SAFER THAN HOME: QUEER COLLEGE STUDENTS AND CHOSEN FAMILIES

by

JEFFREY MICHAEL EPPLEY

(Under the Direction of Merrily S. Dunn)

ABSTRACT

The current study looked at how queer college students experienced forming and being a part of a chosen family. Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was used to develop the study and analyze the results. Two interviews conducted with each student yielded interesting insights into the phenomenon, and journaling by the researcher deepened the description of the phenomenon. Connections to literature in queer college student development and chosen families are identified, as well implications for the practice of higher education professionals, and directions for future research.

INDEX WORDS: chosen family, queer college students, higher education, phenomenology, interviewing

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DEDICATION

To Avery Lorraine, Kellen Ronald, and Kaiden Frederick,

The most important role of my life has been being your Uncle Jeffy. I never really understood what love meant until I met you. You are the reason I do everything, and I love you more than you can ever imagine.

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To Tanvir Sandhu: Anyone who meets you would understand very quickly why you are in my phone with an exclamation point at the end of your name. I thought having a brother was not in

the cards for me until I met you. What you and our bond mean to me is something that can never be covered by words alone. I am so proud of what you have accomplished, how hard you work, and the kind of person that you have developed into being. Anytime I interact with you, I am always smiling and my heart is happy. I am always here when you need me.

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CHAPTER 1

"Blood does not family make. Those are relatives. Family are those with whom you share your good, bad, and ugly, and still love one another in the end. Those are the ones you select. "(Xtravanganza 2018)

People who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning have always been a part of the population of the United States, although they have not necessarily always been identified as such (Bazarsky & Sanlo, 2011). Even though the term "homosexual" didn't appear until the late 19th century, there is evidence to suggest that queer students have been on college campuses since 258 AD (Miller, 1995). While it true that these students have been on college campuses in the United States since the first American institutions were established, their presence has not always been visible or acknowledged.

Statistically, queer students are disproportionately targeted for violence on campus as compared to their straight identified peers (Meyer, 2015). This is not surprising, particularly given the fact that queer students often find their campuses places where heterosexuality is privileged and valued over queer identities, in both academic and social settings. When young adults enter the college environment, they are faced with a variety of developmental opportunities, including the opportunity to develop socially, cognitively, and emotionally (Astin, 1990; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). In addition to these developmental opportunities, students with minoritized identities may experience significant growth in how they come to internalize their multiple identities, as well as how to build community and connection with

others (Jones & Abes, 2013, Strayhorn, 2019). Students who identify as queer come to the college environment already possessing unique needs and abilities. Queer students are coming onto and into college campuses in increasing numbers (Green & Wong, 2015; Newport, 2018) and the specific cultural wealth and contributions of this population have been examined (Fine, 2012; Whitehead, 2019). While theories related to the developmental journeys of queer students exist (Cass 1979, D'Augelli, 1994), these theories use constructivist ideology to posit that the development of queer students occurs in a predictable way and follows developmental models established previously for development of heterosexual students. Other researchers (Denton, 2019) highlight how applying queer theory to current developmental models' challenges, among other things, the linear nature of development, as well as the idea that gender and sexuality develop in a similar fashion for all queer students, without consideration of social class, ethnic or racial background, and other intersecting marginalized identities.

A nexus of research on queer people can be found in the field of sociology. As a part of the study of queer people and their relationships, sociologist Bonnie Weston, in her book *Families We Choose* (1991), introduced the idea of a "chosen family" for LGBTQ individuals. Based upon previous research that identified the concept of the family as heteronormative, Weston states that the idea for a chosen family for queer people "challenges not the concept of procreation that informs kinship in the United States, but the belief that procreation *alone* constitutes kinship, and that non-biological ties must be patterned after a biological model or forfeit any claim to kinship status" (Weston. 1991, p. 34). More than simply involving queer people forming a family adjacent network of partners and friends, the word "family" by itself can be alluring and desirable to queer people, while also raising the specter of past experiences with biolegal family members who have not been supportive of a person's queer identity in the past

(Pidduck, 2009). While prevalent in popular media around the lives and experiences of queer people (Chu, 2017; Shirey, n.d.,), how queer college students experience the chosen family phenomenon, including forming their network, and being part of the kinship networks of others, has not received attention. While the importance of peer social support for queer students has been addressed in recent publications (Sheets & Mohr, 2009), the core aspects of these networks, and how they can support student success, have not been considered. Although the idea of a chosen family has been studied with specific groups of queer college students (Duran, 2016), the essential elements of this phenomenon as they relate to queer students and their development have not yet been studied.

Statement of the Problem

Research indicates that the college years are a time of significant development for queer students (Holland, Matthews, & Schott, 2013; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Identity development is how students build community on campus and establish a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) which is particularly important for queer students (Olive, 2015; Vacarro & Newman, 2016). In the literature, the term "chosen family" is used to identify family like relationships that queer people form with others who they are not biologically or legally related to (Duran & Perez, 2019). While some research exists on how queer individuals build and identify their chosen family (Wagaman, Keller, & Cavaliere, 2019; Weston, 1991). there is little research on how queer college students specifically experience and make meaning of this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how queer college students define family, and how these students create and form a family of choice. I define a queer student as a college student "who's sexual or gender identity goes beyond traditionally

established dichotomies such as heterosexual/homosexual or male/female" (Harr & Kane, 2008, p. 355). Said differently, while participants in this study may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, I will use the term queer in recruitment and data collection to reflect that I am looking to work with college students who do not feel that those specific categories define their sexual and gender identity. Uncovering essential elements of chosen family for queer college students has the potential to be useful for administrators and faculty who work with these students in the college environment. There are a variety of terms for family as it relates to queer people (including chosen family, voluntary kin, and fictive kin). For the purposes of this study the term chosen family will be used. Understanding the process and formation of a chosen family from the perspectives of queer college students will uncover how these families may be different from, as well as similar to, a biological/legal family, including a variety of familial roles and functions. The proposed study will address the following research questions:

1. How do queer college students experience the identification and formation of a chosen family?
2. How do queer college students experience being part of a chosen family?

Operational Definitions

This study is built on definitions important to identify at the outset, as the terms and concepts mentioned below can and have been defined in a variety of ways.

Queer

The dictionary definition of queer begins with characterizing the term as something that differs from the norm (Merriam Webster, n.d.). While this can apply to queer people, I do not want to define this term by what it is not, but rather, by what it is. As one recent publication indicates, queer conveys "both an orientation and sense of community" (Saint Thomas, 2019).

While Munoz (1999) cautions against the possibility of the word as reducing a multitude of identities to one word, I think it best encompasses the population I am looking to study. Using the term queer is also an avenue for queer people and researchers to advance the redefinition of a term which for many of us has a painful and complicated past (UC Berkeley, 2020). Situating this work from this definition allows me as the researcher to have a better opportunity to recruit and work alongside a variety of students in exploring the phenomenon I am interested in learning about through this study.

Chosen Family

Similar to queer, the term chosen family can have a variety of definitions. While the term chosen family was first introduced by Weston (1991), there have been several terms used before and after Weston, including fictive kin, voluntary kin, and kinship network. While all of these terms have advantages and disadvantages, I am defining chosen family as the network of people who a queer person feels closest to and who provide them with their primary sources of support and affection (Weston, 1991). While this may include biological or legal family members, it also can include fellow students, co-workers, staff and faculty, or any other individual whom a participant considers to be family.

Researcher Positionality

My first experience with feeling attraction to men was collecting the pages of department store circulars that featured men modeling underwear. I remember keeping these in a drawer in my room and taking them out periodically to look at and examine them. I didn't know what this meant, but I knew that this probably wasn't something that all boys my age did. Another memory that comes back when I think about how I come to this research is my parents' consistent instruction to "run like a boy". Time has taken away the specifics of what I did to not

run like a boy, but I must have not run with my hands at my sides or in a fist, which my parents might have considered an appropriate way to run. I lasted about 2 weeks in a t-ball league in the second grade, and thus my parents dreams of me being a star athlete ended.

Once I got older, I began to understand that I was attracted to other boys at school, and not other girls as most of my classmates seemed to be. I didn't have anything against girls, but I had an interest in them as friends and not much as else. Most of my good friends in middle and high school were girls, and I remember several times my mother looking at me with a worrying look and asking if I had any friends who were boys. Looking back on that now, it's clear to me that my mother was worried about me being gay, before I even knew that that was what I was. High school became easier for me once I became a part of my high school's theater program and began to realize that there were others like me who didn't feel like everyone else and were looking for a place to belong.

I remember distinctly when I came out to my parents. It was about a month or so before I was to leave for my first year of college, and they agreed to take me to a movie that I had wanted to see, but that was playing quite a distance away from our house. The movie was a musical called *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and told the story of the journey of the title character, who traveled from East Germany to the United States with a botched sex change operation and many trials and travails in between. I knew my parents would not be interested in the movie if I told them what it was about in advance, but I saw this as an opportunity to come out to them as gay. Suffice it to say that the conversation did not go well and assured me that my parents were not supportive of me identifying as anything other than a straight man who intended to get married and give them grandchildren. This negative reaction was also exhibited by others in my life, and soon I found myself alone and isolated in my college residence hall room with nowhere

to turn. On October 11, 2001, I attempted suicide. After waking up in the hospital and realizing that my attempt was unsuccessful, I understood that it was not successful for a reason. I was meant to be doing something else. My college experience from that point forward was better, once I established a sense of who I was, and who I wanted in my life. Without understanding it at the time, this was when I began to build my chosen family and became part of the chosen families of many other people. It was also when I discovered the field of student affairs as a profession, a profession that I decided many years ago would be my life's work.

Since my undergraduate days, I have experienced a variety of life events: moving, marriage, death of my partner, diabetes, mental health issues, and now a doctoral program. Through all of these events, I have gotten the most support not from my biological family, but from those people who are also part of my family without being legally or genetically related to me. My definition of family is likely more encompassing than the conventional one, in that I define family as people who love me unconditionally, who challenge me to be better, and whose support I can depend on. In doing this study, especially since I am interested in how my participants experience this phenomenon, it will be essential for me to continue to check in with myself to comprehend how my experience impacts my interpretations of the experiences of my participants. Some queer students I talk to my only define family as their biological and legal relatives, while others may have had negative experiences with forming or being a part of a family of choice. Through journaling and the assistance of others, I go into this study determined to understand my feelings and thoughts throughout the research process, so that I can bring those thoughts and experiences to the interpretation of meaning I gather from my participants.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The development of college students among a variety of domains is a focal point of the work done in student affairs divisions at colleges and universities across the United States. As an area of scholarship, college student development researchers have developed a compendium of theories, typologies, and models designed to assist student affairs professionals in gaining a better understanding of the developmental needs of the students they interact with. As a widely used introductory text explains, theory can be used by practitioners and scholars in a variety of ways, including enabling the generation of new knowledge and study, and the ability to explain and predict the behavior of college students (Patton, Renn, Guido & Quaye, 2016). Similarly, the idea of a chosen family among queer individuals is one that has gained traction in the literature and popular culture (Chu, 2017; Gates, 2017). While a variety of terms exist that are similar to chosen family (voluntary kin, fictive kin, non-blood family), the literature in this area has not yet specifically looked at how queer college students develop their chosen family, which is the aim of the current study. To demonstrate the purpose for the current study, a review of the extant literature around LGBT college student development and families of choice, as well as a review of queer student experiences in higher education is necessary to understand current thinking on these topics. The chapter concludes with a review of experiences and attitudes toward queer students in higher education in the United States.

Development of Queer College Students

As colleges and universities have been found to foster environments that are less hostile (but not necessarily more welcoming) to queer students, it is of little wonder that research suggests that college is the time when young adults begin to question and think about their sexuality and sexual identity (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). While this exploration of sexual identity has been covered by researchers in some of the seminal work in the field (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the body of literature specifically addressing the identity development of students who identify as queer is not as extensive nor as expansive as it should be. Research around the developmental needs of this population should continue, not only because queer students are coming to campuses in larger and larger numbers but also because this population has unique characteristics and developmental needs that the current body of theory only partially fulfills.

Homosexual Identity Development: Cass

Prior to the work of Cass and her model of homosexual identity development (Cass, 1979, 1984), research on the development of gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual people was grounded in the notion that theories and developmental models should somehow figure out what ways the individual might develop a non-heterosexual identity that was seen by some as bad, pathological, or even evidence of demonic possession**.** Cass's six stage model of homosexuality identity development was the first of its kind to consider how lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals come to an understanding of their "new" homosexual identity. In the first stage known as identity confusion, the individual (specific ages for the stages are not provided) becomes aware of external messages about homosexuality and begins to develop "a conscious awareness that homosexuality has relevance to themselves and their behavior" (Cass, 1979, p.

222). In the second stage, known as identity comparison, involves an individual understanding that they *could* be homosexual (or at least not completely heterosexual), and they begin to consider how their life trajectories and plans may need to be changed or revisited. Of particular interest here is when Cass mentions that "the individual comes to feel alienated from all others and has a sense of not belonging to society at large as well as certain subgroups, such as family and peers" (Cass, 1979, p. 225). The third stage, identity tolerance, moves from the individual thinking that they might be homosexual to thinking that are more likely than not homosexual, and mentions contact with other homosexuals as a crucial piece to further one's sexual identity development (Cass, 1979).

Increased contact with other homosexuals is seen a hallmark of identity acceptance, the fourth stage of the model, while also attempting to be accepted in the heterosexual world as well as the non-heterosexual world (Cass, 1979). In identity pride, the fifth stage of Cass's model, the individual sees "homosexuals as creditable and significant, and heterosexuals as discredited and insignificant" (Cass. 1979, p. 233). Following from this, the individual develops a sense of pride and identification with the homosexual community and becomes less concerned about how they fit in with the expectations of a heterosexual society. In the final stage of the model, identity synthesis, the individual begins to understand and appreciate the similarities between heterosexual and homosexuals and has the same or similar sexual identifications in both public and private settings (Cass, 1979). In addition to describing the six stages, Cass introduces the idea of identity foreclosure, or that "the individual may choose not to develop any further" and will end their sexual identity development before reaching identity synthesis (Cass, 1979, p. 220). In a later study, Cass utilized a questionnaire based on her six stages in an attempt to gain empirical support of her original findings (Cass, 1984). The results of her study indicated that

there is “indistinction between stages” and that there “may be four or five stages instead of the original six” (Cass, 1984).

While foundational as the first significant theorizing about the development of a queer identity, when viewed in a contemporary context this model seems less applicable to identity development then it may have at the time it was written. Throughout the theory and the theorist’s writing about it, the reader is lead to believe that identity development is the same for every individual and follows the specific stages Cass outlines, completely ignoring how contextual factors can impact the developmental process. The theory also suggests that queerness is initially identified as how it is “not” like heterosexuality, thinking of queerness through a deficit lens that privileges heterosexuality and queerness as something aberrant and therefore not as valuable as heterosexuality.

Troiden: Self, Perceived, and Presented Identities

From the field of sociological anthropology, Richard Troiden perceives the development of a queer identity within a theoretical stage model, where the ideal result is that the queer person self, perceived, and presented identities are all in congruence, and that they are, as Troiden names it a “committed homosexual” (Troiden, 1989). Before introducing and explaining his stage model. Troiden describes homosexual identity as “a perception of self as homosexual in relation to romantic and sexual situations” (Troiden, 1989, p. 45), and that identity can manifest as either a self, perceived, or presented identity, depending on several factors, including presence or absence of romantic partners, amount and depth of connection to other queer people, and ability to be openly queer in different contexts, including the workplace, with family, and in society (Troiden, 1989). To put it differently, when there is agreement between who a queer person thinks they are, who they claim they are, and how others see them, their queer identity is

most strongly realized and they have reached the highest level of development, what Troiden calls being a “committed homosexual”.

While several of the stage names and descriptions are similar to those given by Cass (1979, 1984) in her foundational model of queer development, Troiden’s model has some unique differences that indicate a refinement of the ideas of Cass. First, unlike Cass, Troiden suggests specific markers for when movement through the stages of his model might take place. For instance, he indicates his first stage, known as sensitization, occurs sometime before puberty, and that his final stage, commitment, occurs when a person “enters a same-sex love relationship” (Troiden, 1989, p. 63). Second, this model takes into account what was happening to queer people in the time that it was written in the middle 1980s, namely the AIDS epidemic that significantly impacted the queer population of the time, with an infection rate of approximately 150,000 queer people per year in the decade (Centers for Disease Control, 2001). When describing how sexual experimentation can be a part of queer development, Troiden takes this into account when he mentions that “for many men, the possibility of AIDS infection has reduced the perceived desirability of sexual experimentation” (Troiden, 1989, p. 60).

Troiden’s model is unique in how it addresses the idea of stigma around a queer identity, and how that stigma can inhibit an individual’s ability to progress along the development pathway that his model describes. By stating that most models of queer development “take place against a backdrop of stigma” (Troiden, 1989, p. 48) at the beginning of the introduction to his model, it attempts to add some type of context to his model, and context to a level and depth that is absent in the earlier stage model of Cass. Throughout the model, Troiden returns to the idea of developing a queer identity as recognizing one as different from a perceived standard of normal

and mentions that stigma is a consistent challenge to queer people, even if they achieve his stage's goal of one becoming a committed heterosexual (Troiden, 1989).

A distinct progression from the work of Cass to this model is how Troiden takes context into consideration when thinking about queer development and how it may be inhibited or promoted by the individual's context. While the stigma of being queer may look different in the 21st century than it did when Troiden developed and wrote about his model, the discussion of how others see a queer person, and how those external influences have the potential to impact development, reflects an understanding that identity development is not solely an internal process, but involves the thoughts and feelings of others.

Life Span: D'Augelli

In contrast to the early work on sexual identity development that consisted of stage models, D'Augelli (1994) established a model that centers the identity development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people as based on overcoming a society and upbringing that "privileges the perceived naturalness of heterosexuality" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 316). In introducing the model. D'Augelli addresses the lack of fluidity and rigidness of stage models, and instead established a model based on the entire lifespan of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual. The change in the role of the family in development from the models of Cass and others is mentioned when D'Augelli states that "disclosure to family is now facilitated by increased cultural acceptance, more positive imagery in media, and affirmative resources, such as parental support networks" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 323).

The lifespan model is represented by six different processes by which lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals develop and redevelop their identity as queer. The first process involves exiting heterosexuality and beginning the process of 'coming out" as non-heterosexual to others

in a variety of contexts. In the second process, the individual works to develop their identity status as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and within that make contact with other non-heterosexual people. Similar to Cass, D'Augelli indicates that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people must learn about those constructs through "their proximal community of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 325). In order to develop a refined sense of sexual identity, then, D'Augelli tells us that queer people should have pervasive and continued contact with their non-heterosexual peers. Similar to this is another identity process, described as developing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual social identity. Following the lifespan perspective of his work, D'Augelli emphasizes that this aspect of identity and the development of an affirmative social network is cyclical, iterative, and always changing (D'Augelli, 1994).

In the process of becoming a gay, lesbian, or bisexual offspring, the individual must reintegrate into their family of origin. This process involves much work on behalf of the non-heterosexual person, but also impacted by the fact that "more and more parents are taking active steps to reintegrate the person and to understand and affirm his or her life" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 327). Another important process is the one in which the individual develops an intimacy status, although this process is troubled by cultural and political images that privilege heterosexual couples and relationships. The life span model returns to an emphasis on the importance of developing a community of other lesbians, gays, and bisexual people, as well as a commitment to challenge existing heterosexual privilege and the perceived deviance of non-heterosexual people (D'Augelli, 1994).

Bringing to light the idea that queer identity development may not occur in stages is only one of the things that makes this life span model unique. It recognizes that contact with people from a variety of orientations and backgrounds is an important piece of development, and that a

supportive family structure can be integral to positive self esteem and psychological health. While it is understandable that increased acceptance of queerness led D'Augelli to include reintegration into the family of origin, this reintegration may not be possible for some queer individuals, and could potentially cause psychological harm and distress.

Abes & Kasch: Queer Authorship

As an extension of Baxter Magolda's theory of self authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001), Elisa Abes and David Kasch introduced the theory of queer authorship to consider how queer college students develop their meaning making abilities in a way that is both similar and different to Baxter Magolda's idea of meaning making moving from external to internal meaning making structure (Abes & Kasch, 2007). What is unique about the queering of self authorship is that it identifies resistance of heteronormativity as a central idea in meaning making development. Stated differently, "whereas self-authorship focuses on how students construct internal frameworks to navigate external influences, queer resistance focuses on how students deconstruct and reconstruct external influences" (Abes & Kasch, 2007). A part of identity development for queer students, then, is how to change the heternormativity of their environments to then change and develop their identity. In addition to the work of Baxter Magolda, the researchers identify Pizzalato's work on how marginalized populations experience self authorship differently and as a form of social change as significantly influencing their development of queer authorship (Pizzalato, 2003).

Dillon, Worthington, and Moradi: Parallel Processes

A recent theoretical model of sexual identity development presents the idea that the development of sexual identity includes two different but parallel processes: developing an individual identity, and the development of a social identity related to one's sexual orientation

(Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011). Within these parallel processes, the authors describe six identity development statuses that "should be thought of as non-linear, flexible, and fluid descriptions of statuses through which people may pass as they develop their identity over the lifespan" (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011, p. 658). The statuses, while exhibiting a leap forward in the theoretical knowledge of sexual identity development, show evidence of the influence of the theoretical models of Cass and D'Augelli.

The developmental status of compulsory heterosexuality reinforces D'Augelli's notion that heterosexuality is a privileged identity, and also furthers that idea by identifying and resisting the idea that heterosexuality is instead of a privileged status but is rather the norm that all individuals should strive for (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011, p. 660). Another identity status, active exploration, involves the individual exploring the possibilities of a life lived with a non-heterosexual identity, including cognitive exploration through fantasy and reading of non-heterosexual literature and other forms of entertainment. This cognitive exploration would also serve as an outlet for individuals who may be unsure of familial support, and who therefore may not be able to engage in the more behavioral aspects of exploration. The status of identity diffusion is described as identity exploration, but in a more comprehensive and seemingly random way. Queer individuals experiencing diffusion may elect to engage in behaviors that they have not previously considered, simply to make sure that they are exploring their options fully before more thoroughly committing to one sexual identity subgroup (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011).

In the deepening and commitment identity status, individuals engage in "a movement towards greater commitment to their identified sexual needs, values, and preferences for activities" (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011, p. 663). The theorists posit that while their

model is non-linear, that an individual would likely have to have explored a variety of sexual identities and subgroups through the active exploration process before being able to commit a specific identity or subgroup. Similar to other models, the process of synthesis involves congruence among the person's individual and social expressions of their sexual identity, and how that identity is transmitted to others.

Chosen Family

The term voluntary kin is a new term offered by Braithwaite et al. (2010) to better define familiar relationships that have no legal or biological bonds. Previously these relationships have been represented in the literature as fictive kin relationships, a form of discourse dependent families (Ballweg, 1969; Floyd & Morman, 2006; Ibsen & Klobus, 1972). While the term voluntary kin might be new to the literature, the concepts and ideas behind it are well established. Fictive kin, for Floyd and Morman (2006) are established and maintained from personal interactions rather than through the avenues of legal or biological relationships. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term "fictive" involves something that can be created by imagination, a work of fiction ("fictive," n.d.). The very use of the term to illustrate family relationships, then, undermines the importance of the connection, the relationship, and the perceptions of the individuals involved as imaging the connection or the family structure. Braithwaite et al. (2010) argued for the new term of voluntary kin to focus on the positive aspects of the relationship and to change the focus from what the relationship is not to celebrate the wide variety of what voluntary kin relationships can look like. According to Braithwaite and colleagues, voluntary kin relationships are thought to frequently involve selection from all members, meaning that individuals can be a part of several family structures that may not be completely intersecting,

as opposed to biological or legal families that involve all of the same individuals for those involved.

In one of the first mentions of alternative family structures in the literature, Ballweg (1969) identified fictive kin as a type of personal relationship outside conventional structures of biological or legal connection. Ballweg developed the idea of fictive kin from two other existing forms of kinship: institutional kinship or biological and legal family structures, and associational kinship, or family relationship that are established out of shared membership in a group, including sororities, fraternities, and religious groups where the biological and legal family terms are traditionally assigned to members of the association. Fictive kin, for Ballweg (1969), needed to involve a biological or legal familial address term without the biological or legal connection, "basically, it is a form of pseudo kinship in which the kinship term is attached to another person independently of components within the structure of society" (p. 85). Following from this, Ibsen and Klobus (1972) defined fictive kinship as "encompassing the adoption of nonrelatives into kin-like relationships" (p. 615). Similar to Ballweg, Ibsen and Klobus's work assumes that fictive kinship relationships were created to supplement or replace family members, continuing the idea that these relationships worked to meet deficits in the legal or biological family. Trost (1990), and extended by Baxter and colleagues (2009), argued that the concept of what defines family is in flux, and while the generally accepted idea of what constitutes a family privileges family with biological and legal foundations, many familial relationships exist outside of these boundaries. Voorpostel (2013) investigated fictive kin development in older adults and found that the creation of fictive kin is a form of substitution for absent family members thus, continuing the deficit idea as to why fictive kin relationships are established in 2014, Nelson added diversity to the argument made by Trost (1990) and Braithwaite et al. (2009) that many of

the names that are given to families outside of the nuclear family are troublesome. Nelson argued that "the notion of fictive kinship is discursively racialized" (p. 201) because her exploration into the over 600 articles associated with fictive kin through 2005 were predominately focused on African Americans and other marginalized groups. Nelson does discuss the Braithwaite et al. (2010) voluntary kin study, and how it attempted to diversify the sample, but was not successful due to their sample's ethnic makeup. Braithwaite et al. (2010) stated, "While there were persons of color among the research assistants for the research team and we made an attempt to recruit an ethnically diverse group of respondents, we were not successful at representing diversity as we hoped" (p. 393).

Voluntary kin relationships are based on individuals' beliefs that they are family, and their familial interactions and emotional connections (Baxter et al., 2009; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Edwards & Graham, 2009; Holtzman, 2008). Edwards and Graham's (2009) study of the meaning of family resulted in family being defined as "any group that fulfills or enacts the roles and duties traditionally belonging to family" and "many of the participants explicitly noted that family was not specific to relationships of blood or marriage" (p. 203). Bedford and Blieszner (1997) suggested that the definition of family is subjective, and the definition of the family must be left to the perceptions of the individuals involved in the relationship. These participants were accepting and open to the idea that family is more than the individuals that share a biological or legal connection with, but rather that family should be defined by emotional and relational bonds, like love, caring, and the feeling that there is a connection. Holtzman (2008) made the statement that "many Americans do seem willing to broaden their conceptions of family so as to include social and emotional attachments that are not simultaneously grounded in genetic or marital ties" (p. 169). This statement calls for the expansion of the criteria and definition of what

makes a family and also that voluntary kin relationships should be part of this expansion. Even though there is a call for expansion on the definitions of what constitutes a family, it should not ignore that this is a not a completely new way people have constructed their families (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Scott and Scott (2015) made the point that legal representation and acceptance of these families built outside of legal and biological means may be easier than families formed through other means, specifically LGBTQ+ and polygamous groups, because "in contrast to some relationships based on sexual intimacy, these nonconjugal groups are formed specifically (and solely) for the purpose of fulfilling family functions" (p. 372).

Nelson (2013) argued that the terms and labels for discourse-dependent families, specifically fictive kin, voluntary kin, and chosen families, needed to become more streamline and inclusive. Nelson (2013) advocated for the use of an exploratory typology of fictive kin that she created. Nelson's (2013) typology consisted of situation kin, which is kin created out of convenience, institutions, organizations, and caregiving; ritual kin, which is kin created from rituals like religious rites; and intentional kin, which are kin through intentional acts and "sustained through action" (p. 269). Tew et al. (2013) investigated how voluntary families are created in the virtual social space, Second Life. Second Life is a virtual social space where individuals create avatars that allow them to interact and take part in the virtual world, and in this virtual world the individuals have their avatars "live" out a virtual life, sometimes not very different than their real life. The avatars interact with other avatars and they work, have social lives, earn and spend resources, and built communities. Tew et al. (2013) also discussed their decision to use the term "voluntary family" instead of fictive kin or "fictive family" because it "connotes artificiality and carries too much prescriptive baggage in real life and virtual life alike" (2013, p. 207). Tew et al. (2013) found that individuals in the Second Life virtual social space

were able to create voluntary families through rituals, creating their own set of values, and were able to convey the importance of their voluntary families using their biological and legal families as a point of reference. Gazso and McDaniel (2015) researched families of choice and found that sharing life experiences, specifically in low income and immigrant families, bonded individuals in such a way that the participants considered these individuals as family, even though they were not biologically or legally connected to. Participants shared that expressive and instrumental support were important considerations in who they considered family and that this required the participants to constantly assess who they see as family and in doing so, their family can be redefined at any time.

Hull and Ortyl (2018) investigated the definitions of family in LGBT communities. It was discovered that the definitions of what makes a family is a mix of biological and legal family, with chosen family or those who are considered family that are not biologically or legally connected. The participants used a mix of structural and functional properties when defining family. Hull and Ortyl (2018) believe that the increased acceptance of the LGBT people has led to less of the community creating their families from chosen family, thereby reducing the need to replace their biological and legal family members that do not accept them. Participants "usually conceive of chosen family as complementing rather than replacing biolegal family" (Hull & Ortyl, 2018, p. 7).

Braithwaite et al. (2016) focused on a specific type of voluntary kin, supplemental voluntary kin, or individuals that maintain relationships with both their biological and legal families and their voluntary kin. Braithwaite et al. (2016) were interested in finding out how the participant negotiated the relationship between their voluntary kin and their biological and legal family. Braithwaite et al. (2016) found four distinct structures: intertwined, where the voluntary

kin and the biological and legal family were involved in direct positive communication; limited, where the voluntary kin and the biological and legal family had limited communication; separate, where the voluntary kin and biological and legal family had no direct communication; and hostile, where the voluntary kin and the biological and legal family had negative and tumultuous communication.

The largest and most interesting challenge that faces voluntary kin relationships is that they are discursively constructed, purely through discursive practices and communication since the relationships are lacking biological and legal ties. In 2006, Galvin claimed, "discourse dependent families are becoming the norm" (p. 9). Some prior research has sought to understand the discursive ways that individuals construct their families. (Braithwaite et al., (2010) looked into how family is defined through discourse and how society's conception of a family has changed. Holtzman (2008) examined how the theoretical concept of family has changed to reflect the individual's interpretation of family, while other researchers (Edwards & Graham, 2009) examined how linguistic terms influence the idea of family and extended previous constructional framework of family. Discourse-dependent families and relationships, like voluntary kin relationships, are created through the communication that takes place between the individual members (Galvin, 2006). This places communication's role in the constitution of the voluntary kin relationship front and center, and while all relationships are discourse dependent in some way, discourse dependent families like voluntary kin have a greater symbolic significance placed on their discourse. The legitimization burden is placed on discourse-dependent families because they cannot rely on the historical notions of family and are not accepted at face value. Once these voluntary kin relationships become a symbolic reality, their existence needs to be

maintained to continue the relationships at levels that are satisfactory to the individuals that are involved in the voluntary kin relationships.

An issue with existing definitions and categories of these chosen nontraditional family structures is that much of the scholarship has defined their characteristics in terms of a deficit model. In her review of existing literature on fictive kin, Nelson (2004) found that many of the existing knowledge that identifies non legal familial relationships as replacing or supplementing biolegal family were based on research done with individuals who identified as a racial and ethnic minority, and that only in research done with white individuals were chosen family structures identified from an asset perspective, rather than chosen families being characterized as making up for some deficit or underperformance of the members or the biolegal families of the members. Nelson also cited Weston (1991) and her work with queer individuals as asset based and wondered if this meant that is more agency and support for queer people (and more specifically white queer people) in having these family structures accepted then there would be for people from other minoritized groups related to race, ethnicity, social class, and educational level.

As a seminal text in the field of queer kinship, Bonnie Weston's book recognizes at the outset that the definition of kinship itself can clarify a variety of kinship relationships, and how the importance of family came to be prominent in the culture (Weston, 1991, p. 13). Implicit in Weston's work is a desire to establish the form and content of queer familial relationships as their own unique structures, and not as something always designed to replace loss or estrangement for biolegal families. In other words, Weston tells the readers (most of whom were likely unfamiliar with queer kinship before reading her book), that it was important to not think of queer kinship from a deficit model. In a study of kinship networks of transgender

college students, Nicolazzo and colleagues (2017) cautioned that identifying these individuals and the family structures that they had established as coming from a deficit-based orientation was at best misinformed and at worst a form of power manifestation that had the potential to cause significant impacts the physical and emotional health of members of such networks.

A unique iteration of the chosen family phenomenon can be found in the ballroom culture that was prevalent in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s. This time period has been captured on film in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1990) and a fictional series based on the same time period, *Pose* (Murphy et al., 2018-2021), and also chronicled in a book length history based on interviews with many prominent figures in the movement (Tucker, 2021). The original film, through a series of voiceover narrations of ball performances, manages to be "both intensely theatrical and tremulously intimate" (Flannery, 1997, p. 173) in its depiction of what brings queer people to the balls and also how the various houses, house mothers, and house brothers and sisters provide a family structure for those who have been isolated and estranged from their biolegal families.

The houses, as Taylor says "work as an answer to LGBTQ youth, particularly those of color, being renunciated by everything and everyone they love" (p. 109-110). More than serving as simply a way to organize ballroom competitions into different groups of competitors, the houses established as part of the ballroom system provided a structure and support for young queer and trans people (children) to be mentored and emotionally and financially provided for by older queer people who had established reputations in the ballroom culture (mothers and fathers). For many in the house system, their house was a family that was somewhat modeled on their biolegal family, but was different in the fact that this family did not reject them because of their queer and trans identities.

When asked during the film about what family means as it is experienced in the houses, the house mother Pepper LaBejia provides the following definition:

> They're families, they're families for a lot of children that don't have families...But this is a new meaning of family...The hippies had families and no one thought nothing about it. It wasn't a question of a man and a woman and children which we grew up knowing as a family. It's a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond.

The mutual bond that brings these human beings together is, as the film suggests, their lack of acceptance from their biolegal families of their identities as queer people. Throughout the film, several house members and ballroom participants and observers meet and immediately identify someone as their brother or sister, or their father or mother, without consideration to any ideas of gender or sex that frequently inform those terms in biolegal families. In a scene in the film where a house mother talks about the murder of her house daughter, this familial bond is readily and achingly apparent to the viewer. The mother discusses how "the police came to me with a picture of her murdered and they were about to cremate her because nobody had come to identify the body, and I was the one that had to give all of this information down to her family" (Livingston, 1990). Even in death, the house mother took responsibility for the legacy and care of her house daughter, and took on the responsibility of informing her daughter's biolegal family of her death, despite the biolegal family's abandonment of their daughter when she disclosed her identity as a transgender woman.

In discussing family in the context of ballroom culture, Tucker (2011) reminds us that these family structures are the foundation of what ballroom is. The interviews and the thinking and writing that Tucker did made him realize the dichotomy of what a biolegal family should be, and what the reality of the experience is for many queer people: "These are the people meant to protect you from cruelty, and to love you unconditionally, not to be the source of your greatest trauma" (p.89). Being part of a house, while always having performing and competition at balls

as part of the experience, represented this unconditional love for the first time to many of the people involved. In Livingston's film and in Murphy's series, the mothers and fathers of houses not only nourish the physical needs of their children, like food, clothing, and shelter, but also work hard (sometimes multiple jobs, including sex work) to put their children through college, help them celebrate milestones, and even honor their death.

History of Queer Students in Higher Education

The first mentions of queer people in higher education are in documents that describe unusually close relationships between faculty and students, including such names as Ralph Waldo Emerson and others. In one of the first book length examinations of queer history in the United States, the historian Jonathan Katz points out that "a great many homosexually related documents come to portray problematic episodes in the lives they recorded" (Katz, 1976, p. 59). The relationships recorded as part of the early history of queer involvement in higher education are recorded because of the consequences of those relationships, and not for how the individuals involved impacted higher education and the advancement of certain fields or the importance of higher education to the larger population. Even more problematic for higher education administrators, Katz argues, was the fact that "gender transgressions often provoked more fury in schools and universities than same sex desire" (Katz as cited in Graves, 2016, p. 136). There is a sense in reading this history that challenging the normal and expected ways of performing gender and sexuality were not seen as a part of growth and development, but rather as an aberration that was a college or university's role to eliminate.

As higher education progressed and became more a part of the fabric of the country, administrators and alumni developed a strong need to purge a campus of queer students and faculty, in order to maintain the supposed purity or moral integrity of the campus. One of the

more recognized examples of these campus purges is described in depth in the book *Harvard's Secret Court: The Savage 1920 Purge of Campus Homosexuals* (Wright, 2005). In reading Wright's description of the documents gives a sense that there was an outbreak of homosexuality at Harvard in the years before the court was formed, and that by interrogating suspected queer members of the campus community and expelling them that the court would "uncover all manifestations of this anomalous eruption and enable the court to rid Harvard of homosexuality" (Wright, 2005, p. 45). This brings to mind a vision of the presence of queerness on campus as some type of infection that can be cured or eliminated, and continues the trend of historical recording of queer experiences and individuals in higher education being solely composed of incidents recording the efforts of campuses to create a climate in higher education that was not supportive or conducive to queer students or their development.

The idea of being queer as an infection or something that could be eliminated continued long after Harvard's secret court of 1920. In 1964, a state committee in Florida, after having conducted many "hearings" of suspected queer faculty, staff, and students, released a publication called *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida*, which gave as its purpose to make Floridians aware of the "rapid spread and insidious aspects of homosexuality" (Schnur, 1997, p. 150). In a documentary with those impacted by the committee's actions (Beutke and Litva, 2000) , includes an interview with a lesbian identified woman who attended Florida State University, and was summoned by the institution's dean of women to respond to a report that she was a lesbian, while concurrently being threatened with suspension. While the suspension was overturned after the woman's residence hall mates submitted a petition, she was still required to attend therapy weekly (presumably, to cure her) and submit to room checks whenever they were requested. Although this committee and others like it were out of existence by the middle of the 1970s, their

influence and emphasis on queerness as aberrant and something to be eliminated continued to impact education in the United States (Graves. 1996).

By the end of the 1960s, queer students and faculty in higher education began to organize and challenge the prevailing attitudes about queerness and demanded support for queer members of the campus community. One of the important parts of this activism was student organizations formed for the purpose of supporting queer students and for changing the narrative about queerness on campus. These organizations provided "the opportunity to break down stereotypes for the majority population, and serve as a training ground for lesbian and gay youth who will later become proud advocates of gay equality in society at large" (D'Emilio, 1992, p. 131). These groups, while still having to fight to be recognized and still facing potential consequences for their existence, were part of what finally changed how queerness was viewed by leaders of higher education, and formed a basis for the future of queer experiences in higher education.

Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology

Introduction

The current study sought to understand how queer college students experienced the phenomenon of forming and being a part of a chosen family. After considering how to answer my research questions and how to best capture the experiences of the students I worked with, the current study used a hermeneutic phenomenological framework to guide design, data collection, and analysis. Through illuminating how queer students experience the chosen family phenomenon, the current study provides student affairs practitioners insight into how queer students make connections that can have a significant impact on their social and academic success. The two research questions that this study answered were:

1. How do queer college students experience the identification and formation of a chosen family?
2. How do queer college students experience being part of a chosen family?

In Chapter 2, I provided the reader with a review of the relevant literature around queer college student development and traced the history and research around the chosen family phenomenon. In Chapter 3, I provide justification for the methods and methodology I will use in the design, data collection, and analysis. To that end, I provide an overview of qualitative research, phenomenology and hermeneutics as a philosophy, and hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method (coming from the work of the Dutch sociologist Max van Manen). I will also provide a description and rationale for the study, including

recruitment, data collection, and analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how I added rigor to the process so that others can assess the study's credibility and validity.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has the ability to provide a variety of ways to examine human life, including description, prediction, exploration, interpretation, and verification, in a way that is more complete and more suited to the study of human experience than quantitative methods (Durdella, 2019). Qualitative research was well suited to the current study, as the goal of the research was to explore how queer college students experience a phenomenon (the chosen family). For the field of student affairs in higher education, qualitative research is suitable to study aspects of the student experience because it "reflects and parallels the richness of the student affairs field itself" (Manning, 1992 as cited in Biddle, 2018, p. 78). While specific traditions and paradigms exist in the realm of qualitative research, it is also noted that "in dissertation research, the focus of design work does not necessarily need to reflect a strict adherence to rigid rules of a tradition or procedural steps associated with a certain tradition" (Durdella, 2019, p. 93). Since I was interested in studying human behavior and experience, expecting to rigidly conform to a method when studying human beings (very unpredictable animals, to be sure) would seem to almost assuredly end in failure.

There are several features of qualitative research that indicated it was the ideal choice for the current study. When ascertaining the quality of qualitative work, the focus is not on quantitative ideas such as statistical power, sample size, and reliability, but is more focused on a dialogic reaction to a piece of newly constructed knowledge by a community that can involve peers, colleagues, and practitioners (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). Answering research questions through the gathering of material in interviews and other methods allows

the researcher to be the instrument through which this material is interpreted, and provides the opportunity for researchers and participants to co construct knowledge that will benefit the population, instead of simply treating participants as "subjects" as in sometimes done in quantitative research (Creswell, 2018; Mertens, 2020) Qualitative research is also work that is best suited to work with marginalized populations, because it is not bound by quantitative methods that were normed and studied with mostly white populations. In the current study, I was interested in interpreting the idea of forming and being a part of a chosen family through the experiences of queer college students. Gathering material through interviews allowed me to leave the reader of the completed study with an "in depth description" of this phenomenon, which qualitative research traditions are particularly suited for (Mertens, 2020).

Research Paradigm

Before beginning to further explicate the specific parts of my methodological process, I will first identify the research paradigm I used for the current study, as well as provide an explanation for why this paradigm was best suited to the current study. Since its development is connected to the work of well-known scholars of phenomenology and hermeneutics, the current study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm that views reality as socially constructed and recognizes that multiple realities exist (Mertens, 2020). The constructivist paradigm is also identified as one that is seen often in qualitative research (Prasad, 2005; Vagle, 2018).

The axiological perspective of a constructivist paradigm differs from other paradigms (such as post-positivist) with the idea that does not see researchers as value neutral, but rather sees the values of a researcher as intrinsically important in the construction and dissemination of research (Mertens, 2020). For the current study, my values related to the phenomenon I am studying are clear, given the impact that chosen family has had on my development as a person,

professional and scholar. Additionally, the axiological perspective of constructivism had relevance to the current study in that it recalls feminist theory by 'combining theories of caring and justice as holding potential to address issues of social justice in ways that are both respectful of the human relations between researchers and participants and that enhance the furthering of social justice from the research" (Mertens, 2020, p. 18). Indeed, an outcome of this work is that it has made me search for ways to make my professional practice one that is more inclusive and reflective of the unique needs and abilities of the student population I serve. My responsibility as a researcher in working with these students, then, was imbued with a desire to interpret the experiences of my participants in a way that shed light on their uniqueness, while also providing the reader with the opportunity for greater understanding of how to serve queer college students in higher education.

The ontological perspective of constructivism again rejects the post-positivist notion that there is one reality from which all experiences and understandings come. In fact, constructivism goes further than this rejection of objective reality and takes the "stance that the researcher's goal is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge" (Mertens, 2020, p. 19). As applied to the current study, this ontological perspective lead me to gather and interpret phenomenological material to arrive at textual representations of the phenomenon that may conflict, as well as offered insight into the unique ways that queer college students construct and experience a chosen family during their time at college.

Leading from the interpretive nature of constructivism, the epistemological stance of this paradigm is concerned with the interactions that take place between the researcher and participants and that they allow for a "more personal, interactive mode of data collection" (Mertens, 2020, p. 19). As part of data collection for the current study, I involved the students I

worked with in the process of data collection and interpretation. Specifically, I had the students I worked with review the interview transcripts as well as my initial findings, to ensure that they felt as though they are working with me to construct knowledge, instead of me using them for their experiences.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Phenomenology

From a philosophical standpoint, phenomenology is defined as "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view" (Smith, 2016). Although the term did not yet exist, the origins of phenomenology go as far as back as Hindu and Buddhist traditions that reflected on meditative states of consciousness (Smith, 2016). The scholar most frequently identified as the creator of phenomenology is Edmund Husserl (Patton, 2015; Smith, 2016; Vagle, 2018). Although Husserl began his career as a mathematician, he became interested in philosophy at a time when almost all scientific research was conducted from a philosophical framework that was rooted in the positivist tradition (Vagle, 2018). After much consideration of the positivist way of conducting research, Husserl "rejected the idea that this science was best for the study of the human sciences" (Vagle, 2018, p, 8). Husserl developed phenomenology as an alternative to the understanding of the relationship of mind and body proposed in the 1500s by Rene Descartes. Descartes conceptualized the mind and everything outside of the mind as two distinct and separate entities, and the mind was separated from the natural world (Vagle, 2018). This Cartesian dichotomy existed for centuries until it was challenged by Husserl. In contrast to Descartes, Husserl introduced the idea that consciousness is always of or directed towards something, and that the mind is not disconnected from the larger world as Descartes stated (Vagle, 2018). Husserl also introduced the concept of the lifeworld

into the conversation about phenomena and how humans experience them. The lifeworld is "where our living and experiencing of phenomena take place" (Vagle, 2018 p. 7). It is not as fixed as the natural world is, but is a constant state of changing and recycling, based on factors like relationships, settings, and perspectives (Vagle, 2018)

Related to the idea of consciousness always being directed towards something, Husserl introduced the concept of intentionality into phenomenology. Intentionality can be defined as the interconnected nature of subjects (for example, humans) and objects (everything else, including thoughts, ideas, and feelings) (Vagle, 2018). As Freeman and Vagle state "intentionality is neither in consciousness nor in the world. It is the meaning link people have to the world in which they find themselves. People in their everyday contact with the world bring into being intentionality but not in the sense of choice or intent" (Freeman & Vagle, 2009 as cited in Vagle, 2018). It is one of the goals of phenomenology, then, to understand these connections between humans and the world, as well as how they utilize those connections to make meaning of the experience or phenomenon under study.

A student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger, used Husserl's ideas to further the development of phenomenology as a philosophical tradition. In contrast to Husserl and his emphasis on consciousness, Heidegger's phenomenology "stressed that phenomena are lived out interpretively in the world, and hence the world should not be bracketed but fully engaged in the phenomenological inquiry" (Vagle, 2018, p. 9). When a philosopher is thinking about the essential parts of a phenomenon, then, the world that they are a part of is itself essential to understanding the phenomenon and how it is experienced by people. Bracketing out the world or the researcher's experiences would, for Heidegger, is seen as a remnant of the Cartesian idea of consciousness being of something and conceptualizes the mind and the lifeworld as inseparable

(Vagle, 2018). Heidegger believed that phenomena appear in our worlds, and we use the lifeworld and our experiences to interpret these phenomena and understand the uniqueness of the experiences that they create.

An analysis of phenomenology as understood by Husserl and Heidegger reveals significant differences. For example, Husserl, while restoring the connection between the mind and the body that Cartesian philosophy eliminates, still gave the mind some primacy over the body as it related to thought and intentionality (Smith, 2016). Heidegger, in contrast, advanced the idea that "phenomenology enfolds the mind and the world together- treating them as interconnected and never separated" (Vagle, 2018, p. 9). While Husserl found the idea of bracketing out preconceived notions of a phenomenon in order to get as clear and pure a description of it as possible, Heidegger, in contrast, found that "pre-understanding is not something a person can step outside of or put aside, as it is understood as already being with us in the world" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a philosophical tradition that involves interpretation. Hermeneutics "examines how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a context different from our own" (Thiselton, 2009. p. 1). The term itself "has its linguistic roots in the Greek word *hermeneutikos,* meaning the process of explaining and clarifying with the intent of making the obscure more obvious" (Prasad, 2005, p. 31). From these definitions, any text (including interview transcripts) should be looked at and thought of in terms of the context that they were written and created in, as well as the cultural and political landscape that surrounded their creation. Even texts crafted at the same time will likely have been created in contexts and by people who have different experiences and reasons for writing the text. Looking

at texts from a hermeneutical lens can serve to add depth and deeper understanding to the text and can also allow a writer to make connections between different texts based on their social and cultural contexts.

An important point of hermeneutics is that, while it is concerned with interpretation, a writer or researcher should be careful and understand that there is no right or final interpretation of a text under review. When an interpretation of a text is arrived at by a researcher or group of researchers, then it must be "negotiated among a community of interpreters and to the extent that some agreement is reached about meaning at a particular time and place, that meaning can only be based on consensual community validation" (Patton, 2015, p. 137). This suggests that there will never be a correct or final interpretation of a text, and that any conclusions or meanings gathered from a text will be subject to scrutiny by others in the research community and will change as the individuals and the cultural and social contexts change.

The work of German philosopher Frederich Scheiermacher is important to explore when considering the origins of the hermeneutic tradition. Scheiermacher's theory of hermeneutics arose from his work translating and interpreting religious texts, and that interpretation led him to certain ideas of the challenge and temporality of textual interpretation (Patton, 2015). Specifically, Scheiermacher saw the main challenge of textual interpretation arising from the notion that "there are deep linguistic and conceptual-intellectual differences between people" (Smith, 2017). These differences would have to be considered as part of an interpretative process, because the way language and concepts are understood and used vary greatly from person to person and culture to culture, as well as the social and political circumstances present at the time of interpretation. Upon considering this, among the conclusions that Scheiermacher came to be that interpretation as understanding was not simply a natural, matter of fact endeavor,

but rather that "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point" (Smith,2017).

Scheiermacher's theory of hermeneutics established several principals of the discipline of hermeneutics that were revolutionary for the time. Among these ideas is that the meaning of a text and the truth of that same text are not the same thing (Smith, 2017). In the context of Scheiermacher's work on biblical translation and interpretation, this must have been surprising and somewhat controversial to the scholarly community when it was first introduced in the 19th century. Finding meaning in a text (after considering the cultural and social and political contexts of that work), should not be seen by scholars as the writer's endorsement of the facticity of that text or the meanings. Not all texts, whether religious or not, should be assumed to be true, and doing so could lead to, as Scheiermacher called it, "serious misinterpretation" (Smith, 2017).

Based on his statement that linguistic and contextual differences exist between individuals, Scheiermacher advocates for both a linguistic and psychological interpretation of a text (Smith, 2017). A linguistic interpretation involves thinking about the variety of meanings particular words or phrases can have in a text and using clues from the text and the surrounding social and cultural contexts to get as close as possible to the author's intended meaning, while a psychological approach involves the thoughts and particularities of the author's mind and experience (Smith, 2017). Viewing texts in these two ways can assist the interpreter in understanding not just the meanings of the words, but also the way that the writing of those words in a text is impacted by the author's unique characteristics and contexts.

The work of Hans Georg Gadamer also served to be instrumental in the development of hermeneutics as a philosophy. Gadamer furthered the idea of being in the world presented by Heidegger, and also extended that idea to conclude that language and understanding are

inseparable structures when it comes to the "being in the world" aspect of phenomenological philosophy (Gadamer, 2004). Another impact of Gadamer's work was his development of the concept of hermeneutic phenomenology functioning as a "fusion of horizons" (Suddick et al 2020), where the researcher's view of what is possible to uncover about a particular phenomenon is, or in other words to "extend meaning from what is directly given, to discover something more; a new perspective and shared understanding of the subject matter' (Suddick et al, 2020, p. 3)

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Methodology

The research design and data analysis procedures for the current study was based on the work of the Dutch philosopher and researcher Max van Manen, and his book *Researching Lived Experience* (van Manen, 2001). van Manen answers the question of how to do hermeneutic phenomenological work by saying "to do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal" (van Manen, 2001, p. 18). The idea of attempting to accomplish the impossible is exciting and terrifying at the same time, which convinced me that van Manen's work was well suited to the current study. In the year long experience of conducting interviews, finding themes, and conveying everything in writing, I frequently came back to this idea of doing the impossible, and worked hard and tenaciously to showcase the experiences of the students I worked with in a way that would be meaningful for researchers and practitioners alike.

In contrast to the world of objective naturalistic research, van Manen describes phenomenology as "a philosophy or theory *of the unique"* (van Manen, 2001, p. 7). This recalls the idea from the philosophical literature that phenomenology is the study of the connection

between one's mind and one's body (Prasad, 2005; Vagle, 2018). Putting this into practice means that, when we are looking at how people experience the phenomenon we are studying, we are looking for the unique ways that their minds and bodies conceive of and are impacted by that phenomenon. We are not looking for how every person we talk to has a similar experience, because that would not make sense in talking to humans with unique minds and bodies. Rather, we are looking to interpret these experiences of the phenomenon to gain a description of what essential features of this phenomenon may look like.

When conducting a phenomenological analysis, van Manen explains that the researcher should not at all be concerned with whether the experience as described by a person actually happened in the way and with the frequency that the person says it did (van Manen, 2001). This is an important point, because there is no way to know how factual an account is when being told to us after the fact, and even a video or audio recording of an experience is still somewhat removed from that experience itself. This recalls the idea of the philosopher Scheiermacher that finding meaning in a text is not the same thing as recognizing that text as fact (Smith, 2017). Indeed, the idea of uncontroverted and absolute truth resulting from qualitative inquiry and analysis seems like an exercise in futility. In some ways, doing this research and hearing and living with the experiences of these students served to change my idea of what "truth" is, and how being focused on determining whether experiences are objectively truthful is impossible, and is not a goal of my study.

An important point presented by van Manen is that "we do not think about or phenomenologically reflect on our experiences as we 'live' them" (van Manen, 2017, p. 811). While one of the goals of phenomenology is to get as close to lived experience as possible, a researcher will never be able to truly be in the experience with a person, or to even completely

capture the experience with even audiovisual means. In order to get as close to lived experience as possible, it is important for a researcher to gather information in such a way that the experience itself is kept at the forefront of the collecting of information and that other influences on participants lived experience descriptions are controlled for as much as time and resources allow. In one of the conversations I had with a member of my dissertation committee, I asked what the biggest or most frequent mistake that they had seen researchers in phenomenological studies make, and they responded that it was not focusing on the phenomenon during interviews (Freeman, personal communication, 2021). I wrote this idea down on a Post It note and kept it by my computer so it would be in my line of vision as I conducted interviews. It helped me to keep myself and my students focused on the phenomenon.

Interviewing

When I considered how I would collect data to answer my research questions, I knew that interviews would be the main source of phenomenological material that I would use in the analysis. The literature, specifically on phenomenological interviewing, has many different, and sometimes conflicting perspectives. In his text on crafting phenomenological research, Mark Vagle uses some of the rules of improvisation from the writings of the comedian Tina Fey to describe some of the ways a research can remain grounded in the phenomenon, and those rules were well suited to the interviews to be conducted for the current study. The first rule that Vagle mentions is to "agree, always agree and say yes" (Fey, 2011 as cited in Vagle, 2018, p. 91). In the context of an interview, this means that if a participant tells me something that I have some type of emotional reaction to, that I need to be conscious of that reaction, and to make note of it when writing about the interview later. Additionally, it is not about what *I* think or what *my* experience with being part of a chosen family has been, but it is about the experience of *queer college students*, and particularly the queer

college students I am interviewing, that I am interested in knowing about. So, no matter what they are teaching me in the interview, my role as a researcher is to take in what they are saying and affirm their descriptions of their experiences in order to obtain a rich description of the phenomenon as they are living it.

The second rule, related to the first rule is to "not only yes, but yes, and" (Fey, 2011, as cited in Vagle, 2008, p. 92). Applied to interviewing, this means that active listening to the participants is of paramount importance, as it can allow me to use follow up questions and related verbal techniques to continue to get a deeper meaning and understanding of the phenomenon that I am studying. As Vagle says, "there is no way to know where this deepening will end up when we start" (p, 92). This rule can also be interpreted as making the interaction between me as the researcher and my participants to more of a dialogue, or, as Heidegger described it, "a conversation with the phenomenon". While the interview technique I will use is one that is rather unstructured, simply asking one or two main questions and expecting the participant to provide me with a deep description of how they experience their chosen family is not realistic and engaging in a conversation with them about this idea, and perhaps sharing some of my own experiences with it, will serve to build rapport with the students I talk to.

The third rule of Fey's that Vagle mentions as having particular resonance with phenomenological interviewing is to "make statements" (Fey, 2011, as cited in Vagle 2018, p. 93). While part of an interview must obviously include questions that participants will answer, making statements during the course of an interview will serve a purpose at furthering understanding the phenomenon. Making statements in the course of an interview has the potential to build rapport between the researcher and the participant, for when the interviewer makes statements that prove there are listening and following the information that the participant is providing them, the

participant will feel listened to and will be more likely to open up more about the phenomenon under consideration.

The fourth rule, and one that is most resonant to me, from Fey that Vagle applies to interviewing is that "there are no mistakes" (Fey, 2011, as cited in Vagle, 2018, p. 93). As a researcher beginning to hone my craft, and as a student working on a study that is the culmination of a multi-year doctoral program, I want everything with this study to be perfect, from the citations to the word choices to my interviewing. And that will not be the case and was likely not the case with anyone reading this in the future. I am going to have interviews where I might become so involved in the conversation with the student that we begin to veer down a path that is not about the phenomenon, but about something related to the phenomenon, For the proposed study, this might look like a conversation related to a pop culture reference to chosen family, or to other issues related to the student's experience that they might be struggling with or want to tell me. What I can do when a mistake like this happens is to recognize it and think about how that mistake is an opportunity to learn something about the phenomenon that is the focus of this study, as well as how it is a lesson about researching and how important vulnerability is in the process of researching and writing in qualitative research.

The interview protocol for this study was designed using a semi-structured format, allowing me to strike a more conversational tone with study participants then I would have been able to if I used a more formal interview guide. Using a semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to "negate any feelings of an inherent power structure and instead strive to create an environment where knowledge is being co-constructed" (Sperling, 2012, p. 58). Additionally, using this type of interview allowed me to keep the focus of the interview on the phenomenon itself and what the participant's experience of it is. Interviewing others about their experiences is

something that van Manen considers essential to a fuller understanding of a particular phenomenon, as it served to allow me to understand what chosen family meant for a queer college student "as an aspect of his or her life, and, therefore, by extension, as an aspect of the possibilities of our being human" (van Manen, 2001, p. 62).

Participants in the current study were interviewed twice. This prevented the finished study being on "thin contextual ice" if only one interview was conducted with each participant (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). Having multiple points of contact with each participant, and providing time in between interviews for reflection, allowed for the final study to have a more in-depth explanation of each person's experience, as well as gave each person the opportunity for the reflection that is an essential part of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2011). The first interview was focused on obtaining the participant's life history as it related to the idea of chosen family. This included information about their experiences with their biolegal family, as well as their early experiences of forming a chosen family. The second part of the interview was specifically focused on how participants' current experience of a chosen family, including what role they played in their chosen family, and how they maintained the connections between members of their chosen family. At the defense of the proposal for the current study, it was suggested that I not specifically ask about how chosen family was impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, and indeed almost every student I interviewed mentioned the pandemic specifically without being prompted to do so. The second interview, which was conducted between 7 to 10 days after the first interview, served to have the participant "reflect on the meaning of the experiences" that were discussed in the first interview (Seidman, 2019. p. 23). This served to allow participants to provide me with the meaning that their experiences had for them, and how the phenomenon had impacted their life and development.

In his book on interviewing in qualitative research, Seidman (2019) provides four aspects of interviewing that make it particularly suited for phenomenological research. First, Seidman discusses how interviewing can address the phenomenological goal of understanding lived experience, "asking participants to search again for the essence of their lived experience" and allows the researcher to more closely capture how participants experience the phenomenon of interest. Second, interviewing can assist a researcher in getting to the essence of a participant's experience by allowing the researcher access to the participant's subjective view and construction of their experience, rather than the objective view of an experience that would be gained through observational techniques. Another aspect of interviewing that makes it well suited for phenomenological study is that it provides the opportunity to "transform lived experience into a textual description of its essence" (van Manen, 2016, as cited in Seidman, 2019). Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, interviewing gives a researcher insight into how participants make meaning of their experiences. As Seidman says, "an assumption of in-depth interviewing is that the meaning people make of their experience affects how they carry out that experience" (p. 19).

Recruitment

When thinking about the selection of participants for the proposed study, I decided early on that I wanted to speak to students from different institutions, as this would provide me with a sample of students and student experiences that were not influenced by one campus culture, but reflected a variety of campus cultures, and which could then allow me greater insight into the phenomenon I am interested in learning about. Given that the coronavirus pandemic is continued to restrict in person interactions and is still impacting life as I am writing up the study, connecting with people in person was unlikely to happen. However, this condition had the

opportunity to be an asset to the proposed study, in that the physical isolation necessitated by the pandemic caused some participants to rely on their chosen families in an even stronger way than if they were able to see these people in person. In order to participate in the study, an individual had to be a currently enrolled college student in the United States, who identified as queer, and who had a chosen family.

As one author states, "sampling is driven by the desire to illuminate the questions under study, and to increase the scope of or range of data exposed to uncover multiple realities" (Kuzel as cited in Durdella, 2019, p. 184). The goal of collecting phenomenological material for the current study was guided by establishing the ways to best answer my research questions. In looking for participants for my study, I utilized my personal networks, which involves "relying on family members, friends, work colleagues, and acquaintances to recommend people who fit the criteria for the population identified for the study" (Roulston, 2010, p. 98). The use of personal networks was useful in helping me to find suitable participants, as it allowed me to use the network of higher education professionals, I have built in my nearly fifteen years as a professional in the field of student affairs. In addition to personal networks, I utilized social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) to assist in me in recruiting the nine students who participated in the current study.

As scholars (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2001) recommended , participants in the study were asked to select a pseudonym at the beginning of the first interview. The pseudonym was used in the transcription and data analysis processes, in the interest of ensuring that the participant cannot be identified from the material obtained from their interviews. Students who expressed interest in and participated in the current study were informed that they would be compensated with $20 gift cards for each interview upon completion. While payment for

research participation is seen as controversial by some (Seidman, 2019: van Manen, 2001), I framed the compensation as "exchanging participants time for researcher's money, and showing respect for their participation" (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2019, p. 44).

Table 1

Study Participants

Pseudonym	**Pronouns**
Alek	they/them/theirs
Amber	she/her/hers
Drusilla	they/them/theirs
Evan	he/him/his
Jason	he/him/his
Joffrey	they/them/theirs
Paul	they/them/theirs
Solange	they/them/theirs
Wren	they/them/theirs

Remaining Oriented to the Phenomenon Through Journaling

Phenomenological material gathered for this study did not consist solely of participant interviews. Not only was orienting myself to the phenomenon important in the beginning stages of the current study, such as forming a research question, problem, and purpose statement, but it was also important during the interview process to allow myself as the researcher to arrive at a deeper understanding of the knowledge being constructed with participants (Vagle, 2018).

Additionally, looking through these journals allowed me to recall certain experiences that I have had with chosen family that, combined with those of my participants, provides a richer description of the phenomenon. Similarly, van Manen mentions that "literature, poetry, and other story forms serve as a fountain of experiences to which the phenomenologist may turn to increase practical insights" (van Manen, 2011, p. 70). For the current study, engaging in this activity assisted me in understanding possible experiences of the phenomenon of being a part and forming a chosen family, which allowed me to continually develop new horizons of thought for the possibility of experiences that I found in the students I interviewed, and assisted me in better understanding the phenomenon from perspectives that I would not be able to directly ascertain it. Films reviewed for purposes of this exercise included *The Boys in the Band* (Murphy, 2020); *My Own Private Idaho* (Van Sant, 1991); *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994), and *Rent* (Columbus, 2006). Works of literature reviewed included *Tales of the City* (Maupin, 1978), *Giovanni's Room* (Baldwin, 1956), *Why We Came to the City* (Jansma, 2017), and *A Little Life* (Yangihara, 2016).

Upon approval of the proposed study by the appropriate Institutional Review Board, and continuing through the end of the interviewing phase, I reviewed the art and literature listed above, in addition to other works I found during data collection, and paid particular attention to how the work related to the idea of chosen family. Specifically, journal entries were focused on the chosen family members, and how the interaction of the characters provided a possible experience of the phenomenon. Once interviews have been completed, the material from the journals was analyzed in a similar manner to interview transcripts in order to determine how these fictionalized experiences provided insight into how to interpret the experiences of the phenomenon as told by participants.

My journaling also served as a way for me to heal from the experiences I have had with my biolegal family, as well as some of the situations I experienced with my chosen family members over the course of designing, conducting, and writing up the current study. While journaling was definitely the hardest part of the entire process (and perhaps the most difficult thing I have done in my doctoral work), I would have felt that something was left incomplete if I did not include my own reflections and experiences alongside those of my participants.

Data Analysis

While I found transcribing interviews for a previous study to be helpful (Eppley, 2019), I utilized a transcriber for the interviews for the current study. The reality of my personal and professional responsibilities, along with the number of participants and length of interviews, made using a transcriber for the current study a reasonable choice. This also avoided the possibility of fatigue and losing enthusiasm for the research process (Seidman, 2019). Given that silences will be analyzed, the transcriber utilized was instructed to make note in the transcription of silences, as "pauses, silences, laughter, and even inhalations and exhalations provide rich detail for analysis" (Roulston, 2010, p. 61).

The data analysis for the proposed study involved what van Manen calls a detailed reading, or line by line approach to identifying themes (van Manen, 2011). In this approach, the researcher reviews the texts that make up the phenomenological material for a given study, and reviews each sentence or group of sentences while continually asking "What does this sentence or group of sentences reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (van Manen, 2001, p. 93). In addition to this, I also listened to each interview in total before beginning to analyze it, as this proved to be very helpful to me in a previous study (Eppley, 2019).

Specifically, after reading each transcript once, I went back and clustered groups of sentences that I think have a similar meaning together. After that, I then reviewed each group of sentences with the idea of the themes that appeared to me about chosen family from that group. Finally, I then reflected on these themes to construct a text that represented chosen family as told to me by participants, as well as how possible experiences of the phenomenon through film and literature shed additional insight into possible experiences of this phenomenon.

Listening for Silence

The title of this section may seem to contradict itself. When engaged in discussions with participants about their experiences, how was I be able to listen for, and think about, the silences in what is not said? Identified as essential to the hermeneutic phenomenological study of human behavior, van Manen identifies multiple types of silences that are particularly relevant to human science research. First, there is literal science, or the absence of speaking, and there is the potential that "out of this space of silence, a more reflective response often may ensue than if we try to fill the awkwardness of the silence with comments or questions that amount to little more than idle chatter" (van Manen, 2001, p. 112). Being present with a participant who is recalling a difficult memory or is having trouble finding the right language for their thoughts can lead to a greater reflection of their experiences and give the researcher more nuanced phenomenological material to interpret during data analysis. The second form of silence was named by van Manen as facing the unspeakable, or ontological silence. This silence reflects that the language each individual has to describe and relate their experiences will not always be sufficient, even though humans "may have knowledge on one level and yet this knowledge is not available to our linguistic competency" (van Manen, 2001, p. 114). Further refining this idea from a hermeneutic perspective, this ontological science may be addressed through time (what is not available to

language at one moment in time may be readily available the next) and can sometimes be put into words by another person outside of the consciousness of the participant, whether that is the researcher or another participant in the study (van Manen, 2001).

An application of how being attuned to silence can be useful in the study of queer populations can be found in an article that discusses a study conducted with middle schools' students and their experiences of heternormativity in school and at home (Rosiek & Hefernnan, 2014). At the beginning of the article, the authors reflect on the nature of qualitative analysis in being able to only analyze "what is actually said, which is a severe constraint on a researcher's ability to interpret the significance of social dynamics" (p. 727). Through the article reporting the results of the study, the authors experienced multiple instances of silence when students were asked about experiences with peers or teachers that they found to be heteronormative. When analyzing the material gathered from these interviews, the authors did not find an appropriate methodological tool to address these silences, and the absence of information that they indicated: "An analysis of what prevents the community from forming a coherent view of a phenomenon is needed to inform action and intervention" (Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014, p. 730). The authors used post structuralist theory (Butler, 1993; Valentine, 2007) to identify and interpret silences in the data. For example, when analyzing the silences of an interview with a female student who was gender non-conforming, the researchers used theory to explain the silences that they found after reviewing transcripts of their interview with this participant.

Through an analysis of the silence, the authors discovered that the good intentions of those involved in the pedagogy of the students resulted in damaging silences based on the things that they heard and said that reinforced heteronormativity and highlighted the difference between the queer study participants and their heterosexual identified peers (Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014).

Based on the silences observed when queer students and educators were asked about students who were queer or questioning, the authors found that all involved in education need to "transform community discourses that frame certain kind of gender performances as deviant" (p. 732).

For the current study, analysis of the silence gave insight into answering the research questions related to queer college students and chosen families. When reviewing transcripts and my notes of these silences, I thought about the context of the anecdote that contained the silence and considered what the silence illustrates about the participant's experience of chosen family. Going into the interview portion of the current study, I thought I would be able to both be present and participative in the interview, as well as make note of silences that would allow me to go back to these silences during the analysis phase of the study. I have always found it difficult to try and multitask or do two things at once (I am one of the few people I know who find two monitors when working on a computer to be very distracting instead of helpful). After reading a couple transcripts, I realized that some silences were not being noticed.

Once I realized that this was an issue, I developed a strategy that would allow me to make note of silences without writing too much down, which would likely take me away from what a participant was saying. When I noticed a silence of more than 5 seconds, I would look at what the time on the recorder was, and write that down, and put an S (for silence) next to it. While I had hoped that these silences would serve as a point of insight into the phenomenon under study, my analysis of them did not yield significant data related to my research questions. Transcripts as a study guide

After developing themes and looking at how silence impacted the participants during the interviews, I knew I needed to do more with the material I had before trying to write up my

findings. After much hand wringing and sitting with the data I had, I took an approach that I used many times during my undergraduate studies. Specifically, I looked at my two research questions as a final exam, and utilized the material I had, including transcripts, journals, and popular media, as a study guide for that final exam. I came to a much deeper understanding of this process, and found it very useful in determining how to structure the fourth and fifth chapters of this document. I continually looked at this "final exam" throughout the months of writing and revising this study, and by the end of my process had pieces of it committed to memory.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness "refers to the degree of confidence that the reader may have in the way the study was conducted and its findings" (Dibley, Dickerson, Duffy, & Vandermause, 2020, p. 150). Four criteria mentioned by Guba (1983) as being essential to researchers in pursuit of a trustworthy qualitative study are identified as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1983).

Credibility "refers to the integrity of the of the study processes, and invites the reader to ask whether the study, designed and delivered using the prescribed methods, would be likely to produce the findings that are reported" (Dibley et.al, 2020, p. 150-151). One way identified to illustrate credibility is to use quotes from participants in identifying themes. When reviewing transcripts from interviews of the proposed study, I will develop themes based on the words of the participants themselves, and in the presentation of themes in the final dissertation, I will make use of participant voices as much as possible to ensure that the themes I found come from the participant's experiences, instead of my view or opinion of their experiences. Additionally, I plan to utilize member checking, which has been called the "single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility" (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). For the proposed study,

member checking will occur when participants are sent the completed transcriptions of their interviews to review and provide feedback on, as well as when participants are sent the proposed findings of the study once they have been completed.

Dependability is based somewhat on the idea that a study and its procedures should be repeatable, but in qualitative research it is recommended that a researcher "should at least strive to enable a future investigator the ability to repeat the study" (Shenton, 2004, p. 73). One way to obtain evidence of dependability is to be as explicit as possible in the explication of data collection and analysis procedures. Although the procedures for data analysis may change from what it is proposed, it will be important for me to explain data analysis procedures in a way that would allow another researcher to be able to analyze my phenomenological material with the analysis methods I describe.

Transferability refers to the ability to connect the findings of one study to the larger population (Shenton, 2004). Although transferability is not a goal of most qualitative studies, in the proposed study I plan to provide evidence for transferability by connecting the findings from my phenomenological material to the existing literature on queer college student development and chosen families, as outlined in Chapter 2. By doing this, I can show how my findings connect with existing thoughts and findings on the topic, as well identify areas of disconnect with literature that may warrant future research.

Finally, confirmability is described as "steps being taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the ideas and experiences of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (Shenton, 2004, p. 73). Because it is important that I present the experiences of my participants as they live them, instead of how their experiences align with my chosen family development, it will be important to include in my

journaling ideas about the possible experiences I am reviewing in literature and film align or do not align with my personal experiences, and also think about how to separate these thoughts from what I learn from my participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

As I sat down after completing my interviews and began to think about what I had learned about my topic and possible answers to my research questions, I finally came to terms with why completing this work and finding meaning in the experiences of the people I connected with was so difficult. For me, thinking about family means confronting a lot of painful truths about my own biolegal family. For a long time, I avoided telling my parents about what I was studying for my dissertation, because I was not sure of their reaction. When I finally did tell them, they did not understand the concept of chosen family, and saw the fact that I was looking at chosen family (and that I had a chosen family) as evidence that my experience with them growing up was somehow not good enough, and that I then had to find a chosen family to make up for what they lacked. I started to reassure them that wasn't the case, but I realized it would be fruitless to try and overcome their objections and their anger.

There is no way to separate my story from the stories of the nine people I introduce in this chapter. While I knew looking at examples of other phenomenological dissertations would be helpful, I needed to find a way to present the findings in ways that felt authentic, represented the work I did, and more importantly, the work the people I talked to did, with the goal of uncovering themes about how these people experienced being part of a chosen family. While the primary focus of this chapter is to uncover and present themes from the interviews, I also have included interludes from the media (film, television, and books) that have aided in my thinking and understanding about chosen family as I conducted interviews and did deep readings of

interview transcripts. As the process of reviewing and revising this chapter happened, I was encouraged to add more of myself to this chapter, and although looking back at my journals and confronting my past was difficult, it is beneficial in giving the reader more of an understanding of how I approached the work with participants, as well as how I interpreted the meanings of what they shared with me.

After completing the data analysis process as outlined in Chapter 3, I developed the six themes discussed in the remainder of this chapter. The themes are searching for connection, looking for family in Greek life, forced homegoing, unexpected family members, freedom from translation, and role playing family. Within the discussion of the themes, I also include interludes from different books, movies, television shows, and theatrical pieces that further my understanding, as well as included excerpts from my journals (the portions in italics) that illustrate some of my most salient experiences with chosen family.

As my advisor and I discussed during the revision and review process, there was some concern with both of us that my findings did not read as "phenomenological" enough for the type of study I was writing. It took me time to figure out what read as phenomenological and what didn't, but the solution I arrived at was to more intentionally present my findings as answers to the research questions that I asked at the beginning of this study. It was also important, for me as the researcher/instrument, to think about how my meanings and experiences coincided or diverged from those of the participants I worked with. The rich description of the phenomenon and what constitutes it is woven within this chapter, making the answers to the research questions a more prominent part of the study.

Theme: Searching for Connection

Alek, a trans man, remembers their first experience on campus and being excited about all the people they would meet: “The first thing I did when I stepped on campus was that I said hello to every person I made eye contact with. Before college, I could only have friends that my father approved of, and the people that my father approved of were not people I wanted to be friends with”. Although Alek identifies themselves as an introvert who had to have time away from people every day to feel balanced, they used the opportunity of being at college as an opportunity to search for meaningful connections with their peers, since this opportunity had been denied by their biolegal family up until that point in their life. Alek, then, wanted chosen family from the minute he stepped onto campus, and looked for it with every person he met with.

Evan describes coming to college with a need to establish close connections with his peers. Even when he was living with his biolegal family members, he described them as “the absolute last resort of who to go when I needed help”. Although Evan went to college 30 minutes away from where his parents lived, he remembers only going home during breaks throughout the four years of his undergraduate career. Related to his queer identity, Evan talks about the need to establish friendships with other queer people because his coming out “put something permanent between me and my family”. Evan didn’t go home much, because home was a place where he could not be himself and be understood as an intersection of his identities. He remembers the first time he had a conversation with someone in his residence hall as “life altering, because I told this person I was gay and was prepared for a negative reaction and for them to walk away, but they didn’t”.

Wren, a queer woman, chose her institution because it had an honors program, but initially struggled to make connections with others in the program because many of them came

from a different geographic area than she did. She found connections among the queer and neurodivergent people in the program, which was especially meaningful for her since she identified as both queer and neurodivergent. Wren got the sense that these people were "nerds like me" and found it easy to form close relationships with these other students around their shared identities and interests. Wren experienced identification of her chosen family from gaining insights into the interests of her fellow students to find similarities and ways to connect about academic and personal interests and beliefs.

Like Alek, Evan, and Wren, I remember my fear and lack of knowledge about college life was not enough to dampen my enthusiasm for meeting people, who I didn't know, and who didn't have many preconceived notions about me. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to be who I wanted to be, and figure out the type of person I wanted to present myself as. Like Evan's experience, I remember telling someone on my residence hall floor that I was gay (in case the Mariah Carey poster on my door didn't give it away), and was prepared for a reaction of disgust or derision, but what I actually got was just a "right on" and a continuing of the conversation. It was a small moment that gave me hope that I would find connections and people who understood me.

Chosen family, then, is experienced by queer students as a search for connection with others. While making connections with peers is an important and meaningful part of the college experience for students from a variety of backgrounds and orientations, queer students are looking to find people they can trust, who they can go to with their problems, and who share their interests. While many of their fellow students may have biolegal family members to go to for support in times of crisis, those connections may not exist for queer students, and so they

come to college looking for people to trust, who share their interests, and who allow them to be themselves.

My First Family Member

I remember coming back to campus after my suicide attempt in October 2001, and how desperate I was to find connection with others. Although it was hard for me to understand at the time, many people I had known at school distanced themselves from me after I returned, perhaps because they didn't want to have to know how to be around me. Similar to Evan, my biolegal family was the last place that I wanted to go for support. Even as I write this, 21 years later, I am still not allowed to talk about that period of my life around my parents… as if it didn't exist. I eventually found my people, and those people were likely the beginnings of what became my chosen family.

One of the people I met during this time was Chris, who has been my friend ever since. In the midst of writing this dissertation, I saw him in person for the first time in over 6 years, and it was like a bad movie in that we picked up right where we left off the last time we video chatted. I did not have to censor myself and nothing was off the table. We just enjoyed each other's company and being in physical proximity to one another. I slept better that weekend than I had for months before, because I knew I was with someone who was safe, and who made me feel like I could and can accomplish anything.

Interlude: Elphaba

Halfway through my interviews, I attended a performance of the musical *Wicked* (Holzman & Schwartz, 2003). While I had thought of themes related to chosen family in this piece while writing the initial proposal for this study, I attended this performance thinking about the phenomenon and what the piece revealed to me about it. The character of Elphaba makes her

first entrance happy and excited to be attending college and to meet and connect with other students, especially because she is shunned by members of her biolegal family who blame her for many of the family's previous issues. Initially unable to connect with any of her peers because of her differences, she finally connects with her roommate Galinda by being vulnerable about her rejection by her biolegal family, and their friendship and connection become a central theme of the piece.

Theme: Brotherhood and sisterhood: Looking for family in Greek life

Jinx, a non-binary woman of color, joined a sorority early in their college career, and came to understand that experience as one where the bonds that were formed among the sisters were meaningful and quickly became family. Jinx shared the following example of how the sisters would look out for each other in assuring that each sister could socialize and share food with the other sisters:

"We would even have things where one of us would be hungry and wanted to go somewhere, but some of us wouldn't have money, so we'd be like Ok, we'll buy this food because we're all hungry, but we don't want you to feel like you can't join us because you can't afford to eat here. So, then we'd do like food days where somebody would pay for somebody else's food, and then another time that same person would pay them back by buying their food and things like that"

Jinx had previously talked about how they were hesitant to join any club or organization on campus, because they were low income and not connected to their biolegal family and did not always have money to go out for food or pay for other activities. Once the food days were established, Jinx felt comfortable expressing to the group that she would be able to pay for another sister's food during the beginning of the month and would need help with food at the end

of the month. Instead of asking questions about how Jinx was spending their money, as their biolegal and foster families had done in the past when they asked for money for food, the sisters provided a space for each other to share resources and be open and honest about when they needed support, and when they could provide support. Being a part of this family, for Jinx, led them to redefine what family members did and didn't do, and helped them think about support as a mutually reciprocal relationship.

Alek joined a fraternity early in his undergraduate career, also looking to find a group of people who he could support and who could support him in the ways that his biolegal family had never done. While the fraternity reached out to Alek and made him feel welcome initially, they "eventually began to treat me like a girl, like a stereotypical girl. People would talk over me. The other brothers would not invite me to things. They would tell me that I'm too emotional, when the chapter was supposed to be about brotherhood". In reflecting on how this experience impacted them, Alek shared that it made them even more determined to find their family on campus and helped them become more focused on what they wanted that family to look like.

Thinking about these experiences with fraternities and sororities led me to think about how these organizations called the members brothers and sisters, while they frequently do things that are not considered brotherly or sisterly. In the recruiting and pledging/new member process, there is a sense that the new member has to prove themselves worthy of the brotherhood or sisterhood that the organization provides. In order to be a part of this family, you have to meet our expectations, even if this sometimes risks your safety or sense of self. While not true of every fraternity or sorority, there is a pressure on members of the group to conform to a standard of certain behaviors and attributes in order to be a part of the family, and a possibility of

rejection or elimination of membership from the family if these standards and behaviors are not followed.

Interlude: *Fraternity*

In my search for fictional representations of chosen family, I found the collection of stories called *Fraternity* (Nugent, 2020) to make me think about the possibilities of finding family from Greek organizations in ways I hadn't yet come upon in my previous thinking and writing. The stories, while all focusing on different members of the fraternity, have a recurring theme of looking at the fraternity as a way for the men to develop emotional ties within the safety of the fraternity, and allows space for vulnerability among and between the men. There is a particular story in the collection where a new member of the fraternity and an established member begin a romantic relationship and talk about how to structure their romantic relationship on the values of the fraternity they are both a part of. In my work with Greek organizations in my professional life, I had never thought about how members of the organizations could enact their values in their romantic relationships, and reading this story made me think about it could be possible.

How I Got A Brother

My first job involved a lot of working with fraternities and sororities who had violated policies. This involved a lot of learning for me, especially since I hadn't been in a fraternity as part of my undergraduate experience. The groups would elect new leadership every year, and I remember being anxious about hearing who some groups had elected to leadership positions, as sometimes the groups would elect the popular members over the members who were best suited to lead their organizations to success.

One year, an organization who had significant issues elected a leader named Davil, who was not someone I had encountered before. From the very beginning, I knew Davil was someone who was different from many of the leaders I had previously encountered, and who was uniquely invested in making his organization a success. I remember many conversations that Davil and I had about how his fraternity brothers were his family, and that he wanted his family to be the best that it could be. Even though the group continued to have some issues, Davil was instrumental in helping them improve their functioning, think differently about the men they recruited, and how to understand their masculinity in healthier contexts.

The surprising thing about that whole experience is that, on reflection, Davil definitely became part of my chosen family. I left that institution while Davil was still president, and we kept in contact for many years afterwards, while he continued on in school and obtained a doctoral degree. As it did for many people, the pandemic caused Davil to rethink his career path, and after several conversations, he is now a personal trainer, and happier than he's ever been.

While brotherhood and sisterhood can come from a variety of places during a queer student's time in college, being involved in organizations with peers who share their interests can be an important opportunity for queer students to develop a sense of what it means to be a member of a family. Their involvement in an organization can help them uncover what their identity as a member of that family can be like, in a way that may or may not resemble that of a biolegal or nuclear family structure. Although the attempts to find family in these organizations may not always be successful, the organizational involvement has the potential to uncover different ways of being a part of a family unit for people who have previously experienced family as a source of discomfort and alienation.

Theme: Forced homecoming

Although I did not specifically ask people about how the COVID pandemic impacted their experiences of chosen family, its impact came with several of my participants. Jada, a lesbian college junior, talked about how difficult it was to go back to her biolegal family after several months of living on campus with her chosen family: "It was absolutely like going hack in the closet in a lot of ways. My parents were happy to see me, but they wanted the me that had left home in the fall, and not the me that I was now. If it wasn't for the internet and video chats, I don't know how I would have survived having to go back in the closet again". Jada and her chosen family members who she met in her residence hall had video calls several times a week, where they talked about the challenges of being back at home, how they could support each other for however long they would be at home and stayed connected daily through group messaging apps like GroupMe, which allowed them to vent frustration and get support in real time. The experience of being a part of her chosen family, then, allowed Jada to continue finding who she was and who she was developing into, while allowing her to handle the negative thoughts and feelings brought on by sharing living space with her biolegal family.

Wren went home after living in an apartment with several chosen family members and described how a task like doing the dishes after dinner made her appreciate the impact that her chosen family had on her. "Doing dishes isn't something I like to do, but in the apartment, we had a schedule of who would do what, so I would know when it was my turn to do them and could prepare myself. A few nights after going home, my mom asked me to help with the dishes, and when I told her I was finishing up something and would be there in a few minutes, she came into my room and start yelling at me that I needed to help out now that I was home and we got into a shouting match that ended up with both of us crying and not talking the rest of the night,

At the apartment our family would never argue over something like doing the dishes". For Wren, this situation was an example of how her family at school worked through conflict in a way that was different from how her biolegal family dealt with things and made her look forward to going back to campus and returning to her family even more urgent.

Jason, a queer male who attends college online, experienced a strengthening of his bond with his chosen family as the pandemic began and people returned to their familial homes. "I had established a family from a group of queer guys who I had online class with, and once some of them had to move home, I was able to talk with them more and help them figure out how to get through living with their families and reminded them that we are part of a family, and they could be who they wanted". Jason and his chosen family members would establish weekly dinners where the family members would eat dinner together on video chat and talk about how they were working through issues, dealing with feelings of isolation, and trying to maintain focus on their academics in the midst of the uncertainty of the pandemic. Once restrictions had been lifted in their area, Jason and his chosen family members began meeting in person, after having only online meetings and connection for over two years.

These examples made me consider how the pandemic had shaped my own experience of being part of a chosen family. While I did not have to return to the home of my biolegal family, I still felt a need to have increased contact with them while the world was locked down, to make sure that they were taking proper precautions and following recommendations about how to avoid getting sick. It also made me experience a closer bond with some of the members of my chosen family. Because of the lockdown, family members who normally did not have time in their schedule for a phone or video call were able to interact more often, and in a more meaningful way than a text message or social media post.

What the pandemic revealed about chosen family was how it essential it is the psychological wellbeing of queer students when they are faced with the potential loss of it. Rather than remain disconnected from these important relationships, students use technology and any other means available to maintain and develop these connections, in a way that illustrates how essential these relationships are. Whether during a pandemic or because of another unexpected separation, chosen families find a way to remain connected and in contact, and help the members survive adversity and isolation until the connections can be return to in person contact.

Interlude: Coming home

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, I found myself watching the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) several times while immersing myself in depictions of chosen family. Although the film is known for the idea of "there's no place like home", all of the people Dorothy meets when she is in Oz are reflections of people she has met in Kansas (the evil neighbor, farmhands, and others). While she looks forward to coming "home" to Kansas, when she finally wakes up in her bed at the end of the movie, she recognizes the people from Kansas as people that she's seen in Oz. The family she chose (or found) in Oz were there to help her and support her, just as her biolegal family were there to support her in Kansas. In the closing scene of the film, I got the sense that everyone in Dorothy's life, including Dorothy, had been changed by the family she found in Oz, and that the adventure she had had resulted in a greater understanding of herself and a greater appreciation of the family she had.

Theme: Unexpected family members

It would have been difficult to come to an understanding of the chosen family phenomenon without talking with participants about the members of their chosen family. Several

students mentioned that the members of their chosen family were not people they expected to be close to. Drusilla talked about an experience she had with a male athlete in one of her classes that she started getting to know when they were assigned to a group project together:

"I remember being annoyed that I got put in a group with an athlete, because I thought that meant that I had would have to do all of the work. But the first time we got together to talk about the project, we ended up having a lot in common, and he really wanted to do the work he needed to do to make sure we got a good grade. We exchanged numbers after that, and we ended up really helping each other get through the beginning of the pandemic and being at home all time."

Joffrey, who identifies as queer, shared a recent memory from their junior year of their undergraduate studies. He ended up forming a close bond with his resident assistant, and they quickly became family members:

"We were both juniors, and so of course we were thinking about what was next after college and what we wanted to do with our lives, and so one day we ended up eating in the caf together and talking about what we wanted to do and stuff like that. Now that we're both close to graduation, we talk all the time about looking for jobs, grad school, and other things. He was my RA for two years, but I never talked to him about anything important until that day when we both got real and talked about our futures".

Although the bond between Joffrey and his resident assistant was unexpected, their shared experience led from friend to family because of their shared circumstances. Experiencing the formation of a chosen family, then, means finding family connections from a variety of sources, while many members of a biolegal family are predetermined without any action from the members. Although there is a choice in who the members of one's chosen family are, the

bond remains as strong (or in many cases, stronger) than the bond a queer person has with their biolegal family.

Chosen family members are not given to a person. Rather, they must be searched for and developed, and the members can be found in a cafeteria, a classroom, a residence hall room, or many other places where people make contact with each other on a campus. Any chosen family member can be considered unexpected, because it is not likely that two people will begin a relationship understanding that they are both looking for familial connections. It is a process of developing trust and a connection from shared experiences that can move a relationship for casual to close friends to family. The timeline and circumstances can be different and evolving, and the connections can come from where they are least expected.

A Dinner I Will Never Forget

Thinking about unexpected family members makes me think about my friend Steve, who I met in college and who I kept in contact with, but who only recently became a close friend, for unexpected reasons. In the summer of 2019, I became disconnected from a best friend and very important member of my chosen family to the point where we had blocked each other from our phones and hadn't spoken for months. I was preparing to sit for doctoral comprehensive exams, and I remember feelings of isolation. As he did sometimes, Steve mentioned one day that he was in town for business and wanted to meet for dinner, and even though I had a lot of studying and reading to do, I agreed to meet him.

Steve and I have talked many times about how important that dinner was. He disclosed to me that he was having issues in his marriage, and I talked at length about my disconnection from my friend, and after several hours, we knew that our connection had deepened beyond what either one of us had ever expected. I would never have thought that we would be as close as we

are today, but I also don't know what life was like before I had Steve so firmly in my corner and so dear to my heart.

Interlude: Four women in Miami

Thinking about how family is unexpected led me to think about the 1980s television show *The Golden Girls*, and how chosen family is really a central theme of the show and how its main characters interact. A recent online piece I came across (Levine, 2021), made me think in an even deeper way about why the show remains popular and important over 30 years after it concluded production. The women become a family because they no longer fit into their traditional families, because some are widows or otherwise separated from their spouses, and all have grown children who are leading their own lives. Through different circumstances they end up together, and even though they have significant differences in their experiences and approaches to life, they build a family and support each other through numerous crises and milestones. Thinking about the show in the context of chosen family (I really didn't need to watch any of the 180 episodes because I have most of them committed to memory), it also occurred to me that the characters of Sophia and Dorothy, while biologically related as mother and daughter, also are a part of each other's chosen family, which is not something that I had thought about before

Theme: Freedom from translation

Brock, a gay man, talked extensively about how his chosen family freed him from the need he had to constantly explain every aspect of his college journey to his parents and family members, who did not understand why he had chosen his academic and career paths.

"I think being able to translate what you do into a language that is fully understood by those who are not at that level is one of the challenging things. And that's why my chosen family

is comprised of people who do understand my field or who have had those experiences, who can really share wisdom and advice, because you know, they lived it".

As Brock thought about pursuing graduate school, he was hesitant to even tell his biolegal family about his thoughts, because they had made comments in the past about how they didn't understand why people kept getting more degrees instead of "going out in the real world and getting a job". Brock's chosen family members, which included faculty, students in his major, and mentors from his industry, were instead supportive of his decision to pursue graduate school, and it was a relief to Brock to not have to continually "translate' for them why he wanted to continue to attend college and potentially be a faculty member.

Amber, a queer nonbinary human, also experienced a type of freedom from having to translate once they began to build their network of chosen family members. While they weren't familiar with the term nonbinary until the recent past, they knew early in childhood that they did not identify as male or female. When they shared this with biolegal family, some ignored them, and others asked them to explain what they meant when they said they didn't identify as male or female. During their interview, they recalled a specific experience with a classmate during their first year of college that they described as a relief:

> I met this girl from my history class for coffee one day, and we just started talking about our lives and what we were going through and things like that. And at some point, in the conversation I shared that I was nonbinary, and I was prepared for her to have a negative reaction or to ask me a bunch of questions. But instead, she just said that she appreciated me sharing that with her, and that she wanted to know more about my experience being nonbinary on campus, but only when I was ready to tell her. That

forged a bond that we still have to this day, even though our coffee dates have been virtual for the last 18 months.

Jason's family were resistant to having him go to college, and instead wanted him to prepare to take over their business from them. While he eventually forged a compromise and attended school remotely, his parents did not understand why he made time in the evenings and on weekends to connect with his classmates on the phone and through video chat. "I tried to explain to them why it was important for me to connect with people my own age and who were also in college, but they continued to not understand, and so eventually I just became more secretive about the time I was spending connecting with my friends and didn't tell them about it.". When connecting with his classmates, even though he had not met many of them in person when I interviewed him, he felt a sense of being understood in a way that he had not ever felt from his parents. He even established a family structure where certain members of his found family played different roles, including parents and children, and this made Jason feel that family had a more expansive definition then he had realized while he was growing up, and that part of his definition of family meant experiencing the ability to share and talk about things without always feeling the need to explain himself.

The idea of not having translate feelings and experiences for chosen family members was one that was continually a part of my thinking and writing as I continued to read and reread transcripts and listen to interviews. The experience of chosen family building and membership allowed the participants the opportunity to be able to share their lives and thoughts in a way that didn't have to be filtered or censored as they had to be when living with the biolegal family. This made connections easier, and allowed participants to experience family in a way that had not previously been possible.

Not having to explain your queerness or parts of your queer identity is a powerful component of chosen family for queer college students. With chosen family members, a queer student can be the most authentic version of themselves, and there is a level of understanding that develops when parts of the experience of being queer are understood without explanation. This understanding can result in feelings of freedom for the members of a family who have the urgent desire to understand and be understood within their family unit. This understanding gives family members strength to encounter difficult situations and experiences, because they know that they have family to process the experiences with in a way that is unique to them and makes them feel supported and cared for.

Theme: Role playing family

One of the most unexpected things I learned through my conversations was how three of my participants use role playing fantasy games to role play being a family and also to test out different identities and pronouns. Wren talked at length about how playing the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons was what really connected her with her chosen family members, and what allowed her to feel comfortable trying out different pronouns:

> What was amazing to me, and is still amazing to me, about the experience of playing the game and building family, is how many of us felt comfortable using the game as a type of metaphor for what roles we wanted to play in our real lives too. I remember one time when I was the dungeonmaster (who leads the game for the other players), and I just said that I wanted to try having people use they and them for my pronouns. And nobody batted an eye or made any kind of remark, they just referred to me that way, and it was such an amazing experience that made me feel so comfortable and connected to these people. Other people in the family have used the game to try out different genders,

> and one of my closest family members roleplayed being asexual during the game, and it helped her come to the understanding that that was an identity that fit her, and that she felt comfortable telling other people about because of the support she got while playing the game.

Alek talked about how playing video games with his roommates, particularly after his negative experiences with being in a fraternity, led him to establish close bonds with them:

> It wasn't so much the game we were playing, but it was that while we were playing it, and playing for so many hours at a time and almost every day, that I began to open up to them about how horrible my experience in the fraternity had been, and how I was really feeling isolated and maybe that college wasn't for me. They listened, and only gave advice if I asked them for it. And me being vulnerable with them eventually led them to open up to me, and we became friends, and then they helped me understand what family really means. I never thought I would find family through playing video games.

For Alek, this experience helped him to understand that he could find unconditional love and acceptance from others, even when he had not experience that in his past up until that point. Although the pandemic caused the video gaming to end, and Alek was currently out of school because of financial issues, he still would reach out to his former roommates often and talk about how everyone was coping with the pandemic, and how they could help each other navigate those challenges.

The experience of being a member of a chosen family is different for every person who is a member. A single individual may play different roles in different families, and understanding and developing these roles can be achieved through experimentation and game playing in an environment and with people who provide safety for a family member's identity to change and

grow as the person grows and develops. There is not a blueprint for how to develop as a family member of a chosen family, but the desire to be a part of a family unit allows queer students unique ways to be a member of a family that is unique to them and to the other members of a family.

Theme: Fluid family

During our second conversation, Alek shared with me that stress from the pandemic and difficulty securing funds had led them to decide to take time off from college, and to try and build up a financial cushion that would allow them to return to school without having to work. Making the decision to leave, thought, meant that Alek would be disconnected from some of the family members that they had developed relationships with. Surprisingly, Alek was not worried about this. He explained to me that he "knows that family now is an open and changing space for me. I don't think I will ever have a set group of family members that won't change, but people who come in and out of my life that are family regardless of how much I talk to them". For Alek, his experience of family is that it is a continual and fluid process, and that the idea that someone is family remains constant, even if contact with that person decreases or becomes infrequent. It brings to mind the idea of a family that evolves and changes as the members evolve and change and go to different places and reach different milestones in their lives.

Evan experienced the fluidity of family as having biolegal family members become part of a chosen family at certain points, and then cycling out of being part of a chosen family at other times. Evan explained that, around when his mother passed away, he became close with his sister, who had never had a close relationship with as he was growing up. He talked about how "our shared experience of grief brought us together in a way that had never happened before". For a period of time after the passing, Evan and his sister spoke every day, about their mother

and the memories of her, both good and bad. But, at some point, Evan spoke about the fact that his sister started "returning to her old habits of not agreeing with my life and questioning my decision to move across the country", which led him to distance himself, and eventually the conversations completely ended. Evan talked about the experience in a way that indicated he had considered the impact it had on him and how unexpected the connection was, while also understanding that the closeness of his sister to him for that time period was related to a particular circumstance, and not a sustainable connection that would be maintained.

Conclusion

Since the goal of a research study is almost certainly to answer the research questions that framed the study, to conclude this chapter, I will repeat both of the research questions that guided the current study, and synthesize my findings to answer those questions, and to attempt to give the reader an idea of what constitutes this phenomenon.

How do queer college students experience the identification and formation of a chosen family?

Queer college students experience the formation of their family, and the selection of the members of that family, as an ongoing process that continues to change and is fluid. When they come to college, they start to look for people who they can connect and be themselves with, and for those who share similarities to them on a variety of different domains. There is not a specific situation or set of situations that tranisiton a person from a friend or acquaintance to a family member, and sometimes the status of someone as a family member does not become apparent until there is a need for familial connection in times of change or crisis.

Formation and maintenance of a chosen family can happen at predictable points and places during the college journey, such as residence hall suites and student organizations, and can also happen in virtual settings when necessary, such as during the ongoing pandemic that

shaped many aspects of the collegiate experience. When in person interactions with chosen family members are not possible or difficult, queer students make use of the technology available to them to maintain and forge familial connections with their family members that mimic in person interactions (such as having dinner together, family meetings). Online spaces make existing connections stronger, and help to form new connections that have the potential to develop into new family members and familial relationships.

How do queer college students experience being a part of a chosen family?

Being a member of a chosen family is an experience that is life changing and life altering. When a queer student comes out or begins to identify as queer to their biolegal family, they can face rejection, negative feelings, and sometimes isolation or excommunication from the family unit. Being a part od a chosen family, however, allows the opportunity for an individual to develop their own definition of what family means for them. The journey of being a chosen family member is far from a linear one, and what path that journey takes is unique to every individual. Chosen family is a phenomenon that crosses geographical, social, and economic boundaries. While a familial connection may initially develop because of a shared membership (such as being students at the same institution or in a fraternity or sorority), the experience transcends the initial connection in a way that makes the bonds between the people stronger than they normally would be.

Freedom also constitutes what it means to be part of a chosen family. Queer people who have chosen families have a freedom from having to censor themselves and their opinions without fear of experiencing negative consequences or a break in the relationship. There is shared language and understanding that develops with a chosen family, a sort of cultural capital that is unique to the family unit and to the experience of being queer. While having to “edit”

what you say and how you express yourself in professional or academic settings, the chosen family provides its member with the opportunity to freely experiment with gender roles, pronouns, and sexuality in a way that is safe, transparent, and supportive.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The current study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do queer college students experience forming a chosen family?
2. How do queer college students experience being part of a chosen family?

The use of phenomenological interviewing, combined with journaling and remaining connected to the chosen family phenomenon through a variety of media, allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how my participants experienced their realities of what family was for them while they were in college. While the experiences of these nine people are not meant to be representative of the entire population of queer college students in the United States, their stories provide meaningful insight into the experiences of chosen family. In this chapter, I will connect the findings from the previous chapter to the literature on queer identity development and chosen families, discuss implications of the study on student affairs practice, and make suggestions for future research on this topic.

Connecting to Literature

The participants in the current study came to chosen family after feeling that their biolegal families did not fully accept them and their identities as queer (and for some, as transgender or non-binary). Alek endured physical and mental abuse after coming out to his biolegal family, which left him feeling a lack of belonging in his family and ignited in him a desire to find the family that he needed to feel supported. As Cass mentions in her model of homosexual identity development, part of early development involves questioning whether a

person's plan and trajectory for their lives may need to be revisited and having "a sense of not belonging to society at large as well as certain subgroups, such as family" (Cass, 1979, p. 225). Cass also mentions contact with other homosexuals as an important piece of identity development, particularly in her revised model (Cass, 1984). For Alek, then, his development of a chosen family once he arrived at college was an important step in his queer identity development, as it allowed him to find that sense of belonging that he had lost from the negative experiences with his biolegal family, as well as make contact with other queer people who he could make connections with, and with whom he begin to build familial bonds.

While thinking through and reconsidering the literature on queer identity development, I thought about how this study would have looked different if some of the participants had shared experiences of chosen family after having experiences with their biolegal family that were mostly positive. How might this have impacted the essential parts of the phenomenon as I found them, and how might this have changed how connected the results were to the literature? These were questions I continued to come back to, and I still don't think I have a firm answer, but thinking about this study, conducted with students who did have positive biolegal experiences, would likely yield very different results.

In D'Augelli's lifespan model, a descendant of Cass' model, an important part of development is that the individual needs to reintegrate into their family of origin (D'Augelli, 1994). After living with the experiences of the participants, I would challenge that. In fact, part of queer identity development could be that individuals need to not reintegrate into their biolegal family, as the lifespan theory suggests, but should instead form a family of other queer people that supports them as they continue to develop and understand their queerness as a part of who they are. While acceptance from biolegal families is perhaps more likely now than it might have

been when the theory was developed almost thirty years ago, the lived experiences of the participants of the current study do not suggest that reconnecting to their biolegal families is a necessity, and in fact has the potential to cause a negative impact on their emotional and physical wellbeing. This recalls the experience that Moira had about wishing to stay with her roommates once the pandemic occurred, because it was safer for her than being at home.

Wren's idea of roleplaying different gender roles through Dungeons & Dragons was an idea that has continued to stick in my brain ever since it came up in their first interview. By being part of a world that is fantasy with people that they trusted, Wren and their roommates and friends were able to see how a certain identity or using certain pronouns felt. As I was rereading my literature review, I connected this idea of roleplaying to the idea of how students "deconstruct and reconstruct external influences" (Abes & Kasch, 2007) that is a part of the model of queer authorship. Rather than developing internal meaning making structures to deal with external influences, Wren instead used the role-playing game to simultaneously deconstruct their identity as a cisgender female while also constructing potential identities and pronouns that they lead to them to identify as non-binary and to use they/them pronouns.

While I did not specifically ask the students I worked with to provide a definition of what family or chosen family meant to them, looking back at our conversations made me understand that, as Bedford and Blieszner (1997) suggested, the definition of family is subjective. While some students (like Drusilla and Alek) drew clear distinctions between their biolegal families, the other participants viewed the designation between biolegal and chosen families as much more flexible. That flexibility seemed to depend on a variety of factors, the most prominent of which was how supportive or not supportive a student's biolegal family was at any given time. If a parent or guardian seemed to dismiss a student's desire to stay with their chosen family

during the early days of the pandemic, then the students would rely more strongly on their chosen family and distance themselves from their biolegal family.

As Ballweg (1979) described chosen family as coming out of shared membership in a group, such as a fraternity or sorority, it made me reflect on the very different experiences that Jink and Alek had with their Greek involvement during their undergraduate years. Jinx described her sorority sisters as family, highlighting the poignant and illustrative example of how they would provide food for others in the group who did not have the financial means to buy food. Doing so nurtured Jinx's development and connection to her sisters, as well as supporting and contributing to her development as a queer person. Alek came to their fraternity experience seeking connections with other male identified students, especially because they had experienced emotional abuse from their father during their teenage years. The experience of being in a fraternity, however, ended up causing Alek to feel isolated and unhappy, and they soon left. So, while Ballweg's assertion that chosen family comes out of shared group membership, the experiences of Alek and Jinx illustrate that the quality of those shared group experiences and memberships is important in determining and building a chosen family.

Viewing the findings of the current study through the concept of heternormativity as mentioned in the development of queer authorship (Abes & Kasch, 2007), also yields interesting parallels. The forming and identification of a chosen family by queer people resists the notion of heteronormativity and the idea that a male and female family with biological children is the norm against which other families should be judged, and fails to recognize the role that power and privilege have in making family structures that go against this norm as something less than and not as worthy of consideration as the "normal" family. Challenging this ideal notion of a family

makes the chosen family a powerful tool in dismantling the idea of a ‘normal” family as the gold standard.

The idea of a chosen family as a source of support, particularly in times of adversity, recalls the literature on chosen families that comes from the ballroom culture movement of the 1980s in New York City (Taylor 2021). The houses that were formed as a part of this culture were chosen families that were composed primarily of queer people, but these houses also served as important sources of support, both financially and emotionally, for queer people who had not had that support from their biolegal families. This was seen in the interviews as family members supporting each other through food and housing insecurity, as well as in times of emotional and financial turmoil.

The findings of the current study also agree with Weston (1991) and Braithwaite et al (2010) by showing that chosen families are “real” families. It is easy to attempt to define what a chosen family is by what it is not (or how it differs from a biolegal family structure), but that only serves to see chosen families as deficit based. It is not an accident that the original name for chosen families in the literature was fictive kin. As the current study suggests, these family structures have unique strengths, and were developed and are maintained in a variety of different ways. Appreciating these families for what they are, instead of what they are not, is an important step for higher education to take in order to support and appreciate their uniqueness and capacity to support queer students.

A surprising connection I found to the literature was in how the journeys of these participants to find their chosen family happened (and will likely continue to happen long after this study is completed) because of rejection by their biolegal families. There were times during Alek’s interview when they were speaking about the physical abuse inflicted on them by their

biolegal parents that I found both me and them to be crying at the enormity of those experiences, and how they continued to impact how Alek looked for connection, while also being afraid of how those connections could manifest in abuse, as they had seen happen with members of their biolegal family.

It is also important to consider the findings of the current study in the historical context of how queer students have been treated and addressed in the history of higher education. Harvard and other institutions of higher education had secret courts, where even associating with students who were known to be homosexual could get a student suspended or expelled, and was also likely to lead to rejection from the students biolegal family. If institutions continue to have a focus and definition of family as constructed by marriage or blood relations, queer students will be deprived of the chance to build a family on campus that has the potential to serve as instrumental to their growth and development.

Implications for Practice

As a person who came into this study with fifteen years of experience as a student affairs professional, it is important to consider how this study can inform student affairs practice. Student affairs on many college campuses is a division that is frequently expected to do the impossible and make significant changes in the lives of students, often with decreased financial and human resources. Even with those resource issues, I present some ideas here about how student affairs practices can incorporate and address chosen families in a way that is meaningful and supportive of queer students.

At an orientation panel I sat on during the summer I was writing the final chapters of this document, a colleague of mine gave incoming students the advice that “staying connected to your family at home is the most important thing you can do to give yourself the best chance of

being successful here". When I sat down to journal not long after that panel, I began to think about how higher education institutions encourage family involvement. Many campuses now have an office or individual charged with parent and family programs. Similar to my colleague, these individuals no doubt see great value in students staying connected with their families, and with families being connected with the institution. But, implicitly or explicitly, the meaning of the word "family" when referred to in this context almost certainly refers to biolegal family, and its assumed inherent goodness.

I hope that professionals in the field of student affairs specifically, and higher education more broadly, recognize that making assumptions about the goodness of biolegal families is sorely in need of reconsideration. The definition of what family looks like for students entering higher education is broader and much different and encompassing than who their parents and guardians and siblings are. While some students may have familial obligations that are culturally bound and central to their sense of self, and others may have positive experiences with their biolegal families, it is inaccurate to think and promote the idea that staying connected to one's biolegal family is essential or important for success. I think of the reaction of some of my participants if they had heard this statement. While not all of them experienced abuse at the hands of their biolegal families, all of them looked to their experience of being a part of a chosen family as a way to redefine family in a positive context after having negative experiences with their biolegal families. What would it mean for these students to have family programs or family weekends where chosen family members (perhaps from high school, home, or other institutions) be able to visit, just as biolegal families are able to do? Given the decreasing budgets and funding of many higher education institutions, while planning an entirely new weekend or set of programs for chosen family may not be possible, integrating the ideas of family as more than

biolegal, and also has the potential to make others in the campus environment (even other queer students, staff, and faculty who have not encountered or been made aware of the term) aware of what a chosen family is and the meaning that it can hold for students and others.

I don't think simply ending the practice of assuming goodness in biolegal families is enough though. Professionals in student affairs should also work with other administrators on campus to bring awareness and legitimization to chosen family structures that students may come to campus with, and foster abilities for family connections to be made once students arrive on campus. This could mean a variety of creative programming ideas, such as chosen family nights in campus dining halls, creating courses in different disciplines that discuss chosen family and how it impacts society, as well as consulting with students about ways to bring about knowledge and acceptance of this phenomenon for campus communities. While higher education is sometimes slow to change, making changes like this are important in order to allow institutions to better serve the needs of their students and society as a whole.

Every higher education institution requires students to submit information regarding an emergency contact, or someone to reach out to when a student experiences a crisis situation and family needs to be involved. While this individual is normally a biolegal family member, what could this look like if the forms and policies involved allowed students to include people other than their biological family members as emergency contacts? I think of my participant Evan here, and how he told me that his parents and siblings would be the last people he would go to in a crisis. For some of my participants, and for other queer students on campuses throughout the country, having the option of having a chosen family member as the person to be contacted in an emergency could be a great relief and source of comfort, while involving biolegal family members could serve to make crisis or emergency situations more stressful and complicated.

Chosen family also can be benefitted by campus housing looking at different options for students to live and gather while in the residence halls. For instance, having more gender neutral housing options for queer students can serve to foster meaningful connections, if staff are intentional about which students they put in the spaces. For example, what if the (sometimes infamous) roommate questionnaire included a question about what a particular student is looking for in a roommate relationship. While some may be looking only for people to share the space who are clean and not loud, others, similar to some of the participants in this study, may come to campus looking for deeper connections and maybe have the opportunity to live with people who share their identities for the first time in their lives.

More broadly, this study, combined with my experience as a professional in the field, that a focus on students remaining connected to their biolegal families once they arrive on campus does not always lead to greater success and increased mental health for queer students. For example, in the example noted above, at a recent orientation panel that I sat on, several participants emphasized that for entering students, one of the most important things that they could do to be successful was to be in contact with their familial support system. Again, thinking of this in light of the current study, remaining connected to the biolegal family has the potential to cause greater feelings of stress and anxiety, rather than the positive feelings that the professionals at orientation intended.

As an entity, higher education is frequently slow to change and looks at many students (students of color, queer students, first generation students) as having some type of deficit that higher education exists to solve. Chosen family is not different or unique in this regard, as many would define it by comparing it to how it is not similar to a biolegal family structure. When reviewing and thinking about what I learned that I would impart to other professionals in the

field, I kept coming back to this idea. Even though many of the laws that govern higher education define family in a very narrow and heterosexist way, it is important for the profession of student affairs to recognize this phenomenon and those who experience it for the uniqueness and importance of it, and the unique contributions it can make to a campus and campus community, and stop viewing an already marginalized population from a deficit perspective.

Limitations and Future Research

Although I did not ask directly about how the pandemic impacted the experience of the chosen family phenomenon for participants, it was nonetheless a part of each interview I conducted, as the majority of participants had all or most of their classes still online, and had not been to the campus that they attended in over a year. In future studies about queer student and how they experience the chosen family phenomenon, it would be interesting to see what the experience is like for students who began college in an online environment due to pandemic restrictions, and how they built and experienced chosen family once they went to campus and experienced a more traditional (if likely still modified) traditional college experience. Would there be the same desire for connection and family building as there was with the participants in the current study? It is possible that the need and desire could be even stronger with queer students who had their experiences on campus placed online and then moved to a more traditional setting.

An intriguing topic in my defense of this dissertation was the question of what the difference is between a friend and a chosen family member. This wasn't something I had considered in the course of designing and collecting phenomenological material for the current study, but it would be an interesting topic to consider in a future study. While I talked about identification of family members, it did not seem from my research that the distinction between

friend and chosen family member was one that was similar for the people I spoke with. It would be interesting, however, to see if a future study that focused distinctly on how a chosen family member relationship develops from acquaintance to friend to family member was able to contribute ideas that the process was potentially more of a linear one than my findings suggest it might be.

When I was reflecting on my recruitment materials, and what I wanted the study to look like, I began to recognize that the students would be likely to respond to my call would be students who had strong chosen families, and that these students had had negative or insufficient experiences with their biolegal families. However, it may be the case that chosen family can be additive to a biolegal family, and provide complimentary sources of support that can help queer students develop mentally and socially into their ideal selves. Additionally, future research could help uncover if members of someone's biolegal family could also be members of one's chosen family. While the literature and the current study have given some level of understanding as to the vastness of what chosen family can be, future research on the ideas mentioned above has the potential to deepen that understanding even more.

As a developing researcher, my lack of experience with interviewing participants, and particularly in interviewing about a topic I have experience with and am very passionate about, was a limitation that would not be present as I conduct further research on chosen families. When looking at my transcripts (many of which I have almost memorized), I could see a clear difference in the quality of the later interviews when compared to the first ones. This study being the culmination of a multi-year doctoral journey, in addition to my identity as a first generation college student, led me to experience anxiety and trepidation with the first interviews. I was determined to do things right. This showed up in interviews as me doing a lot more talking

than participants, and skipping ahead of the important rapport building that is a foundational technique of good interviewing.

Concluding Thoughts

When the many good meaning and supportive people in my life asked me what the biggest obstacle to overcome in this process has been, I gave many different answers. Upon reflection of the process in total, however, I realize that the biggest hurdle I had to overcome was myself. I remember the countless hours spent staring at this document and not being able to write anything, for fear it would not sound doctoral enough, or was not honoring the participants I worked with. I kept repeating to myself that I could not edit a blank page, and that something was better than nothing, but it was only with small victories, and my refusal to let my past win, that I come to the place where I have finished this journey in a way that it authentic to me, to my participants, and to the family members who continue to amaze with me their love, support, and guidance.

This process has been the hardest one of my life, has taken longer than it should, and may not be of value to anyone but myself and my committee. However, I recognize that as an exercise in perseverance, it has been a success. Thinking and writing about what family means for queer students has allowed me to understand what family means for me. And, I think for me, family means acceptance, in a variety of ways. I accept that my biolegal family comes from a different perspective than I do, and that having some contact with them is important and necessary. I accept that there are members of my chosen family who are no longer people I want in my life. I accept that family sometimes means conflict, and that sometimes in any family being right is not the same as doing the right thing. My greatest hope is that someone reads this

study, and gets to a greater sense of acceptance of who they are, and what family means for them.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview One

- What pseudonym would you like to use?

Life History

- What feelings come to mind when you think about your biological family?
- How has your experience with your biological family been impacted by your queerness?
- In what ways has coming to college changed your relationship with your biological family?
- When do you first learn about the term "chosen family"?
- How has your chosen family impacted your college experience?

Current Experience

- How did you identify the members of your chosen family?
- In what ways do you connect with your chosen family since the pandemic?
- What specific roles do the members of your chosen family play?
- Tell me how chosen family supports your queer identity.

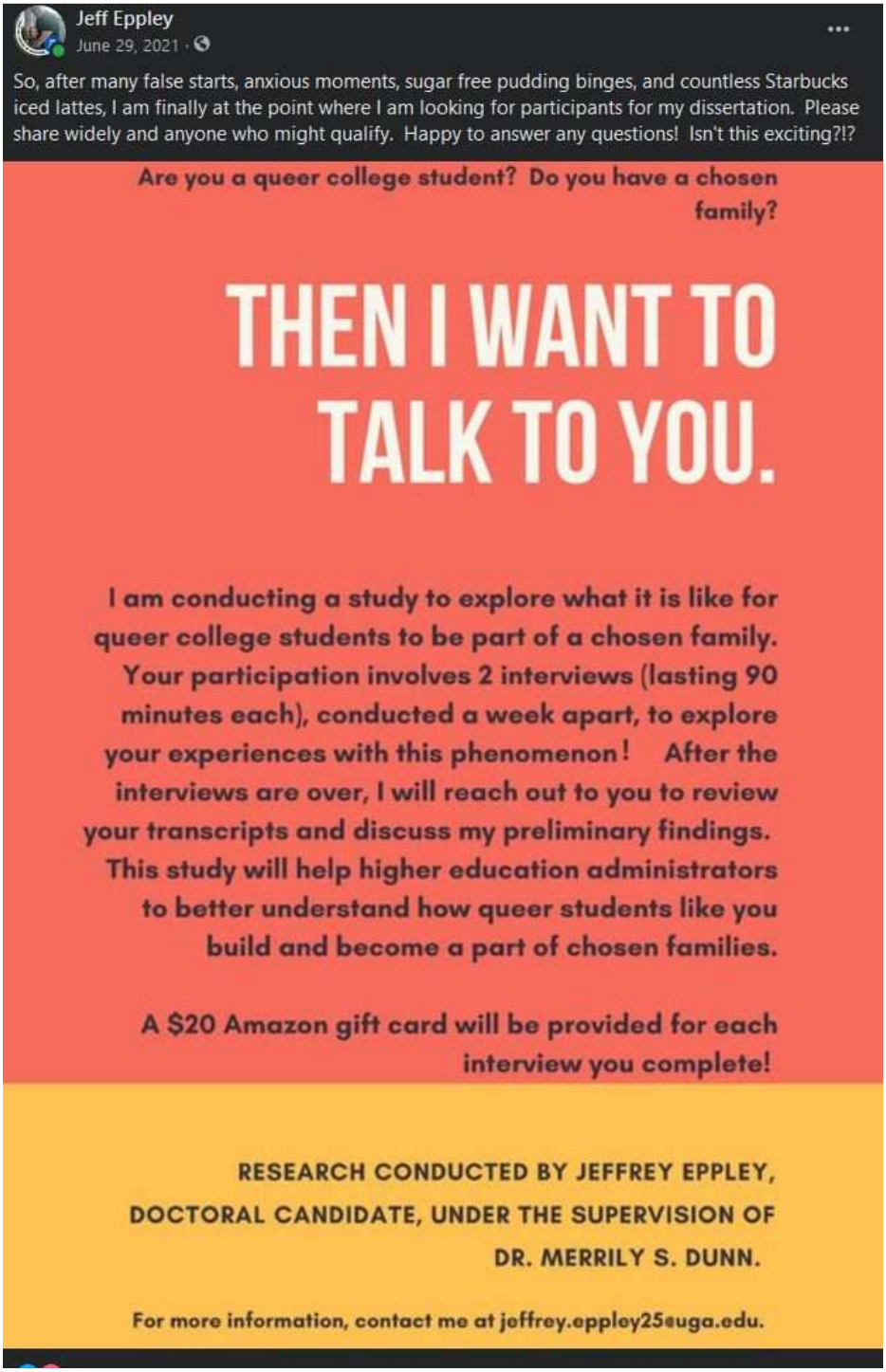
Interview Two

Meaning Making

- When you think about your chosen family members and how they have impacted your life, what stands out to you?
- How would you describe your chosen family to someone who didn't know them?
- How have your chosen family members helped you navigate the challenges of the pandemic?

In what ways does your chosen family impact how you view your major/field of study?

Appendix B: Facebook recruitment post



Appendix C: Twitter recruitment post