-hatred, which is a condition that impacts upon every aspect of the LGB individual's life. According to the HRC survey (2012), LGB adolescents are less likely to report life achievements than their non-LGB counterparts. Also according to the HRC survey (2012), LGB

youth are less than half as likely as their peers to participate in church and less than 30% say they play sports at school or in the community. Furthermore, only 21% of LGBT youth say there is a place in their community that helps LGB people- all of which address the initial indicators of what may lead to risk and protective factors for this population (HRC, 2012). All of these outcomes point towards the impact that social networks have on those that identify as LGB, and how a negative influence may be harmful to them as they approach adulthood.

When the social networks of LGB individuals are non-supportive and don't counter-balance the homophobic attitudes of the larger society, LGB adolescents are at risk of taking what the larger environment is saying about them and internalizing it to produce a negative self-view; which according to the survey would be considered a non-successful outcome (HLC, 2012). It is important to understand the both obvious and subtle ways that homophobia operates within our society. Our society often assumes that the experiences of middle-class White men generalize to all individuals (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004). As a result of that, any differing outlook is often overlooked, misunderstood or pathologized, thus creating an environment of hostility towards anything that does not measure up to the "norm". The term "heterocentrism", as mentioned by Pachankis and Goldfried (2004), better captures the notion that this bias is often not intentional but is due to oversights on the part of mainstream society in considering the existence of diverse sexual orientations.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), in order to affect an individual psychologically, general societal attitudes must become personally relevant. As self-labeling begins to occur during adolescence, this stereotyping has a negative affect on the psychology of the LGB individual. As a result this negative labeling due to societal constructs of what it means to identify as LGB contributes to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety within the individual

and lead to internalized homophobia that will follow the individual into adulthood (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Rationale & Significance of the Study**

Exploring the phenomena of the coming-out process for LGB individuals and how social networks impact this process is critical to the well being of these individuals. Coming-out is a critical developmental process for LGB individuals during sexual identity formation. It is important to understand both the positive and negative influences that social networks (family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater community) have on this process. This research will help to identify key areas that can be enhanced to support these individuals as they transition into the social networks of family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater community, are key components that contribute greatly to the development of identity in either a positive or negative direction (Gonsiorek, 1988, Baker & Fishbein, 1998, Beck, 1995, Anderson, 1994, Burn & Rexer, 2005). Depending on whether or not the “coming-out” process is a positive experience for the individual will determine the need to access social services and affirming activities available in the community. By exploring the relationship of the individual with their social networks, one is able to determine where the services are lacking and what areas need improvement. A key aim will be to identify or develop social networks that have a common theme of supporting the LGB individual in coming-out, which is a critical stage of development in their identity formation.

When these identified social support systems negatively influence or provide an environment for the LGB individual that is hostile or homophobic, it can lead to social isolation and cause a breakdown both within the individual and also within social networks (e.g., family, peers, school, church, and the greater community) (Turner, 2010; Anhalt & Morris, 2003;

Anderson, 1994; D'Augelli, 1998; Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008, Wasserman, 1994). The general functioning or adaptability of these individuals may be compromised because they are not receiving the support they require to conquer developmental milestones, such as publicly identifying himself or herself as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual. It would be expected that by developing an understanding of the impact of variables (e.g. family, education, peers, spirituality, and greater community) and their influence on the coming-out process and beyond, educators will become more aware of the important types of support to LGB individuals and their impact (or lack thereof) on identity development.

The benefits of exploring these social networks that impact the LGB individual includes identifying social preventative efforts to reduce homophobia which may include: enactment of appropriate legislation, reform of the criminal justice system, and widespread establishment of community education programs (Herek, 2009). Moreover, an exploration of factors that may impact upon identity formation in the LGB adolescent may provide a unique insight and opportunity to consider the special implications specific to this minority group. These implications include the influence of the various social networks (e.g., family, peers, school, church, and greater community), and how these systems impact the LGB adolescent. By recognizing differences, this will better define the type of assessment and intervention that is necessary in assisting to meet the needs of this population.

Sexual identity is acknowledged and developed during the adolescent period of an individual's life (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004, Savin-Williams, 2001). This is influenced through that which each person identifies as key components of his or her social network. According to Social Network Theory (Wasserman, 1994), the presence or absence of, and positive or negative effects that these systems present to the individual, will inherently contribute

to the identity development of person. For the LGB community these areas are even more critical due to the added risk factors that accompany the identification with this community.

When social networks fail to provide the support and acceptance to LGB adolescents, the risks to them range from mildly harmful to deadly (Berkman, 1984; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982, Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1998). There are numerous authors that have linked social support and social networks to morbidity and mortality (Berkman, 1984; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Isreal & Rounds, 1987). D'Augelli (1996) argued that LGB youth have very few opportunities to explore and develop their identity without placing themselves at risk for victimization. Mercier and Berger (1989) point to the lack of readily available support systems in the home, community, and educational system as the cause for social isolation for many LGB youth. Elia (1993) notes that the literature consistently associates isolation as one of the major contributors to the high-risk status of many LGB youth. This isolation occurs when there is disconnect between the LGB adolescent and the social network in which they are counting on to provide them with guidance and support.

The significance of this study is that it seeks to understand how these social networks influence the developmental stage of coming-out for LGB individuals. Understanding that this is a critical process, it is important to recognize how having support or lack thereof from the areas of family, peers, education, spirituality and greater community can make a difference for this population.

### **Purpose of Study**

Exploring the impact of social networks on the coming-out process for college students that self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, and/or Bisexual is the purpose of this study. As individuals move from the family to the college environment, they adopt a new set of social networks, while



at the same time maintaining their relationship with the previous systems. Exploring the impact of these systems, both old and new, through the developmental milestone of coming-out will reveal the amount of influence these networks have on the individuals. Through the collection of personal narrative through qualitative interviews, this allowed for the participants to reveal their own lived experience of the coming-out process. The variety of experiences regarding this phenomenon provided insight and valuable information for further examination and analysis when considering the similarities and differences of the participants. By exploring the social networks that existed both prior to and during college, this allowed for and identification of how these networks contributed or prohibited the coming-out process for these individuals.

When working with LGB individuals, the developmental status of the individual needs to take into account both in terms of the traditional life span trajectory and also in where the client falls in terms of their LGB identity development (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004). Although the developmental stages of typical LGBT individuals are largely similar across models, it is important to realize that many developmental pathways lead to the same-sex sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2001). Pachankis and Goldfried (2004) offered a general outline of the stages of LGB identity formation. They noted that most LGB identity development models begin with the stage of “sensitization” or “pre-coming out”. This stage typically starts during adolescence and spans into early adulthood. It is the influence of the social networks that may or may not make the difference in when the person is able to identify publicly with their sexual identity. This study sought to explore these social networks and determine whether or not these impacted the coming-out process for LGB college students.

From the initial “coming out” to the family system, receiving peer support and acceptance, having services available in the education system specific to LGB issues, a place of

comfort in spirituality and offering support in the greater community; all of these circumstances promote positive, healthy identity formation (Gonsiorek, 1988, Baker & Fishbein, 1998, Beck, 1995, Anderson, 1994, Burn & Rexer, 2005). This will provide an at-risk population with better coping skills, which in turn, will lessen the isolation of being “different” and improve mortality and resiliency in LGB individuals overall.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social Network theory will inform the extent of social relationships and social support as well as provide a theoretical lens for understanding the role of resilience or hardiness in adolescent identity formation. Social Network Theory refers to the ties that exist among a set of individuals (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). As individuals move through life, there are developed and identified areas referred to as social networks that provide support and assistance. Through these social networks identity formation occurs and these broad categories are highly influential in defining self-concept. Social support can be defined as supportive relationships with others (Dubois, et al 2002.) According to Turner (2010), it is also possible to have a social network that is not a social support network, due to the fact that this identified network does not provide a positive form of support. Through the ecological perspective, the Social Network Theory focuses on the fundamental importance of neighborhood and resources that extend beyond the family.

When relationships within social networks are disapproving based on stigma and homophobia, this may be harmful to the LGB adolescent as it contributes negatively towards identity development. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is “the process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity” (pg. 62). Generally stigma is based on a person differing from what is considered socially or culturally acceptable. Social stigma is a severe disapproval or a personal discontent with a person on the grounds of their unique characteristics

distinguishing them from others in society. Social stigma contributes to the development of the minority individual's identity. Often the viewpoints of the greater society are a belief that they are somehow a failure and abnormal, this knowledge leading to self-hate and self-degradation (Goffman, 1963). This formation of the minority sexual identity (LGB) involves dealing with what the greater society defines as "normal" and the expectations that accompany this viewpoint.

When these social support systems are negative or jeopardized, it can lead to social isolation and cause a breakdown in these areas and in general functioning. By looking in depth at the actual process and areas that are important in identity formation for LGB individuals, it is important to understand how a negative source of support could possibly be detrimental to them. These considerations are critical in providing understanding of how populations of minority individuals, particularly LGB, are able to maintain momentum and be examples and mentors to others.

By exploring the social networks of LGB college students in a focus group setting, this will increase awareness of the impact (or lack thereof) on their ability to develop healthy sexual identities through the coming-out process. Being sensitive to the differences in the greater community part of the social network system, it will be informative to gather information from LGB individuals in different college settings, including community, public, and private universities. Information based on their previous social network system prior to coming to college will be compared to their current systems to help further understand the differences and possible influences. Through the gathering of personal experiences and the overall opinions of the group, the goal will be to gain understanding on how to provide further support and services to LGB individuals, which will enhance their general well being and success as adults.

## Research Questions

In order to determine the impact of social networks on the coming-out process for LGB individuals, this study posits and explores the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of social networks, which include family, peers, education, religion, and the greater community in the "coming-out" process of LGB college students?
  - a. How do LGB college students define and describe their social networks?
  - b. What factors influence or prohibited the LGB students in "coming-out" publicly?
  - c. How do LGB college students describe what it means to encourage and support them in the coming-out process?
  - d. In comparing the social network systems of LGB individuals in high school versus college, how do these individuals describe both sets of systems and how does this influence the coming-out process?
  - e. Is there a described difference in college environments (community college, private and public) in the services that are available and how does this impact the LGB student?

## Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used throughout the study and will be defined as follows when referenced:

*Adolescence:* It is a period of life filled with transitional themes in every dimension of a person and their environment, including: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. The psychological identity is defined as a "person's self-definition as a separate and distinct individual" (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008, p. 154).

*Bisexual:* this identity label is used for and by individuals who have sexual, emotional, and

romantic attractions to both sexes (Bohan, 1996, Rust, 2000). Depending on the individual, this attraction may be stronger for women or for men, or may be approximately equal, and/or may vary with time.

*Coming-out process:* Coming-out is the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual identities, and then share these identities with others (Rust, 2003). It is the communication that happens as part of that process.

*Early Adulthood:* for the purpose of this study, early adulthood will be considered the traditional college age student from the age of 18-24.

*Education:* this is defined in the study as the school in which the participant has attended and is currently attending, which will include elementary through college when considering the experiences.

*Family:* the family is considered anyone that is related by blood, marriage, or otherwise that provides for a child and becomes the first social network that will impact the individual. Families provide the basis for the beliefs and values an individual holds (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

*Gay:* this identity label is used primarily for and by men whose primary sexual, emotional, and romantic attraction is to the same sex (Ahnalt & Morris, 1998; Bohan, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1995).

*Greater Community:* for this study, the term greater community will include services, both tangible and intangible that provide support in a positive or negative way. This social network exists beyond the other identified systems of family, peers, education and spirituality.

*Identity Formation:* the process by which an individual determines who they are through the individuals and systems that surround them. How they view themselves is impacted by whether or not their environment is positive or negative in the support it provides the individual.

*Impact:* for this study the term impact will reflect the amount of influence (positive or negative) that an individual, group, or greater social network has on the individual.

*Lesbian:* this identity label is used primarily for and by women whose primary sexual, emotional, and romantic attraction is to the same sex (Ahnalt & Morris, 1998; Bohan, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1995).

*Peers:* defined in this study as those individuals that the participant identifies as friends and acquaintances in their social circle of influence.

*Social Network Theory:* for the purpose of this study, social network theory refers to the ties that exist among a set of individuals (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). These networks are highly influential in defining self-concept, which is developed through an affiliation (positive or negative) with the following groups: family, peers, education, spirituality, and broader society.

*Social Support:* defined as supportive relationships with others (Dubois, et al 2002).

*Spirituality:* defined as a drive for meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence. It involves our self-awareness and desire to connect with others (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005, p. 196).

*Stigma:* for the purpose of this study stigma will be defined by the process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity (Goffman, 1963).

## **Delimitations**

Throughout the literature, the term LGBT is used as a generalized category, referring to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered individuals. For the purposes of this study, the (T) transgendered aspect of this label was not considered due to the distinct difference between what it means to be LGB (sexuality) and what it means to be transgendered (gender). This lack of understanding of these differences when it comes to sexuality and gender has led to myths and misunderstandings within the LGBT community. Sexual minorities--typically classified into the four categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people--face common struggles with societal oppression related to their sexual minority status, and they therefore face similar difficulties in developing positive individual identities and healthy communities within that context of oppression. The increasingly frequent addition of "T" to "LGB" speaks to the public--and professional--conflation of all sexual minority concerns under a shared umbrella of invisibility, isolation, and discrimination.

The participants in this research were diverse in age, race, ethnicity, from various campus environments (community, private, and public campuses) and general life experiences; however, all of the participants are currently located in the geographic area of Northwest Ohio. The reasons for this approach were due to the issue of time restrictions and an attempt to provide a broad example of students from various educational settings, and the ability to generalize in this general area the experiences of the individuals that participate in the study. The environments are diverse enough but still contained in this general geographic area which provided a good representation of what this experience has been for these LGB individuals.

A great deal of literature addresses the entire spectrum of those that identify beyond the heteronormative labels (Alexander, 2004; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Elia, 1993; D'Augelli, 1994;

Rust, 2003). Although the discussion regarding the multiple identities that are included in the spectrum is important, it is beyond the scope of focus for this project and consequently will not be included within this study.

Throughout this research project, the methodology of phenomenology is explored through the process of conducting individual qualitative interviews. According to Padgett (2008), ethnography implies an attitude or stance prior to the research. This method takes on more of an anthropological stance in that it requires the researcher to be part of the culture in which they are studying. Grounded theory does not allow the theory to drive the study in that it utilizes a process that involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998). The lack of constant comparing of the information and utilization of several stages of data collection indicates that this would not be an appropriate method to utilize. The case study method involves exploring a program, event, activity, process of one or more individuals in depth (Creswell, 2009). This also consists of collecting detailed information using a variety of procedures of a period of time, which was not the case in this research.

Narrative research consists of studying the lives of individuals by gathering stories, which are then retold or restored by the researcher in a narrative chronology (Creswell, 2009). This method then combines the views of the participant's life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The intention this project was to try to understand the human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants. The coming-out process for the LGB individual is a very personal, individualized experience and therefore this was the best approach to explore how their social networks impacted this important developmental milestone.



## **Limitations**

The most significant limitation in this type of study is the limited nature of generalizability for the results of this research. Generalizability is the extent to which findings are transferable to, or fitting for other situations (Conway, 1998). Qualitative research is generally considered weak in its generalizability across populations, to different settings, and across time (Johnson, 1997), particularly as participants are selected purposively in order to meet the needs of the study.

Phenomenological research is challenging in that it is at times difficult to re-create experiences in a reliable fashion that provides valid information. The intent of this approach was to not generate a theory, rather strive to understand the essence of a concept or phenomena. This may lead to restrictions in this type of approach in that oftentimes the researcher will bring assumptions to the process, which can affect the results or influence the study (Creswell, 2009; Padgett, 2008).

Utilizing qualitative interviews as the method of data collection limited the number of participants as well as the diversity of the participants that chose to be involved. The participants were recruited via purposive sampling and this possibly excluded valuable pieces of information due to the sample not being chosen in a random fashion. The sample size was small and therefore the information was limited due to lack of exploration of vast experiences beyond the small sample size. There was a possibility for bias in that the participants were comfortable in speaking with the researcher, which may influence the experience of those that are struggling with this phenomenon.

The constraint of time is also a limitation- all of the participants were identified through existing gay straight alliance groups, referral from participants, or self-identified LGB students

that were open about their orientation. The time involved in completing qualitative interviews creates a limitation of the amount of individuals that could participate in this study. Obviously, the ability to conduct additional interviews would further enrich the findings and themes of this research. Another identifiable limitation would be the ability of the researcher to take the time to review transcripts with the participants or re-visit the participants to clarify or gather more information that was not clear or thorough during the interview.

### **Researcher Bias**

Researcher bias is an inevitable part of every research study, as it is impossible to divorce the person from the environment. Padgett (2008) states, “no researcher is a bias-free instrument” (p. 9). This study is no different in that there were many precautions that had to be taken in order to prevent personal bias from influencing the study in any possible way. The investigator has a background in social work, which provides a deeper awareness of the long-term issues created by a lack of support from family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater community on an individual that already is considered at-risk. Keeping this in mind, it was important for the researcher to ignore the role of social worker while collecting the data, as to not influence the answers or data that was provided from the participants in this study. The investigator also has many close personal connections with the LGB community, which may encourage pre-conceived results of this research.

Generally when looking at the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) population, the T (transgendered) individuals are incorporated into this group. This researcher recognizes that although there are similarities in the struggle for all of these individuals, there needs to be a separation when considering sexual orientation and gender. This was a constant consideration while preparing the literature review, collecting and analyzing the data.

Lofland and Lofland (1995) provide a number of helpful suggestions when it comes to recording information during qualitative interviews; these consist of being concrete and specific in describing behaviors and events. Learning that there are different levels of observation is important when utilizing personal interviews as a data collection method; including learning to distinguish between verbatim accounts, paraphrasing and concept development. Lastly, it is important to record observations about oneself during the process. This may help to identify personal biases and help the researcher devise ways to manage them.

The researcher identifies as a Professor of Social Work and advisor to the Gay Straight Alliance, both of which provide a vast amount of exposure to working with these individuals, which could then lead to unintentional stereotyping of participants. In order to combat this, there was a need to utilize the dissertation committee and professors to be an objective voice to help interpret results, thus preventing the incorporation of themes that may or may not be present in the results. There is also a danger in qualitative research of misrepresenting the information that was gathered by individuals telling their story. As a researcher it is important to be very aware of personal values, ethics, and feelings and perceptions while conducting this study, and take care not allow them to influence the data collection or the results.

## **Conclusion**

As stated previously, a positive identity must integrate one's sexual identity into it (Baker & Fishbein, 1998). Sexual identity formation, which occurs in the period of adolescence and early adulthood, is highly influenced by these social networks. Depending on whether or not it these networks provide a positive impact can make a difference in the life of the LGB individual, especially during the coming-out process. Mercer and Berger (1989) supported the point that

the lack of support systems can cause social isolation, which then can contribute to the isolation of these individuals, leading to a high risk status (Elia, 1993).

This study explored the phenomena of the coming-out process for a group of self-identified LGB participants that are current college students in a variety of settings. The purpose was to better understand this critical developmental process of sexual identity formation and the impact of the social networks on this process, providing a complete picture of what those networks were like as an adolescent versus what exists for them now as college students. The goal was to gain an understanding of how these systems influence the coming-out process and how to better provides support for this important developmental transition for these individuals. Through the provision of these supports, the hope would be to provide a more comfortable environment for these individuals that would allow them to feel accepted regardless of their sexual orientation.

## CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescence in general, is a challenging time in the life of any individual. Certainly there are many issues that exist for what society considers a “normal” teenager. When identifying with a minority culture, such as Lesbian, Gay and/or Bisexual (LGB), this tends to create additional issues during this developmental time-period. There are unique challenges that these individuals experience compared to what the general population experiences. These challenges tend to increase risk factors for this group, particularly in the social networks of these individuals. LGB youth are an extremely vulnerable subset of the population, particularly given the degree of homophobia in our society. Adolescents who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation face incredible challenges and lack many of the fundamental support systems available to their heterosexual peers (Gonsiorek, 1988).

When considering the process of identity formation, particularly during adolescence, the literature reveals several key areas that are influential social support networks for LGB youth. Social networks have a direct impact on self-concept, which is developed through a relationship or lack thereof with the following groups: family, education, spirituality, and the broader community/society. This literature review identifies several areas that are necessary to the overall well being of the LGB population and explores how certain events or ongoing struggles may occur during this critical time in adolescent development. Identifying the types of systems, individuals that are critical to the systems, and the influences they may have on the youth during this time are key to understanding how LGB youth form their identity and how they feel about being part of their community.

Through an ecological approach, such as the Social Network Theory (Wasserman, 1994), it is evident that there is a strong relationship between an individual’s physical, social, and

psychological health and social supports. When these social support systems are compromised, it can lead to negative consequences for the LGB individual, such as emotional distress, isolation, internalized homophobia, depression, substance abuse, suicide, homelessness, and a wide range of other deterrents to overall well being (Turner, 2010).

### **Adolescence and Identity Formation**

It is important to identify the transitional period from childhood to adulthood that is generally referred to as “adolescence”. According to Hutchinson (2010), it is a word stemming from the Latin verb “adolescere”, which meant, “to grow into maturity” (pg. 225). It is a period of life filled with transitional themes in every dimension of a person and their environment, including: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual. The psychological identity is defined as a “person’s self-definition as a separate and distinct individual” (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008, p. 154). The sociological perspective includes the knowledge of one’s membership in a social group and the emotional significance of that membership (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008). According to Hutchinson (2010), these themes do not occur independently or without affecting one another. There are several developmental milestones that occur during this period, including; puberty, changes in cognition, and identity development. The social aspects of adolescence include a shift in relationships with family, peers, and a move to recognizing sexuality by experimenting in relationships with others beyond the realm of friendship.

Also during this time there are marked changes in the relationships that adolescents have with school, the broader community, and possibly the work environment. Spirituality also becomes an issue, as the adolescent mind is able to contemplate things such as existence, identity, and future. All of these shifts happen during this adolescent time period, which occurs somewhere between the ages of 10 and 18. Although Erickson (1950) and other researchers

believed identity formation occurs in adolescence, some research purports that the formation of one's identity begins during emerging adulthood (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). Regardless of when the transition occurs, adolescents form an identity based on the social networks that are present in their lives during this developmental time period. Initially the family and educational networks are most influential, followed by the spiritual and community networks. These systems all orchestrate together and contribute to the development of identity, whether the influence is negative or positive in nature.

All of these identified social networks of this developmental period lend themselves to the overall identity formation of each adolescent. For LGB youth who are struggling to identify, define, and make sense of feelings of attraction toward members of the same sex, adolescence may be a particularly challenging time in their lives. D'Augelli (1994) developed the Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development identity development related to sexual orientation the following steps were indicated as unordered independent identity processes:

- Exiting heterosexual identity
- Developing personal LGB identity status
- Developing a LGB social identity
- Becoming a LGB offspring
- Developing a LGB intimacy status
- Entering a LGB community

There are six interactive, non-sequential stages that include three sets of interrelated variables that shape an individual's identity: personal subjectivities (emotions, perceptions and

action related to sexual orientation and the meanings the individual attaches to them) actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. Each of these interactive, non-sequential stages related to the identified social networks (family, education, spirituality and greater community) are present during the time of identity formation (D'Augelli, 1994).

### **Social Network Theory**

Social Network Theory refers to the ties that exist among a set of individuals (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, Turner, 2010). As individuals move through life, there are developed and identified areas referred to as social networks that provide support and assistance. It is through these social networks that identity formation occurs, these broad categories are highly influential in defining self-concept, which is developed through an affiliation (whether it be positive or negative) with the following groups: family, education, religion, and the broader community/society. Social support can be defined as supportive relationships with others (Dubois, et al 2002.) According to Turner (2010), it is also possible to have a social network that identifies as such, even if it does not provide a positive form of support to the individual. Social Network Theory considers the fundamental importance of neighborhood and resources that extend beyond the family (Wasserman, 1994). When these identified social support systems are negative or jeopardized, it can lead to social isolation and cause a breakdown in these areas and in general functioning (Turner, 2010, Wasserman, 1994).

There are other areas that are also distinct in identity formation, including the education, religion, and support that is available through the broader community or society (Anderson, 1994; Bohan, 1996; D'Augelli, 1998; Loewenberg, 1988; Troiden, 1993; Wasserman, 1994). When positive in nature, these relationships act as resources that lend themselves to encouraging a positive adjustment in young adults. Particularly in adolescents, strong positive interpersonal



relationships are beneficial because they function as a source of comfort and safety throughout the multiple life changes that occur during this stage of development (Kenny, Gallagher, Alavarez-Salvat & Silsby, 2002).

When relationships within social networks are disapproving based on stigma and homophobia, this may be harmful to the LGB adolescent in that it contributes negatively towards identity development. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is “the process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity” (pg. 62). Generally stigma is based on a person differing from what is considered socially or culturally acceptable. Social stigma is a severe disapproval or a personal discontent with a person on the grounds of their unique characteristics distinguishing them from others in society.

Social stigma contributes to the development of the minority individual’s identity. Often the viewpoints of the greater society are a belief that they are somehow a failure and abnormal. That knowledge then leads to self-hate and self-degradation (Goffman, 1963). This formation of a minority sexual identity (LGB) involves dealing with what the greater society defines as “normal” and the expectations that accompany this viewpoint.

### **Identity Formation through Family**

Familial interactions influence the initial status of identity development (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). This is the first relationship that an individual experiences, thus providing a model for identity formation. Consistent with Erikson’s (1968) model of identity development, Bosma and Kunnen (2001) suggest that the outcome of an earlier developmental crisis impacts the search for one’s identity. For example, if abuse occurs to an adolescent, this may have a severely negative impact on their identity formation, likewise, if they have an absent parent while growing up this may also have an influence on identity development. Two sources of

support that appear to have the greatest influence on the individual are family and peers. Families stimulate and support the development of distinctive points of views; peers offer models, diversity, and opportunities for exploration of beliefs and values (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Both of these types of social networks play an important part during the development of identity.

Aside from Erikson's theory, other research indicates that families provide the basis for the beliefs and values an individual holds (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Through the exposure of their parents' and other family members' belief systems, these values are modeled and incorporated into the identity of that individual. In the case of some individuals that are more secluded, the family may be the only example they have of what is "acceptable" in society. D'Augelli (1998) argues that identity development for non heterosexual people is a challenge due to the fact that most families and society in general do not provide the role models and visible socializing experiences to help them develop their identity and define who they are as lesbian, gay, or bisexual people.

The importance of family and their reactions to the disclosure of a youths' sexual identity can be very influential when it comes to identity formation. Savin-Williams (1994) discusses the parental reactions progressing through a series of stages similar to those described by Kubler-Ross (1969) in coping with dying. These include the stages of shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance. Parents may begin to cycle through these stages once their child decides to disclose that they are homosexual. According to Ryan (2003) the fear of sharing sexual identity with parents and other family members and the fear of ridicule and rejection are primary concerns. LGB youth must learn to negotiate complex psychosocial tasks at a time when they

are dependent emotionally and financially on their families. They have limited mobility to access external sources of support and have fewer resources and coping skills (Ryan, 2003).

Adolescence is a time of learning independence from the family unit and being subjected to other social networks that replace the immediate influence of the parents. As indicated by Moore (1987) this separation from parents has four components of independence: functional- being able to function with little assistance or independently from one's parents, attitudinal- developing one's own set of values and beliefs, emotional - not dependent on parents for approval, intimacy, and emotional support, and conflictual - able to recognize one's separateness from parents without guilt, resentment, anger, or other negative emotions. All of these stages are a marked progression of the developmental stage and a function of identity formation for the adolescent.

Being open and honest regarding sexuality is an extremely important task for an adolescent. The risk for the LGB individual is not being able to predict how people will react to the news, particularly when the disclosure is made to immediate family members. Depending on the parental reaction, whether positive or negative, this will determine the amount of support they will offer the LGB individual. Youth who share their sexual identity with others report feeling better about themselves and are more comfortable being out at school and in their communities (D'Augelli, 1998, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). However, they are also significantly more likely to be victimized at home, to experience more verbal and physical abuse from family members and to acknowledge more suicidality than those who have not come out to their families (Ryan, 2003). Youth rejected by families are likely to end up on the street where they are at high risk for exploitation and serious health concerns. Homeless youth, in general, are

at higher risk for victimization, STDs, HIV, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide and mental disorders (Ryan, 2003).

Identity formation begins with the immediate family and then as the adolescent progresses through this developmental time period, they begin to move towards independence. This differentiation from the primary family unit leads to peer association, particularly in the educational environment, which has proven to be a critical player in identity formation for the adolescent.

### **Identity Formation through Education**

The majority of the adolescent period is spent in school; which is a very influential social network for every individual. According to Hutchinson (2010), school is a “fertile ground for practicing future orientation, role experimentation, exploration, and self-evaluation” (pg. 242). The school experience itself transitions from being very structured (elementary through middle school) to the high school environment that allows more independence and autonomy. The school “climate” can be seen as encompassing such things as school culture, mood, degree to which people get along, respect for differences, motivation, pride, and vision (Biegel, 2010). Ideally this would be a positive social network for the LGB individual, provided there is a supportive relationship from peers, faculty, and the institution.

The school environment provides the student with an extended social network; this exists beyond regular school hours with related activities such as clubs and sports. Much research has focused on the lack of social support systems for lesbian and gay youth within schools, identifying the classroom as the most homophobic environment of all social institutions (Elia, 1993; Unks, 1994; Governors’ Task Force on Bias-Related Violence, 1988; Remafedi, 1987).

According to Birkett (2009), if a classroom does not fit the needs of the children within it, research has shown that academic and social difficulties may follow.

Adolescents begin to discover their sexual identity as early as middle school and continue this process throughout early adulthood. In a study done by Dube and Savin-Williams (1999), children became aware of their sexual orientation at the age of 10 years old. Research done by Miceli (1994) indicates that “sexual identity is identified as late as 15-20, depending on the sex of the individual and the amount of support and positive social networks that they are connected to” (pg. 44). Due to the age span in which adolescence occurs, it would appear that school is a significant social network when it comes to influencing the way the an LGB individual views themselves. Often times they are not compelled to hide their identity until they realize their normative heterosexual environment limits the amount of disclosure they may have about their homosexual feelings. This in turn, affects individuals and causes them to question their feelings, label themselves as “abnormal” and negatively influence identity formation during this developmental period.

According to Uribe & Harbeck (1992), the central role of our high schools is to assist adolescents in developing a sense of personal identity via the adoption of social norms. School personnel, including teachers, counselors, coaches and administrators tend to uphold the heterosexual model as a normative among student, generating a perspective that is in direct conflict with an adolescents’ emerging sense of sexual identity (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). All of these perspectives lead to the LGB adolescent withdrawing and isolating him or herself, this would lead to a negative self-identity, based on what the environment is defining as “appropriate and normal”. LGB youth live in fear of being harassed, bullied, and treated unfairly by peers and others, including teachers and other school personnel.

The peer connections in the educational environment and beyond have a large influence on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and values. Peer relationships are a fertile testing ground for youth and their emerging identities (Brown, 2004). Research suggests the quality of friendships affects the impact of peers on an individual (Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb & Bukowski, 2001). There have been a number of studies linking poor peer relations in childhood to poor school adjustment, psychological health, loneliness, and problem behavior later in childhood and adolescence (Bagwell, et al, 2001; Berndt, 2004; Dubois, et al., 2002). Individuals who do not have positive interactions with friends may experience high levels of conflict and are often motivated by self-interest (Berndt, 2004). These individuals often have a hard time with identity development due to not being able to see beyond the directly negative influential impact of their peers.

Through the social network of education, it is important to acknowledge the stress that is placed on the adolescent through the negative environment fostered by peers and other important influential authority figures around them. The stress of having to come to terms with their own sexuality in early adolescence while simultaneously negotiating their school environment's heterosexism and homophobia places an LGB adolescent at greater risk for depression, suicide, drug use, and school problems (Elliot & Kilpatrick, 1994; Munoz-Plaza et al. 2002; Treadway & Yoakam, 1992).

According to Crisp & McCave (2007), LGB youths' resilience and protective factors are based on contact with supportive individuals and supportive school policies. The amount of support offered through the educational support system is indicated by acceptance of the LGB student. This acceptance can come in the form of Gay Straight Alliances, ensuring "Safe Place" types of environments for students and allowing things such as same-sex couples being able to

attend the Prom. These activities and policies in the educational system help to promote an attitude that is supportive of these individuals, which will be beneficial in the formation of their sexual identity.

*It Gets Better* is a movement to support LGB adolescents during this time period in their lives, particularly within the school environment. The movement was created recently due to the numerous suicides and incidences of bullying that was occurring due to adolescents revealing their identity as LGB. Kristel Yoneda writes in the book, *It Gets Better* (Miller & Savage, 2011), about a time when she was called into the school counselor's office in middle school and was questioned about her sexuality. She was first told it was a safe environment, but instead it was yet another way of bullying. She speaks of being fifteen years old and how she was talking to someone whom she was supposed to be able to confide in. In that one moment, all her faith that she had placed in the system was destroyed, as she then realized that she could not be herself in high school (Miller & Savage, 2011). This is one of many examples that are prevalent in our school environment and how this type of behavior lends itself negatively to the identity formation of an individual.

Generally, the initial seeds of identity formation are generated through the initial social network of the family and further cultivated by educational and peer networks. Beyond these, adolescents also develop their identity through broader experiences in their search for understanding, support, and encouragement. The adolescent mind begins to mature into a need for further understanding, which is often found in a search for spirituality.

### **Identity Formation through Religion**

As the adolescent mind develops, it becomes capable of critical thinking. This is a level of advanced thinking that allows them to begin to consider their existence, identity, future, and

generally fosters a spiritual exploration (Hutchinson, 2010). Therefore, the periods of adolescence and emerging adulthood serve as a gateway to religious exploration, further developing this as a social network system for the individual. Spirituality can be defined as a drive for meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence. It involves our self-awareness and desire to connect with others (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005).

Goldman (2008) argues that conflict involving religious beliefs often manifests for the LGB adolescent; including internalized concepts of sin and rejection by God for being homosexual, which can create anxiety, self-hatred, depression, and alienation from familiar religious groups. Negotiating a spiritual identity for an adolescent may mean dealing with conflict between overlapping collective identities, such as being Gay and being a Christian. Goldman (2008) provides the example of an adolescent female, who considers herself very religious, realizes she is a lesbian, yet homosexuality is not accepted in the doctrines of her faith. This is yet another example of disconnect within a social network system and the influence this may have on the identity formation of LGB adolescents.

D'Augelli (1988) argues that LGB adolescents often feel rejected by the structures and institutions (i.e., religious denominations) through which most other people develop their spiritual identities. It would seem that achieving self-acceptance would be critical in the coming out process; this is essential for spiritual growth. Many individuals look at spirituality as a source of strength; Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson (2005) indicate that there are degrees of reconciliation between adolescents embracing being both LGB and being a religious, spiritually grounded person. The reconciled identity includes self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-acceptance, spirituality as a source of strength, a strong sense of spiritual identity, interaction between spiritual identity and sexual identity. A church openly accepting LGB adolescents and allowing



open, positive discussion about different aspects of this population displays this interaction. Non-reconciliated identities are those that struggle to integrate their sexual identity with their spirituality (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005).

According to Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson (2005), particular experiences that contribute specifically to spirituality and sexuality include: having a religious background and religious experience, attending church camp, having an open and loving environment associated with religion especially as child. Other experiences include having a sexual or intimate relationship associated with or instigated by a religious experience, the development of reflective self-analysis, and the experience of working through challenges, difficulties, and conflicts between religion and sexuality (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005).

Having a religious foundation as a child will often pave the way for the development of spiritual identity. The rejection of this familiar social network of religion/spirituality can create an identity crisis for the individual. Although religion will provide resources for a crisis, it can also be the cause of the crisis. Savin-Williams (1994) indicate that there are many youth coming out at younger ages, particularly in the adolescent time period. Earlier ages of coming out may mean an earlier disconnection from mainstream religious denominations and a failure to receive a religious foundation (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005). Those who do not have a religious foundation may have a more difficult time finding the means through which to develop a spiritual identity. Parks (2000) argues that LGB adolescents from traditional religious backgrounds begin the spiritual identity process earlier than typical heterosexual young people. This may be due to the conflict inherent between religious teaching, emerging awareness of sexual orientation, and the dissonance that the awareness generated (Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson, 2005).

### **Identity Formation through Community**

The larger community that surrounds them often influences the challenges that are unique to LGB adolescents during the formation of their identities. This includes the opinions of homosexuality as portrayed by media, current laws, and Internet access and community resources available as means of support. Community size and political orientation are indications of whether or not it would be considered a positive social network of support for the LGBT individual. The rural environment offers different challenges than urban settings.

According to Sniverly (2004), a small, homogenous population creates a barrier to open expressions of diversity and often exerts pressure to conform to community standards. Because sexual diversity is not recognized and accepted in rural settings, persons who do not express their sexuality in traditional ways are often made to feel like outsiders until they either shows they can “fit in” or leave the community (Boulden, 2001). This may force the LGB adolescent to stay hidden until they are of age and able to make the transition to another, larger community. Sniverly (2004) reports that communities with conservative values demonstrate an unsupportive attitude toward diversity tend to be homophobic, which would then lead to social isolation of the adolescent. Homogeneity and concentrated homophobia in communities, minimal access to openly gay adults and supportive services, and the threat of violence can create an environment that is not conducive to healthy overall identity of youth (Sniverly, 2004).

Health care is a wide-scale community issue for LGB and plays an important role in as a social network in the identity formation process (Goldman, 2008; Savin-Williams, 1994; Weinberg, 1972). Many youth fear that by seeking out health care, the physician will reveal their sexuality to their parents. This leads to lack of trust and is also a danger to the LGB

population in general. Kreiss & Patterson (1997) argue that providers can advertise their services in gay and lesbian publications and at meeting places to encourage youth to seek them out as a provider. Examining barriers related to both LGB adolescents (client barriers) and to the particular care setting (institutional barriers) can result in better access to care for this at-risk population (Diloreno et al., 1993).

Community alliances are an excellent example of a positive social support network. This allows adolescents to play a role in community decision-making and find role models to reinforce a positive sense of self. To the extent that community-based alliances incorporate gay rights activism, they provide important opportunities for youth to assume leadership roles and participant as constructive community members or agents of change. Community alliances provide a mechanism for youth to be leaders if they choose, while expressing authenticity as LGB persons in the company of affirming adults (Sniverly, 2003). The support of equal rights and anti-discrimination legislation for all people will ease the burden of stigma and help the young people of today become healthy, contributing members of society (Sniverly, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Identity is acknowledged and developed during the adolescent period of an individual's life. This is influenced through that which each person identifies as key components of his or her social network. According to Social Network Theory (Turner, 2010; Wasserman, 1994), the presence or absence of, and positive or negative effects that these systems present to the individual, will inherently contribute to the identity development of person. For the LGB community these areas are even more critical due to the added risk factors that accompany the identification with this community.

When social networks fail to provide the support and acceptance to LGB adolescents, the risks to them range from mildly harmful to deadly as supported by numerous studies that have linked social support and social networks to morbidity and mortality (Berkman, 1984; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Isreal & Rounds, 1987). D'Augelli (1998) argued that LGB youth have very few opportunities to explore and develop their identity without placing themselves at risk for victimization. Mercier and Berger (1989) point to the lack of readily available support systems in the home, community, and educational system as the cause for social isolation for many LGB youth. Elia (1993) notes that the literature consistently associates isolation as one of the major contributors to the high-risk status of many LGB youth. This isolation occurs when there is disconnect between the LGB adolescent and the social networks, which they are counting on to provide them with guidance and support.

The social networks of family, education, spirituality, and greater community, are key components that contribute greatly to the development of identity. These networks are highly influential regarding whether or not the self-perception of a LGB youth is one that is a positive one. Also, acknowledging the influences of these social support networks is essential in realizing the impact these have on identity formation for this minority population. Depending on whether or not this is a positive experience for the individual will determine the need for social services or the implementation of affirming activities available in the community. Through consideration of all the identified social networks, it is evident where the services are lacking and what areas need improvement. Throughout each network, a common theme was support to the LGB minority population, particularly during this critical developmental stage. From the initial “coming out” to the family system, receiving peer support and acceptance, having services available in the education system specific to LGB issues, a place of comfort in religion and

offering support in the greater community, all of these circumstances promote positive, healthy identity formation. This will provide an at-risk population with better coping skills, which in turn, will lessen the isolation of being “different” and improve mortality overall

### CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter first presents the purpose of the study and the research design and methodology, including the rationale for the choice of design and the role as the researcher. Methods for data collection and analysis as well as steps to ensure trustworthiness are discussed and limitations for the study are explored.

#### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was used for this study on LGB college students. Qualitative research has an overarching objective of obtaining a deeper understanding of human or social behavior (Merriam, 2009). This type of research provides the opportunity for the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomenon. Creswell (1998) describes qualitative methodology as one that "...analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (p. 15). Additionally, this type of approach focuses on participants' perspectives and allows them to construct meaning from their experiences (Marchall & Rossman, 1999). In this study, self-identified LGB students were asked to reflect on their personal experiences that involved their social networks and how theses systems influenced their coming out process. This would indicate the use of the phenomenological methods within the qualitative realm. According to Glesne (2006), "qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes" (p. 29). This type of approach puts the focus on deeper meaning achieved by immersion, where participants share a particular life experience and the research will find the common themes in these experiences (Padgett, 2008).

## **Participants**

The narrative given by the participants in this study was used by the researcher to develop a rich, thick description (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) of shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of being an LGB college student. The selection of participants for this study was based on a strategy referred to as purposive selection (Creswell, 2008; Maxwell, 2005). This type of strategy is where particular settings, people, or activities are deliberately chosen in order to provide information specific to the population being studied (Creswell, 2008). Participants who met all the following criteria were included in this study: (a) enrolled as a student at a community college, private university or public university; (b) student can be traditional or non-traditional college age; (c) self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, and/or Bisexual.

For this study, there were 18 participants chosen to complete open-ended qualitative interviews with the researcher. Participants were recruited through established connections at various campus communities throughout Northwest Ohio. These contacts invited the students to participate on a voluntary basis; this is also a form of snowball sampling. Established volunteers that agreed to participate in the study recruited others that also identify as LGB to be part of the interviews. The research then informed the participants the purpose of the study, the interview procedure, and had them sign an informed consent to participate in the research.

## **Instrumentation & Data Sources**

The participants in the interviews were given a semi-structured open-ended set of questions that encouraged discussion regarding the research question. The overall study and questions for the interviews were approved through the IRB process at The University of Findlay. The intent of the questions was to gather information regarding the participants' feelings about their social networks, including; family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater

community. They were asked about the transitional period into college and how they have negotiated their previous set of systems with their newly developing social networks. The coming-out process was also discussed with relation to the support or lack thereof to determine if these social networks have had influence on this critical developmental process for the LGB individual.

Internal validity is a strongpoint of qualitative research in that the accuracy of the findings is based on the researchers viewpoint. Creswell (2009) discusses the importance on developing multiple strategies when it comes to assessing the accuracy of the findings. It is also important to be able to convince the audience that these findings are accurate as well. Creswell (2009) discusses the following areas with regards to validity strategies- triangulating different data sources, using member checking to determine accuracy, and using rich, thick description to convey findings. He also mentions acknowledging bias, presenting negative or discrepant information, spending prolonged time in the field, and using peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009).

Threats to internal validity were addressed through the narrative data collection, checking with the participants to clarify several times over to make sure it is a valid capture of their information, providing operational definitions so that they are very clear to the audience and participants, and by utilizing information to explore the impact of social networks on the coming out process for LGB individuals. The qualitative generalizability of this study is a consideration, as the researcher can take the well-supported findings of the data gathered qualitatively and compare them to other existing cases or future cases, which can lead to generalizing about the broader population.



## **Data Collection Procedures**

Utilizing individual interviews to gather information from this population will allow the opportunity to give a voice to those who have been marginalized (Glesne, 2006). The researcher scheduled each of the 18 interviews after the recruitment of the participants was secured. This recruitment occurred through specific individual contacts within self-identifying LGB individuals within the campus environment. The individuals were associated with an established Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group on the campus and from this group; participants that met the established qualifications agreed to voluntarily participate. The researcher provided a confidentiality statement and explanation as to what the data was that was being collected and how it was going to be used. The goal was to complete a minimum of 18 interviews with LGB identifying individuals; this provided a rich and detailed amount of personal narrative that was detailed in addressing the problem statement.

Participants were asked several open ended, semi-structured questions in a confidential environment. With participant approval, the interview was audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription (Merriam, 2009). By providing a confidential environment, this provided the ability for the participant to answer the questions openly. As with any minority population, they felt less threatened and were able to speak more freely and honestly about their experiences. The interviews were 30-90 minutes in duration, this allowed participants enough time to discuss the questions and process the information they were providing.

In order to ensure trustworthiness and quality, several safeguards were put in place by the researcher. Utilizing dissertation committee members and professors, they were asked to review the conclusions of the researcher and provide feedback about the codes developed and their relationship to themes. This triangulation will provide confirmability and dependability (Lincoln

& Guba, 1986) of the author's analysis. The final coding scheme was also shared with several participants to confirm, through member checking, that the themes identified by the researcher were appropriate representations of the individual participants experiences. The researcher utilized committee members and other identified experts throughout the data collection and analysis process in the role of peer debriefers.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a concept explained by Guba and Lincoln (1985) as a way of capturing rigor and accountability. A trustworthy study is one that is carried out fairly and ethically and whose findings represent as closely as possible the experiences of the respondents (Steinmetz, 1991). Padgett (2008) describes three threats to trustworthiness, including reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias. One way to address the rigor in a qualitative study is to provide a detailed rationale for why you are using qualitative methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Morse, 1994; Munhall, 1994). Padgett (2008) provides several other methods for reducing the threat to rigor in qualitative research, including: triangulation, peer debriefing and support, member checking, negative case analysis, and creating an audit trail. All of these strategies were considered as this study progressed in order to maintain a level of rigor that is expected in this type of research.

The transition into early adulthood can be a very challenging time in the life of any individual, particularly one that identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These challenges are only further highlighted when there is a lack of support from the social networks for these individuals; these networks include family, peers, education, spirituality, and the greater community. The challenges then promote many risk factors for this population, which can lead to negative outcomes as demonstrated throughout the literature and particularly in the HRC Study that was completed in 2012.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the impact of social networks, which include family, peers, education, religion, and the greater community in the "coming out" process of LGB college students?
  - a. How do LGB college students define and describe their social networks?
  - b. What factors influence or prohibited the LGB students in "coming-out" publicly?
  - c. How do LGB college students describe what it means to encourage and support them in the coming out process?
  - d. In comparing the social network systems of LGB individuals in high school versus college, how do these individuals describe both sets of systems and how does this influence the coming out process?
  - e. Is there a described difference in college environments (community college, private and public) in the services that are available and how does this impact the LGB student?

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected during the interviews were recorded and later transcribed, allowing lead to the qualitative analysis. Narrative data responses will be analyzed qualitatively for themes, which is a basic tent of phenomenological data analysis (Creswell, 2009). The transcripts were coded using sociologically constructed codes, developed by the researcher (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) through a process that resembles open coding (Creswell, 2009). The second phase of coding consisted of refining the broad categories/themes using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), during this phase the researcher identified themes

and possible relationships in which to analysis and draw conclusions from. Qualitative software (Atlas.ti) was utilized to help develop themes and associations from the transcriptions.

### **Assumptions**

Creswell (2009) discusses the philosophical assumption of social constructivism, which is the understanding of the world in which we live and work. When utilizing this approach, the researcher will ask broad, general, open-ended questions. The focus will be on the process of the interactions and the information gathered through the phenomenology of the participants stories. The researcher acknowledges their background and understands that this has influence on how they interpret their personal experiences (Creswell, 2009). This will be the assumption with this research study, as the participants will be invited to interpret how they feel their social networks have influenced their coming out process.

The interpretive framework that will be utilized for this study will be Social Network Theory (Turner, 2010; Wasserman, 1994). According to this lens, the presence or absence, positive or negative effects that these systems present to the individual, will inherently contribute to the identity development of person. For LGB individuals these areas are even more critical due to the added risk factors that accompany the identification with this community. Considering the following key areas: family, education, religion, and community/society, it is assumed that there are components in each arena that contribute greatly to whether or not the LGB individual is able to come out and publicly disclose their sexual identity. Acknowledging the influences of these social support networks is essential in realizing the impact these have on identity formation for this minority population. Depending on whether or not this is a positive experience for the individual, it was assumed that this would influence the coming-out process for them.

Other common assumptions regarding this study are as follows:

- It is assumed that the LGB college student share common experiences with social networks and the coming-out process.
- It is assumed that the social networks for participants share similar degrees of influence on the LGB student and/or the coming-out process.
- It is assumed the questions asked during the interview will adequately elicit the relevant themes.
- It is assumed that 30-90 minutes will be adequate for individual interviews to reach theme saturation.
- It is assumed that the participants will be honest and forthcoming in their responses to the interview questions.

## CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore and determine what type of impact that social networks had on the coming-out process for college students that self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or other. As individuals move from the family to the college environment, they adopt a new set of social networks, while at the same time maintaining their relationships with the previous systems. By exploring the influence of these systems, both old and new, through the developmental milestone of coming-out suggests that these networks have an impact on the coming-out process for these individuals.

This phenomenological study presents the lived experiences of self-identifying lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students and how their social networks have impacted their coming out process. Phenomenology provides an opportunity for individuals to share their life experiences in order to illuminate the previously misunderstood, unknown, or discounted (Bogdan & Biklen, 1993). A variety of experiences are provided to help the reader understand the research participants. Quotations allow the participants to speak for themselves, providing multiple perspectives.

Key findings obtained from eighteen in-depth interviews where the results of the study inform the understanding of how social networks (family, peers, educational systems, spirituality, and greater community) impact their personal coming-out process. It also takes an in-depth look at the differences between the social networks that are present in high school and how these compare to those that are developed once these individuals enter into the college environment. The information gathered from each of these interviews will help to provide further understanding of (a) the nature of the influence of these social networks, including how these individuals define these as either supportive or not supportive, as well as how they

influenced them in their coming out process, (b) a comparison of these social networks from high school and college and how these changes influenced them, and (c) specifically to their educational environment what supports are present or may be absent that impact the coming out process. The major finding will be discussed in this chapter and analyzed in chapter five. The chapter will conclude with a summary.

### **Characteristics of the Sample**

The selection of participants for this study was based on a strategy referred to as purposive selection from a convenience sample (Creswell, 2008; Maxwell, 2005). In this type of strategy, particular settings, people, or activities are deliberately chosen in order to provide information specific to the population being studied (Creswell, 2008). Participants had to meet the following criteria to participate in this study: (a) enrolled as a student at a community college, private or public university, (b) student can be traditional or non-traditional college age; (c) self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or fall somewhere on the spectrum; (d) 18 years or older; (e) and various gender identities. The interviews were arranged in advance and each one ranged from 25 minutes to 60 minutes, targeting the personal narrative from each individual regarding their social networks and how they impacted their coming out process. Each participant was given the opportunity to identify a pseudonym in order to protect confidentiality.

This study included 18 college students that self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual or otherwise on the spectrum. This sample consisted of nine traditional students and nine non-traditional students with ages ranging from 19-52. The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian/white with only one interviewee identifying their ethnicity as African-American. This is a fairly typical representation of the diversity within Northwest Ohio in general and also in the LGB community where there are people of color are less likely to identify openly as something

other than heterosexual due to the intense stigma that exists within their community (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Herek, 2009; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). This study consisted of four male and thirteen female participants, one of the participants identified their gender as “other”. These participants attended community, private, and public universities, capturing a small snapshot of the different environments and offering some perspective for comparison. When asked how each participant identified their sexuality, there were a variety of answers from the participants, including mostly gay, lesbian, gay, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and queer. This supports the idea that sexuality can be fluid and that there tends to be a variety of labels that can help to identify where individuals fall on the spectrum, which seems to be an evolving process (Rust, 2003; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002).

The interviews began by providing each individual with information about the purpose of the study and having them sign a consent form. They participants were asked permission for the researcher to record the answers using a digital recorder; all of them granted permission to record the interview. They were assured that their answers would be kept confidential and there would be no identifying information that would link their true identity to their responses. The interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.

After interviewing these individuals the audio recordings were transcribed and uploaded into Atlas.ti in order to organize, analyze, code, and find themes. Upon analyzing the data there were 105 different codes found in the transcriptions, which were then grouped into eight major areas, including: social networks, school environment, relationships, emotions, coming-out, fear, spirituality, negative/risk factors and positive/protective factors. From these groups there were three major themes that emerged that expand and enrich the understanding of the lived experience of the coming out process for those that identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual or



otherwise. These themes all build on one another and link into the coming-out process that each person that identifies as something other than heterosexual will experience. The first theme was fear, which seemed to encompass a large part of the sentiment throughout the interviews when discussing what impacted each individual's coming out process. The primary family mainly influenced this emotion and the influence of spirituality and religion in the individual's life at the time they were realizing. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is "the process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity" (p. 62). The social stigma of identifying as something different than the majority contributes greatly to the development of a minority individual's identity. Often the viewpoints of the greater society are a belief that they are somehow a failure or abnormal, that knowledge then leads to self-hate and self-degradation (Goffman, 1963). According to Ryan (2003) the fear of sharing sexual identity with parents and other family members and the fear of ridicule and rejection are primary concerns. The feeling of fear that was indicated throughout the various interviews would indicate that the impact of the social networks created this type of environment for the individual and in order to come-out they had to get beyond this feeling. Through the interviews, fear was created around family and religion/spirituality, which makes sense due to those being very influential social networks that are present when adolescents first start to acknowledge their sexual identity.

The second theme was the need for community and acceptance for the individual, which also is influenced by the social networks in that individual's life. From the initial importance of the family and their reactions to the disclosure of the youths' sexual identity, this sets the stage for the individual and helps them to determine when it is best to reveal themselves as something other than heterosexual. Moving from the feeling of fear to the need for a community and acceptance, this seems to be in line with the "normal" development of the individual.

In the coming-out process, finding acceptance and a “community” is critical and often this can be the catalyst in helping the individual identify their sexuality openly. Elia (1992) notes that the literature consistently associates isolation as one of the major contributors to the high-risk status of LGB youth. Community alliances provide a mechanism for youth to be leaders if they choose, while expressing authenticity as LGB persons in the company of affirming adults (Sniverly, 2003).

The third theme that emerged when it came to the impact of social networks on the coming out process was the shift from the high school to the college environment, and how this was a turning point for the majority of those that were interviewed. According to Stevens (2004), perceptions of the college environment provide one consideration as to when the LGB student decides to disclose his gay identity. Through personal stories shared by the participants, a theme that occurred many times throughout was the idea that they could leave behind the social network influence they had in high school and embrace a new set of social networks in the college environment. This had a major impact on them feeling confident and positive about coming-out and they were able to find the support needed in this environment to complete this developmental process. The search for community and need for acceptance seemed to override the initial theme of fear and the environment that was able to act as a catalyst for the LGB individual was finding support in a new set of social networks that exist within the college environment.

### **Instrument Validity and Reliability**

The interview questions were developed based on an extensive literature review and structured in a way that provided the participants with the opportunity to have a semi-structured conversation about their coming out experience and the impact of social networks on this

process. The interview questions were open-ended which allowed the individuals to respond in a way that was relevant to their experience. As Argyris noted (1985), "the open ended question permits a free response from the subject rather than restricting the response to a choice from among stated alternatives. The individual is free to respond from his or her frame of reference" (p. 342). One of the critical pieces to the development of the LGB identity is allowing the individual to express themselves in a way that makes sense to them, one of the questions asked was "How do you describe what it means to encourage and support you in the coming-out process?" The answers varied to some degree, however, the general consensus was to allow the individual to tell their own story and the best supportive measure was to just listen. This would support the methodology of this data collection, by asking open-ended unstructured questions allows the individuals to respond without feeling the need to fit into an expectation. By asking questions like "What is your identified gender?" and "What is your identified sexuality?" also indicates willingness on the researchers part to allow the interviewer to determine where they fit rather than providing them with a list of closed-ended options.

The interview questions were designed to first collect demographics and background information, including a pseudonym, age, ethnicity, identified gender, identified sexuality, institutions of higher learning attended, when did you first realize you identified as something other than heterosexual, when did you first "come out publicly", and what influenced you to feel safe in coming-out when you did? These questions were followed by exploring the nature of the influence of social networks which included how the individuals defined their social networks, if they were out prior to college, out currently, difference in level of outness at home versus school, and what it was about the environment that they first publicly came-out that allowed them to feel safe in doing so. This question was followed by asking the participant to describe the nature of

the changes in the social networks from one period of development (high school) to the next (college). Questions that helped to explore both sets of social networks in high school and in the university environment included exploring the family, peers, educational environment, spirituality, and greater community in both environments. Areas discussed were political viewpoints, perceptions of LGB individuals in these social networks, experiences with individuals that identified as LGB, church attendance, general supports in these environments, etc.

Lastly, the final question explored the college environment and the support or lack there of that facilitates and/or supports the coming out process. Mercer and Berger (1989) supported the point that insufficient or negative support systems can cause social isolation, which then can contribute to the isolation of these individuals, leading to a high risk status (Elia, 1993). By looking at the current environment and determining strengths and weaknesses, this will allow the opportunity for research support in making changes.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Internal validity is a strongpoint of qualitative research in that the accuracy of the findings is based on the researchers viewpoint. Creswell (2009) discusses the importance on developing multiple strategies when it comes to assessing the accuracy of the findings. It is also important to be able to convince the audience that these findings are accurate as well. Creswell (2009) discusses the following areas with regards to validity strategies- triangulating different data sources, using member checking to determine accuracy, and using rich, thick description to convey findings. He also mentions acknowledging bias, presenting negative or discrepant information, spending prolonged time in the field, and using peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009).

Validity in qualitative research depends on the ability and effort of the researcher, as the researcher is the instrument in this method of data collection. According to Golafshani (2003) there are four areas that need to be addressed in qualitative research to ensure validity and reliability, these include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Credibility refers to “believability or reasonableness” or to the extent that the research approach and findings remain in tandem with what is generally accepted natural laws, phenomenon, standards, and observations (Golafshani, 2003). These qualitative interview questions involved recording the participant’s experiences and insights with regards to their own personal coming-out experiences. The credibility of the information gathered lies within the personal accounts of the participants and is verified by allowing them to present their “stories” in an open-ended interview. The role of the researcher is to simply record their observations and do an analysis at the end. Transferability is the ability to generalize, or the extent to which the results of the research apply to other contexts or settings (Golafshani, 2003). Descriptive research was gathered through qualitative interviews, all with similar context and descriptions leading to generalized assumptions. The sample size was small for this study, however, the questions were consistent and the participants were all from the same general area, therefore there can be some general assumptions drawn about this experience as indicated through the emerging themes.

According to Golafshani (2003), qualitative research requires dependability rather than reliability. It is impossible to measure the same thing twice due to the outside factors that can affect the personal experience and perception of the participant. Therefore dependability would be acknowledging the changes that occur during the research and note this in the results.

Conformability is the degree to which others agree or corroborate with the research findings (Golafshani, 2003). The procedures for collecting the data and checking to make sure it is

accurate through clarification with the participant were implemented in this study during the qualitative interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that “Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former (validity) is sufficient to establish the latter (reliability)” (p. 316). Patton (2001) with regards to the researcher ability and skill in any qualitative research states that reliability is a consequence of the validity in a study.

Threats to internal validity were addressed through the narrative data collection, checking with the participants to clarify several times over to make sure it is a valid capture of their information, providing operational definitions to ensure clarity to the audience and participants, and also by utilizing information to explore the impact of social networks on the coming out process for LGB individuals. The qualitative generalizability of this study is possible, as the researcher could take the well-supported findings of the data gathered qualitatively and compare them to other existing cases or future cases, which in turn would lead to generalizing about the broader population.

### **Research Question 1**

**What is the nature of the influence of social networks, which include family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater community in the coming-out process for LGB+ college students?**

#### **Fear**

The first theme that participants identified when it came to exploring the influence of their social networks, which included family, peers, educational environment, spirituality/religion, and greater community was fear. There were several coded responses that were related to this larger theme that represent this feeling or emotion of fear, these include: avoidance, Bible, bullied, choice, conflicted, confused, cry, depression, difficult, God, hostility,

painful, regret, religion, reservations, secretive, spirituality, stress, struggle, uncomfortable, and worry. All of these coded responses had some sort of element of fear that was very influential when it came to the LGB individual publicly identifying as such. Questions asked to gather this type of evidence via personal narrative were first asking the participants to describe their social networks in general and what factors supported, prohibited, or otherwise influenced their coming-out publicly.

The fear seemed to encompass the perception that these individuals were given that being gay was a “choice” and that is was someone wrong according to their religion. While many individuals look at spirituality as a source of strength; Love, Bock, Jannarone & Richardson (2005) indicate that there are degrees of reconciliations between adolescents embracing being both LGB and being a religions, spiritually grounded person. The rejection of this familiar social network can create an identity crisis for the individual. Parks (2000) argues that LGB adolescents from traditional religious backgrounds begin the spiritual identity process earlier than typical heterosexual people. This could be related to the conflict that is inherent between religions teaching, emerging awareness of sexual orientation, and the dissonance that the awareness generated (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005).

**Subtheme: Religion/Spirituality.** The impact of the social network of religion/spirituality seemed to really influence the timing of the coming-out for participants. For those that were raised in a religious, church-attending environment, this was considered a risk factor and generally was one of the main reasons they stated that they were not comfortable in coming-out prior to college. When asked if there was hesitation when they came out, generally church, religion, God, and the way they related to the importance of religion in their lives had a large impact on this decision and their self-perception of what it meant to be LGB.

MJ, a 54-year old lesbian reported that she:

“Felt really conflicted because to me church was an accepting place” (MJ. Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Another comment made by a participant was:

“I know I have felt like a fish out of water in church sometimes knowing that whatever the relationship was, whatever point in my life..friends could get married by there is absolutely no recognition for my life in this place” (Personal communication, September 8, 2015).

This message can be quite confusing to someone that is coming to the realization that they may identify as something other than heterosexual. Not only is the message one that doesn't align with their personal identity, but also there are no role models available in the church environment that would help to provide support to them as a minority.

One individual reported that his friends and family would sit in church and:

“They would hear of a loving, caring God, and I would hear of hellfire and brimstone” (Personal communication, September 8, 2015).

This is a poignant example of the negative effect that this social network can have on the self-esteem of an LGB individual and their ability to come-out publicly. The impact of the message that is produced through this social network can be long lasting and potentially devastating to an individual that identifies as LGB, as evidenced by the following statement from a 40-year-old lesbian:

“You know, that message of God hates gay people and there's something wrong with you and you're going to hell, like, I ...that's a hard one to let go of” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).



The fear of coming-out due to the influence of religion can also be tied to the uncertainty of the parental reaction, which also contributes to the negativity and delay in the coming-out process.

As stated by Padraic, a 25 year old gay male:

“My mom said..You’re just turning away from the church, what is wrong with you? You have become so distant with me and the church, I don’t know what’s going on with you” (Padraic, Personal Communication, September 29, 2015).

**Subtheme: Parent Reaction.** The importance of family and their reactions to the disclosure of a youths’ sexual identity can be very influential when it comes to identity formation. According to Ryan (2003) the fear of sharing sexual identity with parents and other family members and the fear of ridicule and rejection are primary concerns when it comes to publicly announcing their sexual identity. This can have a very negative impact on the LGB individual and further suppress their identity. Examples of this are demonstrated in the various participants’ responses:

“After I came out to my mom, she was like immediately kind of supported me..hugged me and told me it was okay, and that she still loved me..but it was only 15 minutes later it was like “well, what are we going to do now to fix you?” (Personal communication, September 2, 2015).

“After I admitted I thought I liked her in that way, I wasn’t scared..but I really got shut down by her mom- she told her and her mom was like she (me) can’t come over to the house anymore” (Personal communication, September 2, 2015).

“But I was really scared of telling my parent because of, I don’t know, I guess I thought they..I didn’t think they would love me” (Personal communication, September 15, 2015).

One respondent, when asked about how she felt about not being able to be honest with her mom stated that the fact she couldn’t tell her she was a lesbian was:

“Painful because if that’s your mom and you might share fun things and exciting things about the person you love, right?” (Personal communication, September 6, 2015).

“It’s like they say they accept, they say my partner would be welcome in their homes, at the same time there’s this feeling because of a period of separation that we had, they were afraid I had HIV and I was going to die, which made no sense” (Personal communication, September 11, 2015).

Trying to understand that their child is not heterosexual tends to be a difficult thing for some parents. The uncertainty and lack of trust of how the parent will respond creates a tension within the adolescent. Hearing the following responses from participants was hurtful to the interviewer, as one can only imagine how the adolescent felt after trusting that they could safely come out:

“That was when my mom told me that she understands and it’s not the...choice she would choose for me because it’s only making her life harder” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

“My mom went back and forth between her acceptance with it and was like, I accept you and love you but I don’t love this part of you” (Personal communication, September 6, 2015).

LGB youth must learn to negotiate complex psychosocial tasks at a time when they are dependent emotionally and financially on their families. They have limited mobility to access external sources of support and have fewer resources and coping skills (Ryan, 2003).

**Subtheme: Self-Perception.** According to Baker & Fishbein (1998), a positive identity must integrate one’s sexual orientation within itself. For LGB youth who are struggling to identify, define, and make sense of feelings of attraction toward members of the same sex, adolescence is a particularly challenging time. When relationships within social networks are disapproving based on stigma and homophobia, this may be harmful to the LGB adolescent in that it contributes negatively towards identity development.

As stated by Lou, a 52 year old gay male:

“My whole life growing up, all the derogatory comments, all of the “I’m going to make a man out of you” type of thing”- these thoughts really impacted and delayed his self-acceptance, which in turn prevented him from coming-out publicly” (Lou. Personal communication, September 1, 2015).

Other respondents also provided insight into their own self-perception and inability to understand their identity due to fear of the unknown consequences of disclosure:

“But I like I still had issues with...I didn’t really know how to go about doing it or going about telling other people that I was afraid that if I once told someone that change would occur and I didn’t know if it would be bad or good” (Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

“That would be awesome if anyone who’s ever struggling here could walk in and do that, but if they’re at the point in their life that they’re scared to do that, they’re not going to” (Personal communication, September 6, 2015).

When describing herself as pansexual, Allyssa, a 21-year old white female discussed the interesting aspect of coming out as something other than lesbian, gay, or bisexual:

“Yeah people don’t really know what that is. And I always get the “oh you’re attracted to pots and pans” But it’s..I mean, if people have a hard time with bisexual already, they hear the term pansexual and they are all “what? What does that even mean?” How could you not be any gender? How could you be more than one gender? Or..” So I have to explain and it takes forever” (Allyssa. Personal communication, September 7, 2015).

Other various responses with regards to the generalized fear and anxiety about coming-out and the perception of self are captured in the following statements made by participants:

“Because if you’re trying to face, you know, coming out to someone who you’re scared to come out to and you’re all alone in it...” (Personal communication. September 21, 2015).

“I was afraid of having adversity” (Personal communication, September 11, 2015).

“And I was crying, and scared, and nervous” (Personal communication, September 1, 2015).

For Ali, a self-identified pansexual 22-year old female, her perception of openly identifying as something other than heterosexual is described as:

“For my first semester in the fall, I was still in the mindset like yes, I can be open with people but I still want to date and marry a man and then I won’t have to deal with all the discrimination” (Ali. Personal communication, September 21, 2015).

SchauDon, a 22-year old African American lesbian discussed how it was to try and reconcile her true identity with her fear of how it would be perceived:

“and trying to balance that being a tomboy and then so many guys. So I wasn’t really being true to myself with who I really wanted to be, what I really was feeling. I’m just hiding it because everyone was like oh cool, she has a boyfriend” (SchauDon. Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

## **Research Question 2**

**What is the nature of the changes in to social network for you, if any, from one period of development (i.e. high school) to the next period of development (i.e. college)?**

### **Shift between social networks**

As individuals move from high school to the college environment, they adopt a new set of social networks, while at the same time maintaining their relationship with the previous systems. D’Augelli (1994) identified an unordered independent identity process that occurs for those that identify as LGB, including: (1) exiting the heterosexual identity, (2) developing personal LGB status, (3) developing a LGB social identity, (4) becoming a LGB offspring, (5) developing a LGB intimacy status, and (5) entering a LGB community. All of these stages are related to the social networks and are present during the time of identity formation.

Understanding the differences between one set of networks (high school) and another (college) will provide a foundation for how and when an LGB individual is able to embrace their identity.

**Subthemes: Level of Openness.** When interviewing participants, the majority of them are at the point where they have become fairly to totally comfortable with claiming their sexual identity in the college environment. One of the questions was level of outness being different when comparing both the home and the school environment. The majority of participants admitted that they were able to be more “themselves” which included being openly LGB+ identifying while at school, however when they returned to their home environment, they were more reserved.

Michelle, a 49-year-old Caucasian Lesbian stated:

“If I want to keep a close relationship with them and have interaction and have family functions, I don’t see that happening right away because that would...and I wouldn’t be welcome. I have some family members that would be maybe more accepting than other family members who would be like, “Okay, we’re done” (Michelle. Personal communication, September 3, 2015).

This supports the idea that the family of origin social network can have a very strong influence on the coming-out for an LGB identifying individual. Even at an older age, this individual is having a difficult time transitioning into the acceptance of her sexual identity, even though she is no longer dependent on them as an adolescent. This would indicate that even though the social network has changed, the influence of the original social systems is still present and very influential on preventing them to be completely comfortable in coming-out.

April is a 42-year-old lesbian woman who has been in a long-term relationship and she still admits that she has a difference in the level of outness. When asked about the differences between her openness at home and at school she replied:

“I just can’t talk as freely as I can at school about the possibility of getting married. I don’t talk to my mom about that whereas as school I can talk about that or talk about anything” (April. Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

For her, this is very restrictive due to the reported close relationship that she has with her mother with every other aspect of her life with the exception of her sexuality.

“It makes me feel like I still maybe have something to hide. I can’t totally be myself in all environments yet. Even though she knows it’s not something she approves of” (April. Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

The influential power of the relationship the students’ had with their families, both biological and extended was a large influence on their level of outness at school and home and when they decided to come out publicly. The level of fear had a large impact on this for many participants, as one stated:

“I’m only out with certain people so that makes a difference. Family is not aware” (Personal communication, September 21, 2015).

For a 23-year-old male that came out in college, he talked about how it was two years between the time he came out in college before he told his family which he described as very difficult because of his close relationship with them.

“It was a bit difficult, because I mean, I see my grandparents like either every day or every other day. Even now I was still like- I was just over there yesterday. So, it was kind of hard because I didn’t really tell them and I kind of felt like I was lying to them”(Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

“My immediate family is aware that I’m in a relationship and they..we don’t necessarily talk in detail about my sexuality but they know” (Personal communication, September 11, 2015).

“I mean I’m out at home but I guess just because we don’t see everyone I used to see anyways, so it’s not like I’m going to go out of my way and make a phone call and say “hi, by the way I’m gay” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

When asked why they are more comfortable in a school environment the responses were generally one of feeling a level of comfort and security that is provided by this new social system.

For 19 year-old Courtney, when asked about her level of outness being different when comparing both social network environments, she stated:

“at one point there was, but then I was like, I’m just going to level the playing field kind of..and yeah..” (Personal communication, September 30, 2015).

The narratives provided some evidence in the difference of attitude towards being comfortable in identifying equally in both environments, depending on the age, as many responses by those older students still reflected a feeling of fear or hesitation to be comfortable in their level of openness. When asked what creates an environment that makes it impossible to continue being unequal in identifying between the original social networks and the new networks, one student described it as necessary:

“When it reaches the need for the amount of disclosure to be an equal amount and then it just tips over, then it becomes okay, got to do it (be open equally both at home and at school)” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

**Subtheme: Reconciliation with Religion/Spirituality.** Moving from one developmental stage to another allowed the participants to explore their feelings about religion and spirituality. Those that identified this as a strong social network while growing up felt that moving to the college environment allowed them the opportunity to understand what they really felt about this and the importance it played in their lives.

One student described the transition from one set of networks to another when it came to his religious practice:

“As soon as I could stop going to mass, I did. I believe in God. I think I’m trying to figure that out right now. And it’s difficult for me” (Personal communication, September 7, 2015).

Again, indicating the strong influence of the presence of religion and the impact that it continues to have on an individual well into early adulthood. However, this also indicates the ability of the student to start to recognize that they have a right to explore their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas without the fear that was once attached to these practices.

One participant described his conflict with religion as follows:

“As I challenge the idea, I challenge the conclusions that people make about the bible. Like it says one thing, and I’m like “well, I think that’s what it means” ..it’s all about perspective and the way you see things and interpret them. So if God is as open and loving and everything that you want to say God is, why condemn people who aren’t like you or who go against what the bibles says that you said is says?” (Personal communication, September 7, 2015).

Despite the firm foundation that religion/spirituality has played in the lives of these participants in their original social network, they start to develop a type of reconciliation between what they were taught, how they feel, and what role this system will play in their lives. Although it may have originally had a negative impact in their lives regarding their sexuality and self-perception, many of them have decided that it is still important to them and they are creating a new relationship with their system of belief. This was evidenced by several of the responses to the question of if they consider religion/spirituality to be an important influence in their life currently:

“I believe in God” (Personal Communication, September 11, 2015).

“I believe in a higher being whether it be God or something else” (Personal Communication, September 14, 2015).

“I can be gay and love God at the same time” (Personal Communication, September 14, 2015).



“I am okay with God and that’s still important to me” (Personal Communication, September 27, 2015).

“I say to myself God loves me and I know that, and I’m just loving people” (Personal Communication, September 28, 2015).

“I know that my God blesses me no matter what..so I don’t really care what anyone has to say about It..” (Personal Communication, September 28, 2015).

For those that identified religion and spirituality as a very strong and vital part of their social networks, it was when they were able to come to some understanding and reconciliation within themselves and their relationship that allowed them to feel comfortable in themselves.

**Subtheme: Maturity.** Another emerging sub-theme was that of maturity, as evidenced by the participants’ responses to questions about how they view themselves at this point after the transition from the original set of social networks to the identification of a new “family”, set of peers, educational environment, religion/spirituality, and greater community. The following statements were made by participants’ supporting this theme:

“At this point my sexuality really is no issue because I have come to accept it and as long as I’m accepting, odd as it seems that people are surprised when they first find out, but in the end, it hasn’t created a whole lot of problems” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

“I would say mentally stuff’s harder to change because I hit that age of I’m on my own now. So, it’s me” (Personal communication, September 21, 2015).

“I don’t feel like I have to hide myself, as with high school, I have a little ways to go and I’m still going to need help so I don’t want to set off any triggers or anything and not have support if that were to be the case” (Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

When asked what the biggest difference that occurred during this transition, one participant commented:

“Open-mindedness. I feel like that developed more for me, kind of just who cares what other people think of you? You’re you, just be you. That influenced that” (Personal communication, September 6, 2015).

### **Research Questions 3**

**Specifically in regard to the social network of education, what supports are present that facilitate or support your coming-out process?**

#### **Search for community and acceptance**

According to Crisp & McCave (2007), LGB youths’ resilience and protective factors are based on contact with supportive individuals and school policies. From the initial “coming-out” to the family system, receiving peer support and acceptance, having services available in the education system specific to LGB issues, a place of comfort in religion and offering support in the greater community; all of these circumstances promote positive, healthy identity formation (Gonsiorek, 1988, Baker & Fishbein, 1998, Beck, 1995, Anderson, 1994, Burn & Rexer, 2005).

One participant responded to feeling accepted and what it means to find a “community” as:

“When you find out people know and then you are treated no different, you know it is supportive and it’s a surprise, because it’s not what I’m used to. It gives me confidence” (Personal communication, September 4, 2015).

When asked about her current educational environment, Alyssa, a 20 year old pansexual female described it happily as:

“I’d say even though I attend a private Christian university, I feel like its’ so gay, like, I’ve never met so many gay people before I came here. Like in my town there was only like a couple and I come here and I was like “Oh my God, they’re everywhere” (Alyssa. Personal communication, September 7, 2015).

Indicating that finding a community was both exciting and unexpected, yet so welcoming to her as an LGB identifying individual and how it contributed positively to the identity development.

“Community college wasn’t as...I didn’t feel as open to be myself there. So, I only was really out to close friends that I had as school and not to everybody but at the college, now that I am at the University, I feel much more free to just be who I am and I don’t have to hide that from anybody..” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

**Subtheme: Redefining themselves.** One of the positive impacts on the coming-out process for self-identified college students that identified as LGB was the fact that by transition to a college environment, they were able to redefine themselves, which in turn had a huge impact on their comfort in claiming their identity. Several participants in the following statements described this:

“I guess kind of at the end of the semester, I realized that I wasn’t exactly 50/50 in my attraction and that I didn’t want to limit myself just to..you know, part of..like just one gender of people” (Personal communication, September 7, 2015).

“I spent the entire four years that I was in high school trying to be what other people expected and then those two years in community college where I was like “holy shit! This is what the world is like” And then at my university, it was like, yeah it is, and I can handle it, and I think finally starting to evolve into this adult who is okay with having their own belief system, value, morals, and all of those things” (Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

“At the university I can be whoever I want to be and I don’t have to worry about what other people might think of me” (Personal communication, September 15, 2015).

“I think coming into college, everyone kind of has the moment where they’re like I can be whoever I want to be” (Personal communication, September 21, 2015).

Evan, a 21-year-old gay male stated the difference in him was that:

“back then I was just like, well, how many people know (that I am gay)? And now, it would be like, I don’t care, and then be like- I would be- I wouldn’t say more comfortable but I no longer care what they think” (Personal communication, September 8, 2015).

**Subtheme: Support at the University.** Participants were asked to describe the “college experience” and what it meant to them as an LGB+ identifying person, the majority of respondents had positive feelings about the support that was offered. They also explained how this influenced them in their comfort in further developing their sexual identity.

Cat, a non-traditional 28-year-old Lesbian, when asked about the whether or not the services on campus were sufficient, her response was:

“Oh yes. Besides having the GSA group on campus, we have an LGBT support center- not really support center, but a research center and I love that we offer classes for our faculty and staff about, you now, kind of, how to talk to students and sometimes I wish some of them would actually go” (Cat. Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Katie, a 24 year-old, non-traditional student responded to the question about what a supportive college environment meant to her replied as follows:

“I’m kind of to the point where I am so happy in the person that I’m in that , like, I kind of just want to tell everybody about it, and I’m kind of like throw all caution to the wind” (Katie. Personal communication, September 3, 2015).

When asked what is the best support that a social network can offer a student that is in the process of coming-out, students responded as follows:

“Just, I guess, being there for them and having an open ear. Because I think that like no one pushed me or tried to force me to do it” (Personal communication, September 21, 2015).

“Being accepting, not judging, trying to understand. And that’s why the people who know because I knew that they would be that way (not out to family currently) “ (Personal communication, September 24, 2015).

“Be supportive whether you’re okay with it or not, to be like alright, this is how this is going, so I’m going to be there for them” (Personal communication, September 24, 2015).

**Subtheme: Pride in Self.** Confidence in this educational environment helps to prepare them for the next phase in their lives beyond college. The ability of the individual to reach acceptance of self as someone that identifies as LGB is critical a healthy sexual identity formation. The sociological perspective includes the knowledge of one’s membership in a social group and the emotional significance of that membership (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008).

Padraic, a 24-year-old gay male said it perfectly when asked how his identity as being a gay man and how it intersects with his life, career, and future goals:

“I’d see that it’s helped me develop as a person, but it’s in no way going to hold me back from anything that I want to do. Like there is nothing that I can’t do, there’s nothing that I’m not entitled to, there’s nothing that is out of reach because of my sexuality” (Padraic. Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

SchauDon, a 21year-old African American Lesbian reported that after graduating she wants to be able to educate those that work in factories:

“Because the people older than me who worked in factories for years and haven’t experienced college, they need that information (referring to LGB) people need to be exposed to it as well and I think I can be a light to others..college issues prepare me for the real world” (SchauDon. Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

She also commented on what it was like to be double-minority and what that meant to her, SchauDon replied:

“So I think claiming them (multiple identities) and being proud of who I am and what I’ve done and like I said what I’m involved with, it just..what gets me through” (SchauDon. Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

Most students interviewed were active in a wide-variety of activities on campus, all of which felt very proud that they were able to embrace their identity even as participants in these activities. This helped to increase their pride and in turn their confidence in their identity as an LGB individual.

While exploring the current college environment as a social network, the question was asked what would be something that could be done better or what would you like to see more of? Students responded with the following suggestions:

“I guess, just advertise or make it more aware like we do over at the GSA. There’s resources available because my friends said when she came here for orientation they did tell them that there was a resource center and a GSA, but when I came here, there was none of that” (Personal communication, September 6, 2015).

“Sometimes I wish there was more, but then most of the time, I’m just like..there’s enough, so it’s just those rare occasions, rare instances” (Personal communication, September 11, 2015).

## **Summary**

As depicted through the personal stories, it is imperative that an individual is able to find support in their social network systems. As evidenced by the responses and the research, the family of origin and their ties to religion and level of spirituality can be a very influential factor on the coming-out process. The information gathered from each of these interviews will provided further understanding of (a) the nature of the influence of these social networks, including how these individuals define these as either supportive or not supportive, as well as how they influenced them in their coming out process, (b) a comparison of these social networks from high school and college and how these changes influenced them, and (c) specifically to

their educational environment what supports are present or may be absent that impact the coming out process. The interview data was coded to determine themes and within them there were several sub-themes that provided exploration into the identified research questions. The three main themes that emerged were as follows:

1. Fear was the largest prohibitive factor in the coming-out process for LGB individuals and this was developed through the social networks each student had prior to college, with the greatest influence coming from parents and religion/spirituality. Both of these networks seemed to have a much greater influence that was negative on the participants in their comfort level with coming-out publicly. Subthemes relating to this were as follows: religion/spirituality, parent reaction and self-perception.
2. Shift from the high school to the college environment was the second theme that was evident through the participants' responses. Students were able to compare both of the social network systems and clearly identify the turning point for them that allowed them to feel more comfortable in embracing their identity. Although there was still some hesitance on the part of many to equally identify openly in both social network systems. As the second research question was explored that compared the differences between both social networks, the follow subthemes emerged: maturity, level of openness, and reconciliation of religion/spirituality.
3. Need for community and acceptance was the third theme that emerged. Once the initial feeling of fear had passed or subsided, and the participants had developed a second set of social networks, they became more focused on finding a community of like-minded peers

and they had a need to feel accepted. Several sub-themes emerged, including; redefining self, support, pride in self.



## **CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the following chapter, a summary and discussion of the results of the present qualitative-based study will be provided. First, the results of the study are summarized. Second there will be a discussion of these results as they relate to the research questions that were presented in Chapter 1. Following these discussions, there will be a conclusion as well as a discussion of recommendations regarding this research. Finally, there will be a discussion regarding the future research opportunities that stem from the findings of this study. The three unifying themes that emerge from the present study, which are: fear, shift from high school to the college environment, and the need for community and acceptance. Each theme contained sub-themes that included religion/spirituality, parent reactions, self-perception, level of openness, pride in self, support at the University, redefining themselves, maturity, and reconciliation between sexuality and religion/spirituality. The implications of these themes and how they impacted the coming-out process for these LGB individuals are explored through the participants' responses during the qualitative interview process.

### **Review of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of social networks on the coming-out process for college students that self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual. As individuals move from the family to the college environment, they adopt a new set of social networks, while at the same time maintaining their relationships with the previous systems. Given the importance of this developmental milestone and the impact that both positive and negative influence provided by these systems may have, an investigation of these social networks and a comparison of the differences was warranted. Through the exploration of the influence of these systems, both

old and new, this can help to inform current systems in how to provide better support for these individuals in order to help them reach their full potential.

Participants included in this study were 18 current college students that self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual or other, they were 18 or older, were of different ethnicities, and included a variety of genders. They came from a variety of college environments, including private, public, and community college. The primary research conducted face-to-face interviews with all of the participants. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed; they were then analyzed by utilizing Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis program. An outside auditor for the study reviewed the domains, core ideas, and initial categories and feedback was incorporated into the final results and discussion sections of the study. Data analysis revealed eight major areas, all of which fell under three emerging themes; fear, need for community and acceptance and lastly, the shift from high school to the college environment. As the research questions were explored several sub-themes emerged within the larger three, including: religion/spirituality, parent reaction, self-perception, level of openness, reconciliation with religion/spirituality, maturity, redefining themselves, support at the university, and pride in self.

## **Discussion**

These three themes (fear, the need for community and acceptance, and the shift from high school to the college environment) seemed to capture the essence of the nature of the impact that the LGB+ individual experienced from their social networks as related to their coming-out process. Exploring the phenomena of the coming-out process is critical to the well being of individuals that are working towards acknowledging their sexual identity. It is important to understand both the positive and negative influences that family, peers, educational systems, religion/spirituality, and greater community can have on the process of an individual publicly

identifying as something other than heterosexual. Depending on whether or not the coming-out process is a positive experience for the individual will determine the need to access social services and affirming activities available in the community. By exploring the relationships of the individuals with their social networks, one is able to determine where the services are lacking and what areas need improvement.

### **Research Question 1.**

**What is the nature of the influence of social networks, which include family, peers, education, religion/spirituality, and greater community in the coming-out process for LGB college students?**

The exploration and acknowledgement of sexual identity happens during the adolescent period of an individual's life (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004, Savin-Williams, 2001). By utilizing the lens of Social Network Theory (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), this provides a foundation for exploration of a specific set of systems that are present in the lives of LGB individuals. Through the exploration of the type of support or lack of support offered through these networks (family, peers, education, religion/spirituality, and greater community), this can provide further information as to how these may have impacted the coming-out process for them. When social networks fail to provide support and acceptance, this can cause a risk for them that can range from harmful to deadly. Mercier and Berger (1989) point to the lack of readily available support systems in home, community, and educational systems as a cause for social isolation among many LGB youth. The theme of fear emerged throughout the responses to the exploration of this research question and the underlying subthemes that emerged from this feeling were religion/spirituality, parental reaction, and self-perception.

A negative response from parents can be devastating to the individual or the perceived reaction of what they might say or think about the adolescent paralyzes them and prevents them from revealing their “truth”. The fear of sharing sexual identity with parents and other family members and the fear of ridicule and rejection are primary concerns (Ryan, 2003). This can be detrimental to the LGB individual in many ways, including: less ability to cope, more likely to be victimized at home, to experience verbal and physical abuse from family members and to acknowledge more suicidality than those who have not come out to their families (Ryan, 2003). Youth rejected by families are likely to end up on the street where they are at high risk for exploitation and serious health concerns.

When asked about what prohibited MJ from coming out publicly when she realized at the age of 18 that she might be gay, her reply was:

“Family...I went through breaking up and getting back together with someone several times. And the thing that kept going through my mind was: I can not imagine telling my grandmother that I’m gay” (MJ. Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Courtney spoke of how she was going to come-out, but realized after a conversation with her parents she decided to withhold her sexual identity from them:

“My mom acted like she would accept it, but it was just like “man, that’s so weird”, or “I don’t understand how people” that kind of thing. I said my dad will never find out because if so, I won’t be his daughter anymore pretty much. And with my mom, I was kind of iffy, just like her message was kind of in the middle, so, yeah” (Courtney. Personal communication, September 30, 2015).

Another participant responded to the question of why she didn’t come out in her high school environment even though she knew that she was something other than heterosexual:

“You don’t want to be labeled. You don’t want to be beaten up. You don’t want people to say that you’re just some sort of Cyclops of nature. There’s just a lot of stuff. It’s the stigma that was totally very much a stigma”(Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Social stigma contributes greatly to the development of a minority individual’s identity. Often the viewpoints of the greater society are a belief that they are somehow a failure and abnormal. D’Augelli (1998) argues that identity development for non heterosexual people is a challenge due to the fact that most families and society in general do not provide the role models and visible socializing experiences to help them develop their identity and define who they are as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or otherwise. That knowledge then leads to self-hatred, which can have a very negative outcome for adolescents.

A positive response can make all the difference in the world in the coming-out process and the self-perception of the LGB individual. For Ali, she realized that she was “different” at age 16 or 17, when asked when she came out and what made her safe in doing so, she replied:

“Mostly my parents honestly. My parents have been wonderful, my whole life. And they’ve been very openly supportive of exploring your religion, exploring your career, exploring your place in life. And I’ve always know that, you know, if I were to be anything but a majority in any aspect of my life that they would be kind and supportive and wholeheartedly behind me” (Ali. Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Self-perception plays a major role in how the LGB individual views themselves in relation to the world around them. If they have been given the information or perspective from their social networks that being something other than heterosexual is wrong or bad, this will then create a very negative self-image of them. It causes a great deal of confusion for the individual because they realize that they are different and this is not a good thing, rather it is something that

needs to stay hidden. This can cause a lot of damage to the individual and may lead to some very negative consequences such as self-harm or even suicide. It also contributes to the idea that society views lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and otherwise identifying individuals as something that is “wrong” and perhaps contributes to the idea that being gay is a choice.

One individual replied when asked what her hesitation was in coming out, her reply was:

“The hesitation didn’t have anything really to do with other people and more about myself. I mean I think of the first kind of conversation I’ve ever had, where I first said that to someone where I first was like, hey “I am gay”. And I was crying, scared, and nervous. And I said it in the safest way possible with the safest person possible. And there was still that hesitation, which fear, and- but it wasn’t about that person’s reaction, it was more about finally admitting that more to myself than to someone else” (Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

Michelle, a 49-year-old self-identified lesbian only recently began to realize that she was a lesbian; her self-perception was described in her as:

“Personally myself, I don’t feel bad. But I’m concerned about what people would think or how they would react to me. But I don’t feel bad, if that makes sense” (Michelle. Personal communication, September 3, 2015).

At times, the individual is trying to figure him or herself out and at the same time trying to negotiate the social networks in which they are involved with. When an individual identifies as bi-sexual, it can be even more confusing to both the person and to the family that may not understand what this means, or they may see it as a choice if the individual is attracted to both genders.

Courtney discussed a time when her mom confronted her about her sexuality:

“Courtney are you a lesbian?” And to me, like, I didn’t know really. I was kind of going through it myself, trying to figure myself out, so I didn’t know. I was just like “All I know is I like this girl and we’re together,” and before then, I had been with boys so her asking me, “Are you a lesbian” like, I said no, but I felt like I had to say yes because I was with a girl. So, my mom was kind of upset and like she wanted me to tell her, like, “Yes, I am” or “No, I’m not,” but I couldn’t and so it

was just kind of like I was being attacked while I was already trying to figure it out myself” (Courtney. Personal communication, September 30, 2015).

D’Augelli (1998) discusses the fact that LGBT adolescents often feel rejected by structure and institutions (i.e. Religious denominations) through which most other people develop their spiritual identities. This achievement in self-acceptance would be critical in the coming-out process, but it is often a difficult task. Negotiating a spiritual identity for an adolescent may mean dealing with conflict between overlapping collective identities, such as being Gay and being a Christian.

Goldman (2008) discusses the conflict involving religious beliefs and how this manifests itself for the LGB adolescent; including internalized concepts of sin and rejection by God for being homosexual, which can create anxiety, self-hatred, depression, and alienation from religious groups. If a child is brought up in the church, they most likely will identify with that religion and claim that it plays an important role in their lives. Hence, the conflict that arises when something that is so important and should be associated with love and acceptance, becomes an atmosphere of guilt and self-loathing for feelings the LGB adolescent is experiencing and cannot control.

When asked about the part religion played in her sexual identity process, Cat replied:

“Well, I was home schooled so my social network was the local children’s choir and my church group. Both in a very conservative community. So I didn’t come out. I didn’t know there was an option. So, I mean, it (religion) influenced who I was, gave me a definite moral compass from a very young age, but not necessarily a safe place. My home-schooling curriculum was a Christian-based curriculum so my sexual education was biblical” (Cat. Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

For Lou, a 50-year-old gay male describes the impact that his religion had on his self-esteem as an adolescent:

“That’s one of those pieces of irony when I look back at my childhood- I had two step brothers that I’d be sitting in church with, one on each side of me. They would hear of a loving, caring God, and I would hear of hellfire and brimstone. We talked about it years later and for some reason, that was the message that I got and their message was a total opposite. I think a lot of that had to do with the feelings that I was having on the inside toward my sexuality and myself and it was coming out in that form. My self-esteem was trashed. I had no self-esteem most of the time” (Lou. Personal communication, September 1, 2015).

A positive religious experience can make a big difference in an adolescent’s life when they are developing their self-perception as an LGB individual. Although the majority of participants described their early social network of religion/spirituality as having a negative impact on their coming out, one individual in particular described a very different experience:

“So I remember that a really big thing that helped me, one of my first exposures to the LGBT community was all these church events because a lot of Unitarian youth happen to be more open about their expression. It really helped me get comfortable with the LGBT community and I became a strong ally long before I knew I was a part of it. My church has multiple rainbow flags hanging in the windows and a giant banner outside that says, you know, love equality or something. And they kind of teach, you know, how to live your best life and how to love people to the fullest, especially people on the spectrum should be loved all the more because they need it” (Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

Parental influence, self-perception, and religion all played a major role in creating fear in the LGB adolescent, which in turn inhibited the coming-out process for them. The perceived consequences, real or not, were influential enough to create an environment that for most of the participants was filled with shame and guilt about how they’re emerging sexual identity. For those LGB individuals that had a positive and supportive family environment, they were able to come out much sooner than the majority of the participants that did not.



## **Research Question 2.**

**What is the nature of the changes in the social network for you, if any, from one period of development (i.e. high school) to the next period of development (i.e. college)?**

It is necessary to take into account the developmental status of the LGB individual both in terms of their LGB identity development (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004) and their traditional life span trajectory. By utilizing the identity development model developed by Pachankis and Goldfried (2004), the initial stage of “sensitization” or “pre-coming out” happens while the individual is still in high school or even earlier. The influence of the social networks can make a huge difference when it comes to self-perception, as evidenced by the numerous stories provided by the participants when they were asked at what age they realized they were “different” as compared to what age they actually publicly identified themselves as something other than heterosexual.

A continuous pattern that emerged through the numerous interviews was the large gap in the time between the realization and the actual coming-out and this was due to the negative influence that various social networks had in the adolescent period of their lives. Many of them reported religion and parental influence, not having positive role models, and non-supportive educational environments. The majority of them came from communities that were not at all supportive and they lacked in any services that were geared towards LGB individuals specifically, however this did not really seem to have the influence that other social networks had on them.

Alyssa stated she knew she was different at age 15 but didn’t come out until she was 19, the reason being:

“I wasn’t really sure how they would react (parents and peers), not after a really small high school class of 43 people. So I just kind of, like, I already had this image and I didn’t want to change it, so....” (Alyssa. Personal communication, September 7, 2015).

Michelle described the differences between this developmental period as the following:

“Through high school it was different..I loosened up a little bit in college by meeting different people from other places and a little bit, but I was still very conservative. I think now as I’ve had the opportunity to experience other things and not be in a situation where it’s this way or no way it caused me to be able to branch out a little bit, get a different understanding, think things through and a more broader fashion, and totally be more accepting of other people..including myself” (Michelle. Personal communication, September 3, 2015).

For many of the participants, their level of openness was not the same when they were in the university environment as compared to when they went to visit their family. Even those students that are out in both social networks are still reserved when it comes to their level of openness expressed when they return home to their families.

SchauDon, a 21-year-old African American lesbian described it like this:

“I would say at home the issue (being gay) is more toned down, I think. Just because how I know my family is and just my friends already knew- they already know at home so it’s kind of just like a known thing, it’s not anything that, like, I have to not necessarily walk around and be like, Hey, I’m a gay person” (SchauDon. Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

This is interesting commentary with this LGB individual because at school, she is a leader in many aspects. She is an officer of the Gay Straight Alliance, an athlete, and a member of the Black Student Union- she is a role model to others and is quite open with her sexuality. This is evidence that it still can be difficult to shake the original influence of a negative social network such as family or religion that gives an LGB individual anything other than support.

Another student describes his level of outness at home and at school as follows:

“At home, only the people I like, my family that lives at my house only know like my grandparents, cousins, they really don’t know unless they, like, see a Twitter post or like a Facebook post that I made. Like I don’t just tell them. And then here (referring to the university), if someone just asks me I’m not going to lie to them so I’m just like, yeah, I’m gay, so?” (Personal communication, September 11, 2015).

Katie, a 24-year-old lesbian describes the difference as follows:

“I haven’t had you know that really frank discussion with my family. That’s like, hey mom and dad guess what? You know, it’s not something that gets talked about and you know, with friends and in the university environment, it is something I am fine with talking about and bringing my girlfriend to and being her girlfriend in public. This is frustrating, because you are so happy, and so excited about this real fantastic aspect of your life. It’s frustrating to not be able to share that with the people who you would most want to share it with” (Katie. Personal communication, September 3, 2015).

Even participants’ that were open about their sexual identity in both places noticed a difference in their comfort with behaving the same in both environments. Although, many stated that the confidence they gained from the university environment was enough for them to try to work towards bringing those two environments into alignment. Indicating that again, the positive impact that a social network such as the university educational environment can have on the coming-out process can be both encouraging and life changing for these LGB individuals. Reconciliation with religion was a sub-theme that was very clearly an important aspect when considering the shift of environments. It seemed as though the ability for students to shift into a new environment that supported their sexual identity development, allowed them to find a peace and understanding of the importance that religion/spirituality played in their lives.

Michelle, a 49 year-old Lesbian described this reconciliation as follows:

“Personally, I think a relationship with Jesus is important to me. But being identified as a lesbian now is not supported in a lot of church environments that I was used to. So, knowing that I probably would hear some negative, whatever, this causes me not to go. It can be a struggle at times. Yeah, it can be. I think just realizing that there needs to be maybe a little bit more open-mindedness to things than there are, I think there’s more to Christianity than some people are willing to acknowledge” (Michelle. Personal communication, September 3, 2015).

Evan, a 21 year-old gay male succinctly discussed the intersectionality between his spirituality and sexuality:

“My spirituality helped me through the process and so they’re connected (religion and sexuality) and they helped me-like, me being gay has helped me, like, find more spirituality and spirituality has helped me being gay” (Evan. Personal communication, September 8, 2015).

Other participants described their current status as a religious person as:

“My spirituality is something that encompasses every area in my life, as opposed to just going to church on Sunday, so yes, I feel I am definitely a spiritual person” (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

“It’s not that I have to be perfect anymore and with the changes and what-not a the church, it’s been very interesting to go back to that place that I was away from for four years” (Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

It would seem from the interviews conducted for this study, once the participants were publicly out, which takes them learning to love and accept themselves, they are then able to embrace their spirituality and come to terms with the differences in this social network from when they were an adolescent to what it is now for them as an adult. Once they were able to accept this part of themselves, they had the confidence to question and seek out understanding and reconciliation, learning to appreciate and recognize the intersectionality between their religion/spirituality and their sexuality. All of this was spurred on by a level of maturity that was reached once the individual was supported enough to come-out, felt confident in doing so and

was able to then think about the difference in themselves from one developmental period to the other.

When asked about returning to his home environment as an openly gay man, especially at the high school he was once a part of, Evan responded as follows:

“Just seeing like, where I came from and how I’ve gotten away. Matured from how they’re acting and how my support systems have changed and how I have bettered myself” (Evan. Personal communication, September 8, 2015).

### **Research Question 3.**

**Specifically in regard to the social network of education, what supports are present that facilitate or support your coming-out process?**

The school environment provides the student with an extended social network; this exists beyond regular school hours with related activities such as clubs and sports. As individuals shift from the high school environment to the college environment they are able to begin to objectively look at themselves without the influence of the original social network systems. Those students that participated in this study indicated that this shift allowed them to work on completing the important developmental milestone of coming-out and publicly identifying as something other than heterosexual. A positive identity must integrate one’s sexual identity into it (Baker & Fishbein, 1998). Research done by Miceli (1994) indicates that the “sexual identity is identified as late as 15-20, depending on the amount of support and positive social networks that they are connected to” (pg. 44). Participants felt that being able to come to college allowed them a “clean slate” and they could redefine themselves through the newfound support in the university environment.

Padraic, a 24 year-old gay male describes the university environment as follows:

“I was very comfortable, I was living my life out, I was you know, I have no secrets about my sexuality and everyone knew that I was out. And my professors knew, my classmates knew, and it was just like, “Whatever”, and “Nobody Cared” (Padraic. Personal communication, September 29, 2015).

When describing her current environment at the university, Cat stated the following:

“It’s very supportive. I mean, like, most of the people that I met have been at least okay, not necessarily like you said, embracing, but at least supportive. I don’t necessarily wear my sexuality on my sleeve, but it’s not something I hide about myself. People are cool. I love that we offer classes fro our faculty and staff about, you know, how to talk to (LGB) students and sometimes I wish some of them would actually go. But I love having the sensitivity part of it for the professors who really want to be out there” (Cat. Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

When asked about her current school environment, April, a 40 year-old lesbian replied:

“I would say it’s positive and welcoming and open, those types of things, because, well, for one thing, I’m not the only one. I’m not the only one that identifies other than heterosexual. And for another thing just everybody being educated and open and being in a social work program, I feel like that’s a very open environment, non-judgmental and you can pretty much be yourself, no matter who that is” (April. Personal communication, September 18, 2015).

As evidenced time and again through the information collected from the participants, the supportive school environment allowed them to gain pride in themselves as LGB community members. Through clubs, activities, and a general supportive environment at the college, this promoted pride and confidence, they were able to find community and acceptance. All of these factors are protective in the sense that the individual is able to complete the important developmental milestone of coming-out. This allows them to move forward into the future, beyond this social network and contribute towards a healthy LGB college graduate.

## Conclusion

Overall, when considering the process of identity formation, particularly during adolescence, the social networks have a lasting impact on LGB individuals, particularly when the support has been negative towards them identifying as something other than heterosexual. Through this qualitative study the three main themes that emerged when exploring the impact of social networks on the coming-out process were fear, shift from high school to college, and the need for a community and acceptance.

This study attempted to ascertain and record the experiences of 18 college students that identified as LGB individuals and how their social networks impacted their coming-out process. The participants' words in this study suggest that fear, shift from high school to college, and the need for community and acceptance all have an impact on their coming out process, and these themes emerged by exploring their social networks. It is with humble appreciation of the participants' courage to share their coming-out experiences that this research has been completed.

The results of this study suggest that social networks have a powerful impact on the coming-out process for LGB individuals. The messages that these individuals receive about what it means to be something other than heterosexual can have long-lasting effects and delay the completion of sexual identity development, which then prevents them from being a completely whole and healthy individual. The social networks of parents and religion/spirituality tend to have the greatest implications on them, and when the support is negative or lacking, this creates fear. This feeling is manifested in their self-perception and is often based on religion/spirituality and the parental reaction towards LGB identities. It is only when they are able to shift into a new set of social networks, they are able to become more

objective about themselves. Again, promoting the idea that when the social networks are positive in nature, this is encouraging and allows the LGB individual to reveal their truth.

By comparing the developmental period between high school and college, it was apparent that this had a very positive impact on the coming-out process. The level of openness expressed by these participants was often unequal; they were able to be more open about their sexual identity in their college environment. This development of a new set of social networks (“family”, peers, educational environment, religion/spirituality, and greater community) gave them the opportunity to re-define themselves. The more accepting they were of themselves and understanding that being something other than heterosexual was a positive in this new environment, they gained the confidence to then begin to reconcile with the two social networks that had the most influence during their high school development- family and religion/spirituality.

Many participants expressed that it was acceptance in this new environment from their social networks of peers and education that allowed them to gain the ability to see them as something beyond what the earlier negative messages had implied. For some of the older, non-traditional students, they still were not able to move past the heavy influence of the negative messages that were engrained by those early systems during the important adolescent development period. For these LGB individuals, the college environment represented freedom, the chance to become someone new, but it still was not enough to allow them to create a level of openness that was equal in both social network systems. It was interesting to note that religion/spirituality was a very important system to most of them, having been under the influence of this during adolescence, albeit negative in many instances, this still was a value that most participants held.



Reconciling the feelings about religion/spirituality and how it related to their identity was critical to them and most were able to find a way to come to terms with the fact that there was intersectionality between their beliefs and their sexuality. All of these positive changes towards accepting themselves during the period of development that was occurring in the college environment indicated a new level of maturity, all encouraging a positive self-image and allowing the LGB to complete the important developmental milestone in sexual identity development of be able to come out publicly and live openly with this new label.

The search for a community and acceptance within that community happened as they transitioned to the college environment, the importance of this social network became clear as evidenced by the numerous participants that expressed that through the support at the university they could confidently come-out as LGB. Being able to openly identify as something other than heterosexual and having the confidence to be “different” assisted in a new founded pride in themselves. This allowed them to look forward to the future and express the desire to utilize their identity in a positive way for others. Many participants responded that they wanted to return to their former social network systems and provide an example that would be hopeful for adolescents that were struggling with the negative messages regarding their sexual identity.

### **Recommendations**

From the evidence gathered in this study, the researcher would make the following recommendations:

- It would be beneficial to provide mentorship for those LGB that have come out in college and can return home to their high school environments comfortably to provide education and support to those struggling with sexual identity development.

- The social network of religion seems to have a very influential impact on an adolescent, particularly when it comes to their sexual identity. Finding affirming, non-judgmental environments where high school students can explore the possible intersection and acceptance between their religion/spirituality and their sexuality would solve a lot of the issues that surround the fear that is associated with the coming-out process.
- Several participants stated that they were not aware of all the affirming clubs and activities that were available on campus until they were well into their college career. Providing this information during orientation would be a benefit in giving them access to a community where they will find acceptance, which will contribute to the well being of the LGB student. If a student is feeling that they are in a safe place to be themselves and express their sexuality in an open way, they will then be able to concentrate on their education and other areas that need attention during this developmental time in their lives.

### **Future Research Opportunities**

The results of this study create a springboard for further research opportunities regarding the impact of social networks on the coming-out process. Because of the vast age difference in the participants, a number of other interesting possible areas for research came about due to this variable. Comparing the social networks through the lens of the societal changes (i.e. time, policies, culture) would help to provide a greater appreciation for the impact that these variables have had on the attitude of the family, peers, educational systems, religion/spirituality, and

greater community. The older individuals that participated in this study had a very different self-perception based on the culture that had a heavy influence on their environment.

Two of the participants in this study were in a relationship, one of which was 52 and the other was 25- the interesting points that were brought up were those that dealt with the difference in the culture of when their sexual identity formation occurred. The older partner of the couple expressed how she still has fear that is a residual reaction to the negativity that was applied to anyone that identified as something other than heterosexual in the 1980's. She expressed the difference in the culture due to the changes in policies (i.e. the recent legalization of equality in marriage) and how this may be the biggest argument that she and her partner currently have. When the participant was asked, "do you have feelings of hesitation and then you realize it's not necessary? I wonder how that would feel in comparing your experience then to what it would be like now?" Her response was as follows:

"There is still a stigma but it's less and I guess I get nervous in certain situations. And it's refreshing to know that there are people that who never experienced that. And so I have to think about that as well. I still get nervous being with somebody who's significantly younger and came out in very different situations. I still tell her that somebody who was murdered coming out of a gay bar. So that's within my lifetime and that's a hard thing to shake" (Personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Based upon this response and others that were similar from the older participants in this study, it would be an interesting area to explore further as it all contributes to the knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of LGB individuals.

Another interesting area of research would be to look at those that have been out for a long period of time as compared to those who have just come out, particularly if this occurred in the same type of environment. Finding the protective factors that provide this resiliency within individuals would be beneficial to improving for those that are hesitant or still fearful the tools in which to move forward in their sexual identity formation.

The exploration of what happens beyond the college environment when yet another set of social networks are developed and how the LGB individual is able to manage the different sets of systems as they move into the next phase of their life. It would be interesting to discover what, if any, influence the past networks that were at one time very impactful on the coming-out process, continue to have on the individual and how they are able to manage the many levels of systems.

Coming-out is always a very interesting phenomenon to explore, individuals have their own personal story that is emotional and often times painful. Looking at the differences between coming-out in different periods of life would be a useful study. It is important to acknowledge that there is a unique set of circumstances for every life-stage, particularly when it comes to acknowledging sexual identity. Research supports that generally LGB individuals are able to publicly acknowledge their sexuality during early adulthood, however, it would be interesting to look at the impact that social networks had on these individuals at all stages of life, based on when they actually were able to openly admit they were something other than heterosexual.

Lastly, there is a time when LGB individuals develop pride in themselves and it would seem beneficial to explore further what it would mean to provide a positive social network of support to those adolescents that were struggling with this developmental period of sexual identity formation. This type of study would need to involve adolescents that were in this period of development and be done as a comparative analysis to students that have reached the milestone of coming-out and are comfortable with their identity. Any type of research that further explores the struggle that these individuals have in coming-out, accepting themselves, and feeling a sense of community will contribute to the over all health and well-being of LGB individuals.

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## APPENDIX A

**Institutional Review Board**

Date: **July 14, 2015**

To: Dr. Michael Scoles

CC: Robin Walters-Powell

RE: The Impact of Social Networks on the Coming-Out Process for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-Sexual Individuals

**Project Expiration date: July 14, 2016**

The University of Findlay Institutional Review Board (IRB) has completed its review of your project utilizing human subjects and has granted authorization. This study has been approved for a period of one year only. The project has been assigned the number 910.

In order to comply with UF policy and federal regulations, human subject research must be reviewed by the IRB on at least a yearly basis. If you have not completed your research within the year, it is the investigator's responsibility to ensure that the **Progress Report** is completed and sent to the IRB in a timely fashion. The IRB needs to process the re-approval before the expiration date, which is printed above.

Understand that any proposed changes may not be implemented before IRB approval, in which case you must complete an **Amendment/Modification Report**.

Following the completion of the use of human subjects, the primary investigator must complete a **Certificate of Compliance form** indicating when and how many subjects were recruited for the study.

Please refer to the IRB guidelines for additional information. This packet can be obtained within blackboard under community section. Please note that if any changes are made to the present study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please include that number on any other documentation or correspondence regarding the study.

Thank you very much for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (419) 434-5442 or email [irb@findlay.edu](mailto:irb@findlay.edu).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susan W. Stevens EdD, AT".

Susan W. Stevens, EdD., AT



Chair, Institutional Review Board

Cc: IRB Office

## APPENDIX B

**FINDLAY**

THE UNIVERSITY OF FINDLAY

**Institutional Review Board****Consent Form Template****DATE:**        **March 16, 2015****PROJECT TITLE: The Impact of Social Networks on the Coming-Out Process for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-Sexual Individuals****PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR(S) AND CO-INVESTIGATORS: Dr. Michael Scoles and Robin Walters-Powell.****INTRODUCTION:**

This study will explore the phenomena of the coming-out process for a group of self-identified LGB participants that are current college students in a variety of settings. The purpose will be to better understand this critical developmental process of sexual identity formation and the impact of the social networks on this process, providing a complete picture of what those networks were like as an adolescent versus what exists for them now as college students. Ultimately the hope is to gain an understanding of how these systems influence the coming-out process and how to better provides support for this important developmental transition for these individuals. Through the provision of these supports, the goal would be to provide a more comfortable environment for these individuals that would allow them to feel accepted regardless of their sexual orientation. This study will seek to identify key areas of change within the social network, which ultimately supports or hinders the coming-out process for LGB college students.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of social networks on the coming-out process on college students that are self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, and/or Bisexual. As individuals move through life, there are developed and identified areas referred to as social networks that provide support and assistance. It is through these social networks that identity formation occurs, these broad categories are highly influential in defining self-concept, which is developed through an affiliation (whether it be positive or negative) with the following groups: family, peers, education, religion, and the broader community/society. Social support can be defined as supportive relationships with others (Dubois, et al 2002.) According to Turner (2010), it is also possible to have a social network that identifies as such, even if it does not provide a positive form of support to the individual. Through the ecological perspective, the Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1973 and Wasserman, 1994) focuses on the fundamental importance of neighborhood and resources that extend beyond the family. When these identified social support

systems are negative or jeopardized, it can lead to social isolation and cause a breakdown in these areas and in general functioning.

### **DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PROCEDURES:**

The participants that participate in the interviews will be asked to respond to a semi-structured open-ended set of questions that will promote discussion regarding the research questions. The intent of the questions will be to gather information regarding the participants' feelings about their social networks, including; family, peers, education, spirituality, and greater community as they relate to the coming-out process. They will be asked about the transitional period into college and how they have negotiated and reconciled their previous set of systems with their newly developing social networks. The coming out process will also be discussed with relation to the support or lack thereof to determine if these social networks have influence on this critical developmental process for the LGB individual.

The researcher will arrange for a time to meet with each individual after the recruitment of the participants is secured. This recruitment will occur through specific individual contacts within each designated campus environment. It is anticipated that participants will be associated with an established Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group on the campus and from this group; participants that meet the established qualifications and have volunteered to participate will be selected for interviews. The researcher will provide a confidentially statement and explanation as to what the data is that is being collected and how it will be used. The target number of interviews is three students at each campus, which would make a total of 18 individual interviews.

Participants will be asked several open ended, semi-structured questions during the interview. With participant approval, these interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription (Merriam, 2009). By providing a confidential environment for these LGB individuals, this will cater to this minority population, they will feel less threatened and they will be able to speak more freely and honestly about their experiences. The interviews will last no more than 90 minutes in duration, thus giving the participants enough time to discuss the questions and process the information being shared by the group. Each interview will take place at a mutually agreeable location suggested by the interview participant.

### **TIME ASSOCIATED WITH STUDY:**

Each participant will be asked to voluntarily participate in an interview that will last approximately 90 minutes.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS:**

Psychological risk involved in the current research involves responding to questions related to personal experience, such as harassment, discrimination, and general psychological well-being, and possible physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The perceived level of risk will be less than

minimal due to the information being kept confidential from the general public. The open-ended nature of the questions and responses means they can share what they want to share, which gives the participant a level of control in the interview process.

Social risk involved in the current research involves the less than minimal risk of survey participation having a negative impact on the individual such as impacting their enrollment in education, employment, or social standing. The information will be kept confidential and therefore the risk will be less than minimal for the participant.

Legal risk involved in the current research does not exist due to there is nothing of an illegal nature being asked.

Economic risk is less than minimal; it will take approximately 90 minutes to participate in the interview with the researcher and the participants will have a choice in the date and time of the interview.

Physical activity is not required as a part of this study, and therefore there is no physical risk associated with participating in this research.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS:**

The information that will be collected and analyzed will be very important in exploring social networks in the lives of those that identify as Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual. The coming-out process is a developmental milestone in the lives of these individuals and it is important to understand how social networks can contribute or inhibit this process. The narratives collected will provide a realistic, first person perspective on the impact of their social networks on their coming-out process. Another goal would be to bring to light issues that concern how comfortable they feel on campus with other students that may be different than they are, safety on our campus, and if they feel respected, harassed, or discriminated against in any way. It will be helpful to understand what types of supports or lack thereof exist and how they have impacted these individuals. This is critical information to have and it will help to inform policy and procedures in an educational setting. It will help identify areas that are both strengths and weaknesses, which will then assist in planning and evaluation of the campus environment.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA:**

The individual subjects' anonymity and confidentiality will be protected with private interviews done by the researcher and the protection of the information collected, including the analysis process. Basic demographics will be collected along with the narrative, however it will not be information that is identifiable with the information given by the participant. Pseudonyms will be chosen by the interviewee and will be used during the data collection process, analysis, and write-up of the study.

Anonymity and confidentiality will also be protected during analysis as any professionals assisting data analysis will understand and sign the confidentiality agreement. Also, during analysis, data will not be categorized by multiple demographics at once. Finally, upon completion of the proposed study and after a three-year lapse of time, in accordance with IRB policy, all survey responses will be destroyed.

**COSTS AND/OR COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION:**

There are no costs and/or compensation being offered for the participation in this study.

**CIRCUMSTANCES FOR DISMISSAL FROM THE STUDY:**

As a condition of being a participant, the student must self-identify as LGB. If during the interview, it is found that the student has misrepresented themselves, this would be grounds for dismissal from the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary on behalf of the participant. If at any point during the study the subject would like to withdraw from participating, they may do so at anytime without repercussions.

**CONTACT PERSONS:** For more information concerning this research, please contact Dr. Michael Scoles at 419-434-5812. If you believe that you may have suffered a research related injury, contact Dr. Michael Scoles at 419-434-5812. If you have further questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

Sue Stevens  
 IRB Chairperson  
 The University of Findlay  
 Findlay, OH 45840  
 419 434-5442  
[irb@findlay.edu](mailto:irb@findlay.edu)

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:** Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner.

For studies with students, state that the subject does not jeopardize grades nor risk loss of present or future faculty/school/university relationships.

**CONSENT:** Federal regulations require precautionary measures to be taken to insure the protection of human subjects on physical, psychological, social, and other issues. This includes the use of “informed consent” procedures.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (PRINTED NAME OF SUBJECT) have been adequately informed regarding the risks and benefits of participating in this study. My signature also indicates that I can change my mind and withdraw my consent to participate at any time without penalty. Any and all questions I had about my participation in this study have been fully answered. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

---

SUBJECT SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

I have witnessed the consent process and believe the subject has been fully informed, understands the research study, and has agreed to participate in the study.

WITNESS PRINTED NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

WITNESS SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

Interview Questions (I'll erase the questions when I turn in the final copy, but I thought this would be helpful in thinking through them to have them in front of my face)

**What is the nature of the influence of social networks, which include family peers, education, religion, and the greater community in the “coming out” process of LGB college students?**

## Demographics

Pseudonym:

Age:

Ethnicity:

What is your identified gender?

What is your identified sexuality?

What college/university do you attend currently?

Have you attended other institutions of higher learning?

When did you first realize you were lesbian, gay, or bi-sexual?

What age did you come out publicly at a lesbian, gay, or bi-sexual person?

What was it that influenced you to feel safe in coming out?

(Here is where it gets confusing for me- talking about the before college/and after- do I make some of these contingent? Am I asking these correctly? Help☺)

Please discuss the following social networks when you were growing up- comment on their importance, how they supported or did not support you and if they had anything to do with you coming out or not coming out:

Your biological family, or who you considered to be your family:

How did they identify politically?

How did they view LGB individuals?

How would you describe your relationship with them growing up?

Your friends/peers:

Did you have any friends that identified as LGB?

Where they out publicly?

Did you have a same sex relationship prior to college? Why or why not?

Your school:

How would you describe your experience in school?

Was it common to see same-sex couples at your school?

Were there any teachers that were supportive at your school? Or was identifying as LGB seen as “secretive” and not acceptable?

Did your school have a GSA?

Did you participate? Why or why not?

Your community

How would you describe your community of origin?

Was there anything that was available for LGB individuals?

Did you attend church?

How often?

What (if any) is your religion that you identified with growing up?

Was it an important part of your growing up?

Was your church supportive of LGB individuals? What was the message they sent to you about your sexuality?

What kind of influence (if any) did this have on your self-esteem while you were growing up?

**a. How do LGB college students define and describe their social networks?**

Please comment on the following environment at your college/university:

Your "family":

is there a group/person/etc. that has become your main support here at college?

Why or why not?

Do you remain in close contact with your family of origin? How often do you visit/talk? Why or why not?

Your friends/peers:

Did you develop new friends here at school?

Do you consider them a support? Why or why not?

Are you open about your sexuality with them? Why or why not?

Do you have other friends that are openly LGB?

Your school:

What is your school environment like?

What kinds of activities are you involved in?

Do you feel it is a supportive environment for an LGB individual? Why or why not?

What kinds of activities and/or supports do they offer students that identify as LGB?

Your spirituality:

What (if any) religion do you identify with?

How often do you attend church/practice this religion?

Is this different than what you grew up as? Why or why not?

Do you consider this to be a major influence in your life currently? Why or why not?

Does your church/religion support your sexual identity?



What do you think about the above social networks at your college/university? Do you consider them supportive? Sufficient? Why or why not?

**b. What factors influence or prohibited the LGB individual in “coming out” publicly?**

Thinking of your social networks, both before college and after, which were influential in your coming-out process?

Which networks supported your LGB identity?

Which networks were not supportive of your LGB identity?

Why did you come out when you did?

What happened after you came out? Where you supported? Where you not supported? Please describe your experience in coming-out and what you feel were the major reasons you chose to do this when you did.

**c. How do LGB college students describe what it means to encourage and support them in the coming out process?**

Thinking about your own personal experience, what has been supportive to you in the coming out process? Why or why not?

What kinds of supports do you consider to be the most impactful in your coming out?

What types of supports were lacking or not present and how did this impact your coming out process?

**d. In comparing the social network systems of LGB individuals in high school versus college, how do these individuals describe both sets of systems and how does this influence the coming out process?**

Thinking about the age you came out, what was it about your social network that influenced this process for you? What was the main factor for coming out when you did?

Where you out prior to college? Why or why not?

Are you out currently at college? Why or why not?

Is there a difference between your level of “outness” at home versus here at school? Why or why not? Please explain.

Think about the environment in which you publicly identified as LGB. What was it about that environment that made it ok for you to do so? Was there any hesitation? Why or why not? Please explain.

- e. Considering both social network systems of LGB individuals (high school vs. college), what is the nature of the changes in these networks between these two different periods of development?**
  
- f. Is there a described difference in college environments (community college, private, and public) in the services that are available and how does this impact the LGB student?**

**Table 1: Themes & Subthemes**

Themes & Subthemes	Verbiage/Phrase
Fear	
Subthemes	
• Religion/Spirituality	Acceptance; choice; church; coming-out; conflicted; depression; God; hell; negativity; religion; sin; spirituality
• Parent Reaction	Avoidance; aunts; brother; choice; conflicted; dad; family; hostility; mom; painful; scared; sister; stressful; uncle
• Self-Perception	Acceptance; acknowledgement; attraction; avoid; choice; comfort zone; confidence; conflicted; cry; depression; development; discrimination; fear; friends; future; high school; hostility; influence; level of outness; life-changing; negative environment; love; positive; positive role model; pressure
Shift between social networks	
Subthemes	
• Level of Openness	Acceptance; acknowledgement; avoidance; balance; being-outed; boyfriend; choice; comfort zone; coming-out; community; confidence; conservative; counseling; dating; depression; development; discrimination; encouragement; Facebook; fear; friends; future; girlfriend; good relationship; greater community; heterosexual; high school; influence; label; negative environment; painful; peers; pressure
• Reconciliation with Religion and Spirituality	Acceptance; choice; church; coming-out; conflicted; depression; God; hell; negativity; religion; sin; spirituality
• Maturity	Acceptance; acknowledgement; attraction;; comfort zone; college campus; college experience; community; confidence; development; friends; future; high school; hostility; influence; level of outness; life-changing; negative environment; love; positive; positive role model; pressure

Search for community and acceptance  
Subthemes

- Redefining themselves  
Acceptance; acknowledgement; balance;  
college campus; comfort zone; community;  
confidence; connection; encouragement;  
exposure; friends; future; gay bars;  
girlfriend; good relationships; honesty;  
identities; justified; life-changing; love;  
pansexual; parental support; peers; positive;  
positive role models; pressure
- Support at the University  
Acceptance; activities; college campus;  
college experience; comfort zone; coming-  
out; community college; confidence; dating;  
encouragement; friends, future; good  
relationships; identities; laugh; life-changing;  
love; peers; positive; positive role model;  
professor
- Pride in Self  
Acceptance; acknowledgement; attraction;;  
comfort zone; college experience;  
community; confidence; development;  
friends; future; influence; level of outness;  
life-changing; love; positive; positive role  
model

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*\*repeat terms were considered in context of the interview*