NARRATIVES OF (IN)VALIDATION: EXPERIENCES OF GAY/QUEER CISGENDER

MEN IN COLLEGE

by

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(Under the Direction of Laura A. Dean)

ABSTRACT

Despite increases in institutional supports for queer-spectrum college students over the past 20 years (Garvey et al., 2017; Pryor, 2018), this population – which includes gay/queer cisgender men – still perceives campuses to be less safe and welcoming than their straight peers (Greathouse et al., 2018; Pryor, 2018). Additionally, gay/queer cisgender men are virtually invisible to college administrators studying retention, persistence, and graduation (RPG) rates for this population (Garvey, 2020). These men are at risk for dropping out because of the obstacles they face, though many persist and graduate despite barriers and a negative campus environment. Validation, as discussed by Laura Rendón (1994), is key in supporting RPG for gay/queer cisgender men, yet research on the experiences of this student group related to validation is sparse. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand where and how gay/queer cisgender men experienced validation on campus as well as how they overcame any challenges they may have faced because of their sexual identity. With social constructivism serving as the research paradigm and narrative inquiry as its research design, Rendón's (1994) validation theory served as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's (1995) human ecology theory aided as a secondary framework to connect

proxies within the campus environment to validating experiences. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and organized into themes within and across the participant narratives ultimately constructed. The research findings uncovered that the men found validation from faculty, peers, participation in queer-friendly student organizations, and institutional supports such as LGBTQ resource centers and Safe Zone programs. Conversely, the men found invalidation primarily from the general student body, organizations they perceived as unwelcoming toward LGBTQ students, and campus spaces they found to be hyper-masculine, such as the stadium, rec center, Greek Row, and residence halls. Recommendations are included to provide university faculty and staff with insight into how to better serve and meet the needs of this student population in order to support their retention, persistence, and path to graduation, keeping in mind that no student population is homogeneous and not all students experience validation similarly.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the gay and queer men who participated in this study as well as their queer-spectrum college peers across the country in hopes that they will feel welcomed, affirmed – validated – in order to present themselves authentically and unapologetically in college and in life. I also dedicate this dissertation to those who have struggled during college because of their sexual identity, past, present, or future in support of their strength and perseverance. It does indeed get better.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The year 1998 appeared to be pivotal for sexual minority students on college campuses in the United States. This marked the first year lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) students' perceptions of campus climate shifted in a positive direction (Garvey et al., 2017). Garvey et al. (2017) pointed toward sociohistorical events, particularly the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, as shaping sexual minority college students' perceptions of their campus climate. Matthew Shepard's murder shed light on challenges faced by LGBTQ students across the country and perhaps stimulated colleges and universities to implement or augment services, resources, and policies to support LGBTQ students in their pursuit of a college education.

Partially encouraged by student activism, institutional support for LGBTQ students grew through the late 1990s and on into the 2000s as more campuses established LGBTQ resource centers (Garvey et al., 2017). Pryor (2018) described the expansion of campus support for LGBTQ students over the past decade with an increase in services, resources, and spaces designed to ensure institutions are welcoming and supportive of their sexual minority student population. Garvey et al. (2017) explained how other sociohistorical events such as the passage of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009 influenced the lived experiences of LGBTQ students in positive ways. Recent Supreme Court federal rulings legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide in 2015 (Chapel, 2015) and protecting LGBTQ individuals from workplace discrimination in 2020 (Totenberg, 2020) serve as additional examples of events that likely positively influenced

the narratives of sexual minority students. In part because of these national events, evidence has suggested that LGBTQ students' perceptions of campus climate have improved as more recent graduates have more positive perceptions of their climate versus peers who graduated earlier (Garvey et al., 2017).

While the past three decades have seen an increase in the visibility of LGTBQ students on campus and have given rise to more inclusive policies and programs, it is unclear if these measures have facilitated more positive outcomes for sexual minority students (Rankin et al., 2019). Despite the progress made and the more positive perceptions of campus climate for sexual minority students, research indicates that college and university environments are not welcoming to LGBTQ students, some of whom perceive their campus to be less inviting in comparison to their straight peers (Pryor, 2018). Within this discussion of campus climate and environment for sexual minority students, it is key to highlight that the LGBTQ population is not a unitary group. The LGBTQ acronym encompasses several groups (to be discussed below), all of which experience their campus environment differently. Individuals within each group also have unique experiences with their campus environment. Though each segment of this population could warrant its own study, the current study will center around gay/queer cisgender men (also to be discussed below) due to limited research on this group of students. Additionally, I as the researcher share the identity of gay/queer cisgender man with this group, which sparks my curiosity about how these men experience their college environment.

Statement of the Problem

Garvey and Inkelas (2012), studying lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students, maintained that they perceive their campus climate to be hostile and chilly, which may lead them to conceal their sexual identity. They also shared that LGB students experience more incidents of

harassment, assault, and intimidation versus their straight peers. In their review of several recent national higher education student surveys, Greathouse et al. (2018) concluded that queer-spectrum students reported their university as safe and welcoming at lower rates than their heterosexual peers and that they felt less valued by their institution as an individual. The authors revealed the greatest disparity between queer-spectrum and heterosexual students when asked whether they felt that their sexual orientation was respected on campus, with 35% fewer queer-spectrum students responding positively. From these findings, it should not be surprising that only 55.4% of queer-spectrum students reported a sense of belonging on their campus (Greathouse et al., 2018).

Rankin et al. (2019) also examined national survey data from 2016 and 2017 related to queer-spectrum students across the United States and shared some of the additional challenges this student population faces, some of which could directly or indirectly stem from their negative experiences on campus. Queer-spectrum students reported experiencing feelings of isolation on campus, sadness or depression, below average emotional health, self-injury, suicide ideation, drug and alcohol use, eating disorders, roommate difficulties, and financial challenges at higher rates than their heterosexual peers (Greathouse et al., 2018; Rankin et al., 2019). Garvey (2020) further explained the financial challenges that queer-spectrum students may face as a result of being ostracized from their families due to their sexual identity. How might a negative campus climate and these aforementioned obstacles affect the persistence and success of queer-spectrum students? Rankin et al. revealed that queer-spectrum students were more likely to submit late coursework than their heterosexual peers as well as that they were more likely to stop out of school for a semester because they felt that they did not belong on campus. According to

Greathouse et al. (2018) and Rankin et al., queer-spectrum students considered dropping out of school at nearly twice the rate of their straight peers.

If campus administrators understand that sexual minority students are at risk for dropping out, a question then becomes: How do they identify this population in order to intervene and encourage persistence? This presents another challenge. The aggregation of data from national higher education surveys found in the previously mentioned research by Greathouse et al. (2018) and Rankin et al. (2019) points to the relatively recent addition of data collection related to sexual identity within these instruments. However, sexual identity is largely absent from institutional data collection, with a few exceptions, and is also not included on the common application shared by colleges and universities across the country (Garvey, 2020). Garvey (2020) explained how institutional data informs the allocation of resources and development of policy and enables campus administrators to connect students with resources and track their success, while Rankin et al. discussed the negative impacts from the lack of such data collection. Consequently, the lack of data collection for queer-spectrum students means that they are practically invisible to campus administrators and ignored in student success initiatives as a student population in need of support and intervention, which results in "negative consequences for building community, sharing resources, and examining differences or trends in retention across sexual and gender identities" (Garvey, 2020, p. 437).

Given the negative campus experiences and obstacles some sexual minority students (including the gay/queer cisgender male population considered in the current study) encounter as a result of their sexual identity, it is evident that these students are at risk of dropping out. While some do just that, others persist and graduate despite the challenges they may face. Additionally, institutions do not know who these students are or how many of them are at risk. Institutions do

not maintain figures related to retention, persistence, and graduation as they might for other student populations due to the lack of data collection. This leads to the question of what causes some gay/queer cisgender men to fail and others to succeed at their institutions. More importantly, what drives their persistence and success and how can educators facilitate this?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation during their college career. Students experience academic and interpersonal validation when they receive support and encouragement from faculty, staff, peers, and others, both in and out of the classroom (Rendón, 1994). The concept of validation as detailed in validation theory developed by Laura Rendón (1994) will be discussed in greater detail later within this chapter. This qualitative study will employ narrative inquiry and utilize a social constructivist paradigm to reconstruct the stories of seven men related to validation throughout their undergraduate experience. This study strives to understand where these men experienced validation on campus, whether through a specific institutional agent, office, or peer group, as well as how they experienced validation through practices or interactions with faculty, staff, or peers. In addition, this study aims to understand where the men may have experienced invalidation. Through sharing their stories, this study seeks to develop an understanding of where and how these gay/queer cisgender men found the support to overcome challenges during their collegiate experience in order to persist and succeed despite obstacles they may have faced. In the event that they did not encounter any barriers, this study seeks to understand how these men were able to sustain or maintain their self-efficacy to succeed.

Theoretical Foundations

The stories of the men will be analyzed using Rendón's (1994) validation theory as a primary framework. Bronfrenbrenner's (1995) human ecology theory will serve as a secondary framework to connect the participants' experiences within their campus environment to validation, or invalidation, as the case may be.

Validation Theory

Validation theory, as developed by Laura Rendón (1994), posited that students who expressed doubt in their ability to be successful in college were transformed into confident, motivated learners who believed in their ability to succeed through validating practices found within their environment. On campus, validation is provided by faculty, staff, and peers, while off campus, it can also be provided by friends and family. Rendón indicated that there are two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. The former happens primarily in the classroom through interactions with faculty and centers on a student's ability to succeed academically. The latter occurs primarily out of class with peer interactions serving as a major driver, though faculty, staff, and family can also play a role in providing interpersonal validation. This type of validation seeks to assist the student with social integration and a sense of belonging at their institution, which ultimately supports a student's belief in their ability to succeed in college. Rendón developed a four-point learning model for institutions, primarily for faculty and staff, to consider in implementing practices that seek to support academic and interpersonal validation both in and out of the classroom.

Validation theory emerged out of Rendón's (1994) research with students who were not part of the traditional established population within higher education – White men. They posited that students who were not traditionally part of the establishment, such as students of color, first-

generation students, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and adult learners were alienated by the focus of higher education on privileged White men and as such, doubted their ability to succeed. Validation theory was developed as a means to transform students from diverse backgrounds into students who believed that they could succeed in college. Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011) and Hurtado et al. (2011) later discussed the possibility of applying validation theory more broadly to other marginalized populations who might face obstacles during their pursuit of a college education and might doubt their ability to succeed, including sexual minority students. The current study will utilize Rendón's theory as framework for understanding how and where gay/queer cisgender men find the validation they need within their campus environment to overcome adversity and develop the self-confidence they need to persist and succeed in higher education.

Human Ecology Theory

While the current study will employ validation theory as the primary framework for examining the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men related to their success in college, it is important to remember that validating practices as described by Rendón (1994) occur within the campus environment. According to human ecology theory, human development is essentially a result of what Bronfenbrenner (1995) termed proximal processes, which are interactions between an individual and the people, symbols, and objects within their environment. These processes become increasingly complex over extended time periods and their magnitude varies as a result of the individual's immediate environment where development is occurring, their biopsychological characteristics, and attributes of the developmental outcomes being considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Renn and Arnold (2003) specifically discussed the application of Bronfenbrenner's human ecology theory and its process-person-context time (PPCT) model to

college student development when they examined the impacts of peer culture on students. The current study will examine the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation, which occur through proximal processes happening primarily within students' more immediate campus environment. The following chapter will provide additional information on proximal processes and human ecology theory as related to this study.

Research Questions

The current study seeks to answer the following research questions that are rooted in validation theory as developed by Laura Rendón (1994):

1. Where do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience?

2. How do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience?

3. How do gay/queer cisgender men overcome the challenges they encounter within their campus environment in order to believe in their ability to succeed in college?

These research questions are anchored in a social constructivist paradigm as they seek to collect and understand the perspectives of gay/queer cisgender men related to validation during their undergraduate experience. The current study aimed to construct narratives and emergent themes related to validation to better understand how institutional agents can support and facilitate the success of this student population.

Delimitations

The current study sought to understand the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men related to validation on campus. It is important to remember that the experiences shared in this study are unique to a small group of students on one campus in a particular part of the country.

While these experiences do not represent those of all gay/queer cisgender college men across the country, the themes generated within this study may inform the practice of faculty, staff, and administrators who serve and support this student population.

Additionally, it is key to understand that the life experiences of its members are not homogenous when studying any population. Sexual identity is one aspect of an individual's identity along with race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, being able-bodied, and religious affiliation, along with a list of identities that intersect and create a unique, lived experience for each individual. In particular, Garvey et al. (2019) suggested that the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender make the lived experiences of queer people of color much more complex and that they often have challenging decisions to make about how to express their marginalized identities in society and on campus. Queer people of color reported that they felt tensions or conflicts while negotiating their racial, sexual, and/or gender identities and that being out was sometimes viewed as a privilege they did not have (Garvey et al., 2019). Thus, it is imperative to remember that not all students holding minoritized identities experience their environment – and validation – in the same way, especially when considering the multiple dimensions of an individual student's identity. While recognizing that not all cisgender gay/queer men are the same, this study seeks to examine their commonalities in hopes of shedding light on how they experience validation within their college environment.

Lastly, as a White, gay, cisgender man who came out in the early 1990s in a relatively conservative part of the country, my experiences with college and coming out are as equally unique as those of the study participants. Their narratives will be interpreted through the lens of my own experiences and assumptions which will likely influence and shape this study, though my intent is to honor the voices and stories of the participants as much as possible.

Definitions

Sexual Identity and Gender Identity

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans* individuals are often lumped into the category of "LGBT" or a similar grouping of letters, yet it is important to understand the distinction between sexual orientation or identity and gender identity. Garvey, BrckaLorenz, et al. (2018) summarized that sexual orientation relates to how an individual is emotionally or sexually attracted to others, while gender identity relates to how an individual perceives their own gender within their own mind and body. The terms "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual" are tied to sexual identity along with many others (asexual, pansexual, etc.), while "transgender," or "trans*", is an umbrella term that refers to the gender identity of those who do not ascribe to their assigned gender at birth (Linley et al., 2016). Linley et al. (2016) explained that the term "cisgender" describes a person whose gender at birth aligns with their internal gender identity. The current study is focused on cisgender individuals – who were born male, who identify internally as male.

Descriptors for the LGBTQ Student Population

Literature discussing the experiences of sexual and/or gender minority students typically aggregates them into one category such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer or questioning (LGBQ), or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ), among others. Some studies refer to this population as "sexual minority students" (Woodford et al., 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015) or as "queer-spectrum students," because it is more inclusive of various aspects of sexual identity and reflective of its fluidity (Garvey, 2020; Garvey, Squire, et al. 2018; Greathouse et al., 2018). When referencing previous research on the experiences of this population, the current study will attempt to use the identifier used by the original author(s) whether it is "queer-spectrum," "LGBQ," or "sexual minority"

students. Overall, it is challenging to describe these students collectively, given that each grouping could be studied on its own, particularly trans* students, whose challenges are typically much more unique and complex than those of cisgender students. As discussed previously in this chapter, the current study will explore the narratives of gay/queer cisgender men in order to narrow the focus on a segment of the LGBTQ student population.

Gay/Queer

Rankin et al. (2019) discussed the shift in terminology from "homosexual" and "gay" to "queer" in the first decade of the 21st century, with the latter intended to be more inclusive of the fluidity of sexuality and gender. In discussing the use of terminology to describe the population involved in this study, it is important to understand that queer-spectrum students of color are less likely to adopt the terms "gay" and "bisexual" since these identifiers are viewed as White social constructs (Garvey, et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2019). As such, the authors propose use of the term "queer" to be more inclusive of people of color. Additionally, as the understanding of sexual identity has evolved to become more fluid, the term "gay" may not necessarily reflect the fluidity of sexuality to include men who consider themselves to be pansexual, asexual, bisexual, non-heterosexual, or other identities not presented here (Rankin et al., 2019). Though the term "queer" has been reclaimed and embraced by some in the LGBTQ community starting with the AIDS crisis in the 1990s, some men (particularly of older generations) may not use the term "queer" to describe themselves as it has held a derogatory or demeaning connotation for them (Cheves, 2017). Recognizing that some men use "gay," while others use "queer," while still others may use both depending on the situation, this study will use "gay/queer" to describe the men involved in this study.

Outness

Most people are familiar with the term "coming out," which refers to a person's decision to partially or completely divulge their sexual or gender identity to others. When someone says that they are "out," it means that they are living and expressing their identity openly. Garvey (2020) defined "outness" as the extent to which someone discloses their sexual and gender identity to others and maintained that it is tied into their identity development process. While Garvey asserted that differences in "outness" exist across racial identities, it is important to point out that students' perceptions of their college campus climate can also affect their "outness" as can numerous other factors.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism refers to the notion that heterosexuality is the only recognized and legitimate sexual orientation. As a result, the majority of institutional norms, policies, and culture are rooted in this ideology, which ultimately affords privilege or advantage to heterosexual individuals and ignores the needs and experiences of those with other sexual orientations, pushing them to the margins (Garvey, BrckaLorenz et al., 2018).

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Significance of Study

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The collection of data through national surveys regarding gay/queer cisgender men, and sexual minority students, is a relatively recent phenomenon, while data collection at the institutional level regarding these populations is minimal. In light of this, this student population has been relatively invisible to campus administrators and there is very little information about the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men related to persistence and student success, particularly qualitative in nature. Rendón (1994) initially applied validation theory to populations that had been traditionally underrepresented in the academy and that may have faced additional

barriers to their success, such as students of color, first-generation students, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and adult learners. Rendón, Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011), and Hurtado et al. (2011), discussed the applicability of validation theory to other marginalized populations, including sexual minority students. However, there are few studies that utilize validation theory to examine the experiences and successes of sexual minority students, and gay/queer cisgender men in particular. The current study aims to research an understudied population for which there is very little qualitative or quantitative data at the institutional level as well as to research this population within the framework of validation theory, for which there is also limited research. The goal is to understand the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation in order to understand what drives their persistence and success in college.

Summary

Over the past 20 years, sexual minority students' (including gay/queer cisgender men) perceptions of their campus environment have become increasingly positive (Garvey et al., 2017). A number of institutions have increased resources, services, and programs for this population of students while also updating policies and mission statements to be more inclusive and less heterosexist. Despite this progress, collegiate gay/queer cisgender men still experience harassment and discrimination, which leads them to perceive their campus climate in a negative light. On top of this, gay/queer cisgender men are largely invisible to campus administrators, particularly when studying retention, persistence, and graduation rates for this population due to the lack of institutional data collection. In light of the obstacles that gay/queer cisgender men may face in college, they are at risk for dropping out of college – yet many persist and are successful learners despite these barriers and what they may perceive as a negative campus environment.

Rendón (1994) posited that students who initially doubted their ability to succeed in college, particularly students traditionally underrepresented on college campuses, were transformed into confident, motivated, and engaged learners who believed in their ability to succeed in college. What led these students to believe in themselves was validation, both academic and interpersonal, in and out of the classroom. The current study used Rendón's validation theory as a framework to understand where and how gay/queer cisgender men find support within their college environment, leading them to persist and succeed in college.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Given the marginalization experienced by queer-spectrum students on college campuses and the numerous challenges they face, validation theory appears fitting as a framework for facilitating a sense of belonging and self-efficacy for academic success. Though Rendón's (1994) original research on validation theory briefly mentioned sexual orientation as well as gays and lesbians, it did not examine how validation theory might apply to a wider variety of student backgrounds, particularly in relation to sexual and gender identity, able-bodiedness, and religion, among various others (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Their original research also did not consider the intersection of students' multiple identities, some of which are invisible to everyone except the student. Nonetheless, it is clear that validation theory remains relevant in the 21st century due to the continuing shift in student demographics, along with the increasing enrollment and visibility of traditionally marginalized populations.

Hurtado et al. (2011) advocated for examining how students from other underrepresented social identity groups, including low income, part-time, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ), and disabled students experience validation, in addition to how it advances student success at different types of institutions. Employing validation as a framework may illuminate ways to reduce the marginalization and educational inequities faced by various populations and spark the creation of learning environments that empower and lead all students to success (Hurtado et al., 2011). This chapter seeks to outline Rendón's (1994) validation theory along with its foundations, explore how this theory has been generally applied to college

environments within the last decade, and consider how sexual minority students might experience validation – or invalidation – on campus. In light of the scarcity of research on validation related to this population, this chapter will also consider "proxies" within the college environment that provide support and encouragement for sexual minority students, which are similar to validating practices.

Validation Theory

Rendón's (1994) validation theory was conceived during the mid-1990s when colleges and universities started experiencing a shift in student demographics, which has continued well into the 21st century. At the time, enrollment increasingly became majority female, with more adult learners and first-generation students, while traditionally marginalized groups, such as African-American, Asian, and Latinx students, became the majority at some institutions. Rendón explained that higher education was initially designed by – and for – privileged White men and has continued to function in that manner. They maintained that students who do not fit the traditional college profile felt alienated and intimidated by this environment, challenging "traditional values, assumptions, and conventions which have long been entrenched in the academy" (Rendón, 1994, p. 33). In response, Rendón advocated for developing a new student learning and development model that is more responsive to the needs of the changing student population. This new learning and development model resulted in validation theory.

According to Rendón (1994), validation theory initially evolved out of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Leaning, and Assessment's Transition to College Project in the early 1990s. This project examined the impact of in-class and out-of-class experiences on college student learning, with an emphasis on how the latter influenced learning and retention, and sought to answer two questions related to how students become active participants in their

college communities and how students' out-of-class experiences impact classroom learning and educational goals (Rendón, 1994). Rendón described how the project used Astin's (1985) student involvement theory as one of its foundations, which theorized that student learning will increase as they spend more physical and psychological energy on tasks, people, and activities. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) research on the impacts of higher education on students over the previous 20 years was another foundation for the project which, in summary, posited that student learning, attitudes, values, and orientation about learning are shaped by informal interactions with faculty and peers outside of the classroom as well as by participation in extracurricular activities.

As Rendón (1994) worked on the Transition to College Project, they discovered that involvement was only one part of the equation for understanding student growth and learning. They uncovered that some non-traditional students who doubted their ability to succeed in college were suddenly transformed into motivated learners who believed in their ability to learn and be successful. Rendón theorized that the missing piece of the equation was validation, rooted in scholarship from Belenkey, Clinchy, Golderberger, and Tarule (1986), whose *Women's Ways of Knowing* examined women as learners and revealed that some women had a desire to feel validated after others made them feel less intelligent.

Key Concepts

Rendón's (1994) new model of student learning and development – validation theory – includes five key concepts related to students from diverse racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds. First, students initially expressed some doubt about their ability to be successful in college. Second, these students needed active intervention from others such as faculty, staff, peers, or family in order to successfully navigate the college experience. Third, success in their first year hinged on whether they became involved on campus or they received academic and/or

interpersonal validation from external agents, such as faculty, staff, peers, or family. Fourth, validation may be the missing link to facilitate student involvement. Lastly, validation may be a prerequisite for the occurrence of student involvement.

Rendón (1994) described validation as an enabling, confirming, and supportive developmental process where students feel they have self-worth and are capable learners. The more validation students receive, the richer their academic and interpersonal experience. Rendón conveyed that "What had transformed these students were incidents where some individual, either in- or out-of-class, took an active interest in them – when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment" (Rendón, 1994, pp. 43-44).

Validation Types

Rendón (1994) established the importance of students receiving academic and interpersonal validation by individuals both in-class and out-of-class. Academic in-class validation centers on a student's belief that they can succeed academically and occurs primarily through interactions with faculty. Validating practices include faculty providing students with extra assistance and meaningful feedback as well as being approachable and showing authentic concern. Another validating practice involves faculty designing learning experiences that encourage students to believe they are capable learners. Rendón described out-of-class academic validation as occurring when students turn to peers or family members for encouragement that they can succeed academically, particularly when academic validation is absent in the classroom.

Interpersonal validation facilitates personal and social adjustment both in and out of the classroom (Rendón, 1994) via informal interactions with faculty, staff, peers, family, and

significant others. For example, an instructor might provide affirmation for students as whole persons versus simply affirming them as students and might "build supporting, caring relationships with students and allow students to validate each other and to build a social network through activities such as study groups and sharing of cell phone numbers" (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 19). Rendón further highlighted that students in their initial study attending a large research university discussed the need for interpersonal validation in this environment.

A Model for Facilitating Validation

Rendón (1994) constructed a four-point model for facilitating validation on campus. The first involved training faculty and staff on the needs and strengths of diverse student populations as well as on their differences and similarities, in addition to developing their understanding of students' cultural histories and life experiences. The second included training faculty on how to validate students in and out of class, particularly early in their college experience, as well as on how to stay connected with students. The third related to fostering a validating classroom through removing learning barriers and instilling a sense of self-efficacy to succeed academically. The last point of the model involved fostering a therapeutic learning environment both inside and outside of the classroom. This involved several items such as faculty and staff reaching out to students to provide encouragement and support instead of waiting for students to contact them for assistance (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). As part of creating a therapeutic learning community, Rendón advocated that faculty and staff make themselves available to students in and out of class and recommended that they visit areas of campus frequented by students (such as dining halls and libraries) and attend campus events (such as football games) in order to cultivate deeper connections with students. Another piece of developing a therapeutic

learning community involved faculty and staff discussing personal, academic, and career goals with students and identifying ways for them to become more engaged so that they feel a stronger connection to the institution. Rendón emphasized the importance of the institution in promoting pride in culture, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity in facilitating validation.

Applications of Validation Theory

Literature applying validation theory to the LGBTQ community – or any smaller group of students within it – is sparse. The bulk of the literature written about validation theory since its inception has been predominantly focused on its application to the student populations originally discussed in Rendón's (1994) initial research. That is, previous research has explored students of color, primarily Latinx (e.g., Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Allen, 2016), in addition to focusing on students at two-year institutions (e.g., Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Zhang, 2016), students of lower socioeconomic status (e.g., Gildersleeve, 2011), and first-generation students (e.g., Coronella, 2018). It has also examined these students within contexts where they may benefit from additional support or where they have traditionally been underrepresented (e.g., Baber 2018; Zhang & Ozuna, 2015). Some of the literature also discussed the implementation of validation theory in efforts to improve retention and persistence at institutions with predominately marginalized student populations (e.g., Ekal et al., 2011; Ezeonu, 2011). While some studies utilized validation theory as the key theoretical framework for its design and specifically study validation, others employed validation theory as a means to solve a problem or answer a research question, while incorporating additional constructs as part of the theoretical framework. One such example of the latter is Emetu's (2019) study of African American male college students, which used validation theory as one of three frameworks to inform recommended practices and implementation of strategies to reduce barriers to persistence.

Since the current study seeks to examine the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation, the review of existing literature will primarily examine studies that utilize validation as their primary theoretical framework. Additionally, in the virtual absence of literature applying Rendón's (1994) theory to sexual minority student populations, I will examine how validation theory has been studied in other contexts to provide insight into how it might be useful as a framework for facilitating the success of queer-spectrum students, and more specifically gay/queer cisgender men.

Faculty and Validation

In Rendón's (1994) original writing introducing validation theory, it is abundantly clear how faculty play a critical role in facilitating academic and interpersonal validation in and out of the classroom for all students. More recently, Alcantar and Hernandez (2020) examined the impact of faculty validation on Latinx student experiences at a two-year Hispanic-serving institution in the Northeast. As we might expect, their findings highlighted the importance of faculty in providing academic and interpersonal validation both in and out of class in potentially increasing students' sense of belonging, persistence, and academic self-concept (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020). Similarly, Barnett (2011) explored the influence of faculty validation on students' sense of integration and intent to persist, specifically studying nontraditional students across age, gender, and race/ethnicity groups at an urban community college. Their findings implied that higher rates of faculty validation moderately to strongly predicted students' sense of integration across age, gender, and race/ethnicity, while significant, positive results were found in regard to predicting the persistence of Hispanic female students regardless of age (Barnett, 2011). The findings of Alcantar and Hernandez and Barnett confirmed the importance of faculty

validation in and out of the classroom for students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds in addition to first-generation students and adult learners, as initially asserted by Rendón (1994).

Staff and Validation

Though Rendón (1994) identified faculty validation as a major component of their theory, they also mentioned the role of institutional staff in providing validation. Coronella (2018) explored first-generation Latina students' experiences in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors with academic advisors utilizing validating advising practices. They considered that advisors and students co-construct validating advising practices – with some advisors initially viewing students from a colorblind or deficit perspective as a solvable problem, which could be viewed as a form of invalidation by students. Coronella highlighted the need to shift advising toward a more strengths-based perspective in order to support and empower this underrepresented group with persistence in STEM majors. Cornella also uncovered the invalidation found in viewing students from a deficit perspective as well as the idea that validating practices can be co-constructed with students, both of which have implications for faculty and staff working with various student populations.

Zhang (2016) investigated validation found within academic advising practices for international students at a Texas community college and its impact on academic and social adjustment. While international students found validation when advisors provided accurate information about course selection and helped them transition to a new culture and learning environment, they also found invalidation when advisors who provided them with inaccurate information were not knowledgeable of international student issues and experiences, and did not coordinate adequately with other campus offices (Zhang, 2016). While Zhang acknowledged that international students do not fit within the underrepresented populations initially discussed by

Rendón (1994), they revealed that these students experience lower self-efficacy and obstacles when navigating the U.S. higher education experience. The lack of understanding of international students' experiences found within Zhang's study underscored the importance of training for faculty/staff on the cultural experiences of students discussed by Rendón within their four-point model for facilitating validation.

Student Experiences with Validation

Similar to the goal of this study, other studies sought to understand experiences with validation on campus from the student perspective, uncovering where and how they found it. For example, Allen (2016) studied the validation of Latino students at an historically Black college and university (HBCU) in Texas, seeking to understand their experiences. They revealed that students found academic validation from faculty in class and staff out of class as well as from peers and family members but that they also encountered obstacles from external influences such as work. Allen identified that interpersonal validation came from faculty and staff out of class as well as through peers and Latino student organizations, while discovering challenges to interpersonal validation from family unfamiliar with the HBCU, lack of support for Latino organizations, and the absence of Latino students and culture on campus and online. Allen's participants felt affirmed as learners and non-traditional students while interpersonal validation made them feel like they mattered and their success was important, which are key components of Rendón's (1994) theory.

Acevedo-Gil et al. (2015) also analyzed the experiences of Latinas/os – some of whom were Mexican and/or undocumented – in developmental courses at California community colleges, using validation theory as one of their frameworks. The authors discovered that students received academic validation from institutional agents who emphasized high

expectations, recognized social identities, and focused on improving students' academic skills. Acevedo-Gil et al. also concluded that placement in developmental courses was viewed by some students as invalidating, that they were viewed as less intelligent and as operating at a deficit. As with Rendón (1994), Acevedo-Gil et al. further discussed the importance of peers, significant others, and counselors in providing academic validation.

Zhang and Ozuna (2015) explored the validation experiences of community college transfer engineering students, many of whom are in the non-traditional populations initially studied by Rendón (1994). They determined that students perceived their instructors to be most important in providing them with validation needed to facilitate their academic success and that instructors were also key in providing them with interpersonal validation in the form of career advice and mentorship. Additionally, Zhang and Ozuna revealed that family members provided interpersonal validation as well as that students found validation in the overall community college because it gave them confidence in their ability to succeed academically before transitioning to a four-year institution.

Hurtado et al. (2011) examined validation in order to better understand and support college student retention and persistence across all student populations, but particularly for students of color. Using the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey, Hurtado et al. deduced that students of color reported lower levels of validation than White students, with a more pronounced difference in classroom academic validation. Hurtado et al. reported that these findings were in line with previous studies, which might be expected as Rendón's (1994) theory was initially developed for underrepresented populations who may have had doubts about their ability to succeed in college. The results also have implications for understanding that students experience validation and invalidation in different ways – within and across their various

identities. This is an important piece to keep in mind when studying the validation of queer-spectrum students and the men involved in the current study.

Validation from Institutional Supports within a Therapeutic Learning Community

Scholars have also researched how institutional supports such as resources and programs create therapeutic learning environments for marginalized populations anchored in validation in order to facilitate student success, as recommended by Rendón (1994). Baber (2018) examined a community-based college readiness program for underrepresented students from low resource neighborhoods in Chicago who were primarily Black and Latino. Similar to the students in Rendón's study, Baber uncovered that participants were often doubtful about their academic potential. Baber discovered the critical role validation played when students' existing strengths were recognized as an important factor for college transitions, as opposed to using a deficit perspective. In keeping with Rendón's new model for student learning, the program connected students to academic and professional support staff who actively connected with them and affirmed their ability to succeed. The program also offered a validating peer group. Baber's study highlighted that validating agents with consistent presence and availability are critical for transition and persistence.

Gildersleeve (2011) explored Mexican migrant students in a participatory action program. Using validation theory as a foundation, they discovered that marginalized students can become more successful when their contributions to – and participation in – the campus environment are viewed as important. Students in the program experienced validation through self-reflection and critical pedagogy, while also being part of a self-validating group. Building upon Rendón's theory (1994), Gildersleeve originated the concept of neo-critical validation, which allows students to create their own self-efficacy and version of validation, diverging from

the unintended power dynamic of having validation bestowed on them by a university agent. It is essential for faculty and staff to be mindful of this power dynamic when utilizing validating practices with all student populations.

Other scholars have outlined how institutions adopted validation theory to create a therapeutic learning community across the entire campus. Ekal et al. (2011) described how the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), with a primarily first-generation, low-income, and Hispanic student body, employed validation theory in its strategy for student success, retention, progression, and graduation. UTEP identified four components critical to validating students in their pursuit of higher education: aspirational access, academic access, financial access, and participatory access. Ezeonu (2011) shared how Highline Community College utilized validation theory as a framework to address the transition and retention issues of marginalized populations including students of color, immigrants, refugees, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Ezeonu discussed how Highline implemented a therapeutic learning community as outlined by Rendón (1994) to address the barriers to success faced by its students. The author explained that present institutional structures of today were not designed for the diversity of the current student population and, as such, experiences in and out of the classroom should be re-designed, which also echoed what Rendón articulated in 1994. Ekal et al. and Ezeonu provided examples of how validation theory can be used as a framework campus-wide for student success.

Applications of Validation Theory to Queer-Spectrum Students

The previous section examined how validation theory has been more recently studied and applied within higher education across various student populations and institution types. Those studies shared examples of both academic and interpersonal validation both in and out of the classroom by faculty, peers, and family as well as how institutional supports such as resources

and programming employed validation theory as a framework to support students' sense of belonging and belief in their ability to persist and succeed in college. Other studies sought to understand student experiences with validation – as the current study seeks to do. As mentioned, the bulk of the literature focused on the application of validation theory to Latinx populations, though Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011) and Hurtado et al. (2011) acknowledged its utility for other populations including queer-spectrum students. However, literature applying validation theory to this population of students is sparse. A search using the keywords of "validation theory" along with "gay," "queer," or "LGBTQ" resulted in the three studies that follow.

Faculty/Staff Validation of Queer-Spectrum Students

Kanagala and Oliver (2019) analyzed the challenges faced by queer people of color (QPOC) students through the perspectives of QPOC student affairs professionals. Validation theory was one of their theoretical frameworks due to its emphasis on the success of first-generation students of color and on validating agents in and out of the classroom. QPOC student affairs staff were viewed by Kanagala and Oliver as key institutional agents for supporting – and creating safe spaces for – marginalized students, QPOC students in particular. They uncovered that QPOC student affairs professionals were the validating agents who made sure QPOC students received the support they needed to be successful academically as well as to help them understand themselves from a developmental perspective. Kanagala and Oliver also determined that QPOC faculty and staff played crucial roles as validating agents for QPOC students because the interaction between the two groups in and out of the classroom afforded opportunities for students' life experiences to be validated.

Validation of Queer-Spectrum Students through Institutional Supports

Kuczik (2016) examined lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and asexual (LGBTQA) students' experiences and perceptions of on-campus LGBTQA resource centers based on their engagement with these spaces, using validation theory as one theoretical framework in their study. They found that resource centers supported interpersonal validation through promoting the visibility, affirmation, and self-worth of LGBTQA students while liberating them from invalidation they experienced from peers and the community where they felt unsafe and isolated. LGBTQA students connected with one another through these resource centers and felt understood while also experiencing personal development, self-awareness, and growth through learning from one another. Resource centers offered validating experiences in the form of mentorships and peer mentor programs crucial to students when coming out and experiencing "firsts." Additionally, the center director was determined to serve in a validating, mentoring role. Overall, these experiences provided LGBTQA students with the opportunity to engage with out-of-class agents, helping to facilitate academic and interpersonal development.

Validation Theory as One Framework to Remove Barriers

Emetu (2019) explored the academic and social integration of African-American male college students, focusing on barriers to retention and providing recommendations for supporting this population. However, their study was not centered on queer African-American male college students: it grouped participants into six categories one of which was "homosexual male students." Emetu ultimately identified five barriers to retention and from there, developed five practices and four recommendations for implementing strategies to support African American male student retention, where they briefly touched on the homosexual African-American male population. Their strategies and recommendations were rooted in theory of retention, validation

theory, and transformational leadership theory. Aspects of academic and interpersonal validation from Rendón's (1994) theory were visible in the practices and the recommendations for implementation and echoed what Rendón discussed in creating a therapeutic learning community.

Proxies for Studying Validation of Queer-Spectrum Students

Despite the lack of literature studying validation theory as a framework for the success of queer-spectrum students, this population faces obstacles in their pursuit of a college education that many are able to overcome. How might we learn more about queer-spectrum students' experiences with validation or invalidation? Nora et al. (2011) explained that scholars studying student attrition have been writing about concepts similar to validation prior to and since its development in 1994. According to Nora et al., authors have previously examined how faculty and staff have offered support, affirmation, encouragement, and mentoring, along with fostering a sense of belonging, value in cultural identities, and positive self-worth, all of which relate to student persistence. Nora et al. referred to these similar and overlapping concepts as "proxies" for validation. While literature specifically discussing the validation of queer-spectrum students, and specifically gay/queer cisgender men, may be limited, we can learn about their experiences with validation through studying similar concepts or "proxies." In support of this notion, Pitcher et al. (2018) conducted a study to determine where LGBTQ students found support on campus and viewed the college environment as an important means for institutions to support this population of students. For the purposes of the current study, we will seek to examine how and where queer-spectrum students might find validation within their campus environment.

Campus Climate as Proxy for Studying Queer-Spectrum Student Validation

Given the lack of literature discussing the experiences of queer-spectrum college students with validation, studies related to the campus climate for this population and their perceptions of their environment can signal clues for their experiences related to validation. Renn and Patton (2011) described campus climate as "the overall ethos or atmosphere of a college campus, mediated by the extent to which individuals feel a sense of safety, belonging, engagement within the environment, and value as members of a community" (p. 248). Garvey (2020) maintained that because of its relationship with student success and persistence, studying campus climate is key to understanding the experiences of queer-spectrum undergraduate students. Specifically, Garvey et al. (2017) summarized how campus climate shapes "academic experiences and outcomes, student involvement, identity development and outness, and wellness" for LGBTQ students (p. 796). Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) framed their study of the effects of campus climate on the academic success and persistence of queer-spectrum students within the work of Tinto (1975) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1983), which centered on academic and social integration. Woodford and Kulick (2015) also underscored the importance of examining campus climate, particularly academic and social integration, in studying the persistence of sexual minority students – emphasizing the key role that instructor and peer relations play. As noted earlier, Rendón's (1994) theory of validation is grounded in concepts of academic and social integration, with a focus on faculty and peer interactions.

Campus Environments for Queer-Spectrum Students

Understanding queer-spectrum student academic and social integration – and ultimately their experiences with validation – within the campus climate is best accomplished through studying their interactions within the multiple layers of their environment. Garvey (2020) and

Garvey et al. (2017) emphasized that the retention of queer-spectrum students can be best understood through studying their interactions within their environment because their experiences result from the distinct environments where they live and interact with others, particularly peers. The concept of examining how environment shapes the individual experiences of queer-spectrum student development relates back to human ecology theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1995). Renn and Arnold (2003) later made the case for applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to higher education research in their discussion of the influence of peer culture on student development while Patton et al. (2016) maintained that the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model articulated within Bronfenbrenner's theory can be utilized "to shape campus environments to promote growth and development for diverse populations" (p. 41).

The first proposition within human ecology theory maintained that human development occurs through a process of regular, reciprocal interactions between an individual and the people, objects, and symbols within the multiple layers of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner (1995) referred to these interactions, which become more complex over extended periods of time, as proximal processes. These processes can occur in dyads such as parent-child and child-child activities, though they can also take place through activities such as "group or solitary play, reading, learning new skills, studying, athletic activities, and performing complex tasks" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). In the context of the collegiate environment, proximal processes might occur through faculty-student and peer-peer interaction as well as through participation in student organizations and campus events, and interfacing with campus offices and spaces, among other interactions. In the second proposition, Bronfenbrenner maintained that the magnitude of these proximal processes affecting development varies based on the biopsychological characteristics of the individual, the environment where the processes

are occurring, and the developmental outcomes being considered. These two propositions together form the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model.

Within the PPCT model, Bronfenbrenner (1995) viewed the context or the environment as four nested systems – microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem – with each one progressively becoming more broad and inclusive of the previous. In their application of Bronfenbrenner's model to the college environment and student development, Renn and Arnold (2003) placed the student at the center of the PPCT model, which was comprised of concentric circles, one for each system. The most immediate context, the microsystem, is where college students interact most within their environment. Renn and Arnold described how the microsystems of a traditional aged college student "might include a residence hall or apartment with roommates, a science laboratory section, a student organization, an athletic team, or a campus job" (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 270). The mesosystem is where the microsystems of an individual student intersect, interact, or overlap. The current study seeks to understand how and where gay/queer cisgender men experience validation in part through examining proximal processes occurring within their microsystems or more immediate campus environments.

Queer-Spectrum Students' Perceptions of Campus Climate

Garvey et al. (2017) discussed the progress made in improving campus climate for queer-spectrum students over the past 20 years, particularly after the death of Matthew Shepard in 1998. Despite this progress, Linley and Nguyen's (2015) climate study review of two- and four-year institutions indicated that LGBTQ students generally view campus spaces in a negative light. Similarly, Pryor (2018) surveyed research describing how LGBTQ students generally still perceive college and university campuses to be less inviting than their peers. In a review of recent national student surveys, Greathouse et al. (2018) highlighted that only 55.4% of queer-

spectrum students reported feeling a sense of belonging on campus. They also uncovered that queer-spectrum students reported their university as safe and welcoming at lower rates than heterosexual peers, and felt less valued as individuals by their institutions. Greathouse et al. found the greatest disparity (over a 35% difference) between queer-spectrum and heterosexual students when asked whether they felt "students of my sexual orientation are respected on campus" (p. 14). Blumenfeld et al. (2016) concluded that "individual perceptions of discrimination or of a negative campus climate for intergroup relations can affect student educational outcomes" (p. 2). Despite the recent progress made to improve campus environments for queer-spectrum college students, it is clear more work needs to be done. Consequently, we can examine queer-spectrum students' experiences with faculty, staff, and peers both in and out of class as well as with institutional supports, resources, and spaces to provide us with insight into how and where this population of students might find interpersonal and academic validation.

Faculty and Academic Validation

Rendón (1994) emphasized the importance of academic validation and the role of faculty in providing it to students. Similarly, studying various aspects of campus climate related to academics can provide insight into queer-spectrum students' perception of their environment and experiences with validation. Garvey et al. (2017) confirmed that faculty interaction and classroom experiences strongly relate to LGBTQ students' perceptions of their environment. Ultimately, we can look to queer-spectrum students' experiences with faculty in and out of class and within academic disciplines as proxies for validation – to find ways in which they receive academic validation in and out of class.

Faculty Validation

Garvey (2020) summarized how faculty are largely influential in students' perceptions of campus climate through facilitating their academic and social integration, which can then influence their decision to persist. Woodford et al. (2015) added that faculty provide interpersonal support for queer-spectrum students and that positive instructor relationships may foster a connection with the campus environment. Garvey, BrckaLorenz, et al. (2018) discovered that having more frequent faculty interactions resulted in increased participation in high-impact practices (such as research and internships) for some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer or questioning (LGBQ) students, leading them to conclude that "encouraging and providing opportunities for student-faculty engagement among LGBQ undergraduate students is critical not only for facilitating positive environments and communities, but also for academic achievement" (p. 213). Garvey and Inkelas (2012) further revealed that the relationships lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students have with faculty (and staff) may encourage more openness and self-disclosure about their sexual identity, which can generate a greater sense of comfort with their campus climate.

Faculty as a Buffer. Garvey (2020) and Woodford and Kulick (2015) posited that faculty may often buffer a negative campus climate and the heterosexist harassment experienced by queer-spectrum students. Woodford et al. (2015) also uncovered that relationships with instructors may soften the effects of a hostile campus climate by mediating the relationship between heterosexist harassment and negative physical health symptoms, meaning that as relations with instructors increased, the negative relationship between heterosexist harassment and physical health became stronger. Garvey, BrckaLorenz, et al. (2018) argued that "when faculty members create environments that make students feel valued and affirmed, the effect

moderates chilly classroom environments and facilitates positive learning for all students" (p. 212).

Faculty inside the Classroom. Inside the classroom, faculty who challenge heterosexist language and develop curricula inclusive of queer-spectrum students are perceived as supportive of this population (Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Linley et al. (2016) agreed that LGBTQ students felt "supported by faculty who confronted homophobic behavior, challenged normative heterosexist/cisgender discourses within the curriculum, and utilized inclusive language within the classroom" (p. 3). Garvey et al. (2019) described how queer-spectrum students of color felt more affirmed when in-class discussions included issues related to sexuality and gender, while Linley et al. determined that LGBTQ students felt supported when faculty welcomed students bringing relevant LGBTQ-related items into class discussions. Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) advocated that faculty can be more welcoming by introducing LGBQ-supportive campus services, policies, and organizations to students in their courses. They concluded that how faculty welcome and affirm LGBQ students influences their classroom learning and academic engagement throughout their undergraduate career (Garvey, Squire, et al., 2018).

Faculty outside the Classroom. Outside of class, faculty serve as advisors who affirm students' major choice, advise LGTBQ organizations, and participate in ally programs in order to provide a safe space for students (Linley et al., 2016). Linley et al. (2016) discovered that students felt supported by faculty who understood LGBTQ issues and provided support and mentoring as well as by faculty who were simply visible around campus, regardless of their sexual identity. Garvey et al. (2019) observed that validation provided by faculty and staff (and peers) was important to their experience as well as that queer and trans* people of color (QTPOC) students were more out if they knew more LGBTQ faculty. Garvey et al. (2017)

concluded that LGBTQ students who knew more LGBTQ faculty and staff had more positive perceptions of climate.

Visibility of Out Faculty. Linley and Nguyen (2015) cited studies indicating it is important for LGBTQ faculty to be out as a means of supporting students. Queer-spectrum students specifically seek out LGBTQ faculty for advice beyond academics, and it is affirming to them to see an LGBTQ person in a position of power who is out and visible on campus (Linley et al., 2016). Kanagala and Oliver (2019) revealed the importance of the visibility of queer people of color (QPOC) faculty and staff within the campus environment as affirming for QPOC students, emphasizing that these students benefit from seeing others who look like them across all levels of their institution. Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) articulated that faculty who "embrace their identity can give hope to students that they can live an open and fulfilling life, providing guidance in aligning students' social identities with their aspirations" (p. 100).

Invalidation from Faculty. Garvey, BrckaLorenz, et al. (2018) conveyed that negative faculty interactions can have adverse effects on LGBQ students' academic success. Garvey et al. (2019) discovered that students in their study experienced discrimination from faculty because of their sexuality and/or gender and that being out had a negative impact on their classroom experiences. Garvey et al. (2017) also exposed that LGBTQ alumni reflecting on their undergraduate experiences recalled finding themselves in hostile interactions with faculty and staff, with one participant indicating that "some administrators and professors openly communicated to me in front of others that I was 'living in sin'" (p. 806). Blumenfeld et al. (2016) shared the experience of one student who was told by professors that their participation in LGBTQ activism was a sign of mental illness. Garvey (2020) and Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) concluded that negative classroom experiences and unfair treatment by faculty not versed in the

needs and experiences of queer-spectrum students may lead these students to perceive their environment negatively which may influence their decision to leave campus.

Validation within Academic Disciplines and the Curriculum

Garvey (2020) and Garvey et al. (2017) revealed that academic disciplines affect LGBTQ students' perceptions of the campus climate and that a chilly campus climate can influence a student's major choice. Blumenfeld et al. (2016) reported that respondents in their study most often found liberal arts, social science, and humanities to be more welcoming. Linley and Nguyen (2015) explained that students majoring in the social sciences and humanities, such as social work, expressed that they experienced a positive climate where LGBTQ students are able to bring their whole self to the table. A participant in a study conducted by Garvey et al. (2017) shared that "'it felt safe and normal to be a gay student in Theater and Music'" (p. 811) while Pryor (2018) reported that a student found a connection within their performing arts major. Offering LGBTQ-courses within disciplines can also positively affect students' perceptions of their campus environment. Woodford et al. (2018) discovered that students attending institutions offering at least one for-credit LGBTQ course tended to report encountering less overall heterosexism on campus, which may decrease psychological distress and indirectly increase levels of self-acceptance.

Garvey et al. (2017) found that LGBTQ students changed majors due to negative experiences within their major. In general, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines are perceived as unwelcoming to queer-spectrum students (Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Garvey, BrckaLorenz, et al. (2018) also noted that LGBQ students in some majors, such as computer science, mathematics, and the physical sciences were less likely to participate in high-impact practices than students in some other majors, likely because of their

less-welcoming environment. Linley and Nguyen (2015) explained that the positivist and objective perspectives found within the STEM disciplines view people as irrelevant, which does not allow LGBTQ students to bring their whole self. As a result, LGBTQ students may feel invisible when their experiences and identities are absent from the curriculum (Garvey, Squire, et al., 2018). Overall, Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) confirmed that when queer-spectrum students are more comfortable in their chosen major, they are more satisfied with their overall academic experience.

Peer and Interpersonal Validation

While faculty can offer interpersonal validation, the literature discussing queer-spectrum students' perceptions of campus climate also highlighted the importance of peer interaction, which is a major component of interpersonal validation discussed by Rendón (1994). Garvey (2020) summarized how peer interactions are key for marginalized students because they may lessen the impacts of negative campus experiences. They also maintained that students perceive campus climate more positively when they have supportive peer networks, especially given the strained relationships that some queer and trans* students may have with their families. Garvey et al. (2017) asserted that the campus climate of LGBTQ students is strongly influenced by both peer interaction and co-curricular involvement. For the latter, studies typically examine the impact of queer-spectrum student organizations on the experiences of this population.

Informal Peer Interaction

Garvey et al. (2017) reported that informal peer interaction impacted LGBTQ students' perceptions of their campus climate as well as that graduates in their study who knew more LGBTQ students had more positive perceptions of their campus climate. Garvey et al. (2019) also observed that the number of LGBTQ students known had a positive relationship with

outness for queer and trans* students of color, revealing the positive influence of peer

interactions on student experiences and their need to receive affirmation. Woodford and Kulick

(2015) and Woodford et al. (2015) suggested that having LGBTQ friends may buffer students

from the negative impacts of a hostile campus climate and heterosexist harassment, potentially

positively affecting academic engagement, GPA, and social acceptance, while reducing the risk

for alcohol abuse among LGBTQ students. Moran et al. (2018) specifically examined the effects

of four types of bullying victimization experienced by LGBTQ students and uncovered that peer

support can result in fewer depressive symptoms stemming from bullying. Similarly, Bissonette

and Szymanski (2019) determined that positive peer relations had a mediating effect on

depression resulting from internalized heterosexism and stressed the importance that these

relationships have in providing a support system and validating LGBQ students' identities.

Woodford et al. (2015) underscored that "larger LGB social networks might provide a more

consistent form of social support, as well as a more diverse group of peers with whom to relate

different experiences of discrimination" (p. 82).

Peer Interaction through Student Organizations

Linley and Nguyen (2015) maintained that peers can support LGBTQ students in and out

of class through forming study groups or social clubs. Garvey (2020) also acknowledged the

positive effect queer and trans* student organizations have on perceptions of climate perceptions

because they create peer networks that facilitate a sense of belonging, mentorship, and

connection with resources. Garvey et al. (2019) argued that involvement in LGBTQ student

organizations is critical for queer and trans* students of color, as it is key in their ability to create

community and engage in conversation about LGBTQ issues while also offering a space where

they can develop a sense of belonging. Woodford et al. (2018) revealed that institutions with a

high ratio of LGBTQ student organizations may protect students from heterosexist discrimination, which may indirectly influence psychological well-being and self-acceptance in a positive manner. Pitcher et al. (2018) posited that, particularly for institutions without resource centers, LGBTQ student organizations are crucial to providing peer support through the development of connections, which facilitates a sense of belonging and contributes to student retention. In addition to learning that these organizations support struggling students and offer safe and comfortable environments, Pitcher et al. uncovered that some students might have left their institution altogether were it not for their LGBTQ organizations and the connections they made there.

Negative Impacts of Peer Interactions

Garvey (2020) related that negative peer interactions can thwart queer and trans* students' development and the ability to be out as well as that the fear of being outed can impact their academic engagement and performance. Woodford et al. (2015) learned that LGBTQ students experiencing heterosexist harassment more frequently was associated with negative impacts on depression, anxiety, physical health, and risk for alcohol abuse. They maintained that discrimination can be subtle for LGBTQ students who may experience derogatory remarks instead of physical assault.

Derogatory Peer Remarks. Linley and Nguyen (2015), Mathies et al. (2019), Winberg et al. (2019), and Woodford et al. (2012) discussed the negative impact of heterosexual students' use of the terms "that's so gay" and "no homo" on cisgender sexual minority students. Mathies et al. and Winberg et al. explained how "that's so gay" is commonly used to describe something that is stupid or unwanted, while straight students use "no homo" to mean that a same-sexual connotation is not attached to their words. Over 50% of the LGBQ students in these studies

reported hearing those phrases used within the past year on their campus occasionally to very frequently (Mathies et al., 2019; Winberg, et al., 2019). Both studies elaborated on the fact that heterosexual students are often unaware of the heterosexism in these comments, which can be perceived as subtle forms of heterosexist harassment by LGBQ students. Winberg et al. indicated that use of these phrases significantly increased the risk for hazardous drinking and frequency of illicit drug use among LGBQ+ students, while Mathies et al. concluded that use of these phrases was associated with worse academic outcomes related to developmental challenges. Hearing the word "no homo" was associated with lower GPAs among LGBQ students (Mathies et al., 2019; Winberg et al., 2019), while hearing "that's so gay" was found to lead to feelings of isolation and impacts to physical health (Woodford et al., 2012). Both Mathies et al. and Winberg et al. underscored that the stress from these subtle forms of microaggressions may negatively affect LGBQ students.

Overt Peer Harassment. Even though the campus climate has improved for queer-spectrum students, they still experience more overt forms of harassment on campus. Blumenfeld et al. (2016) quoted several student experiences with harassment on campus. One student commented that "I considered leaving my campus because during my first semester [at my campus] I was physically assaulted on campus on my way home…Two more physical assaults happened on/near campus in the next three days," and another shared that "my partner and I were shouted at while walking down the street when I first arrived," while yet a third revealed that "I actually left my first college due to the abusive climate that involved death threats against me" (Blumenfeld et al., 2016, p. 11). Pryor (2018) also exposed the tensions a gay man in their study experienced with their Christian roommate who tied their sexual identity into morality, telling them that "God still loves you" (p. 44). Blumenfeld et al. and Pryor shed light on queer-spectrum

students' negative and invalidating experiences with peers, which impact their perceptions of campus.

Validation through Institutional Supports Offering a Therapeutic Learning Community

Institutional supports can also be designed to be more inclusive, which can offer the therapeutic learning community recommended by Rendón (1994), validating queer-spectrum students and positively influencing their perceptions of campus climate. Woodford et al. (2018) termed this "structural inclusion" and summarized research indicating LGBTQ inclusive policies and resource centers have the ability to contribute to lower levels of discrimination for sexual minority students that can positively affect their psychological well-being. Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) suggested that LGBQ students found greater academic success when they perceived that campus administrators were taking steps to improve diversity issues on campus by increasing the diversity of faculty, staff, and students and creating space for cross-cultural conversations and mentoring, which is also consistent with Rendón's (1994) recommendation for creating a therapeutic learning environment. While institutional supports such as policies and resources may signal clues as to how queer-spectrum students experience their environment, campus spaces and what happens inside them also shed light on their experiences. Lastly, geographic location has been reported to have an impact on queer-spectrum students' perceptions of their campus environment (Garvey, 2020; Garvey, et al., 2017).

Institutional Policy and Mission

Pitcher et al. (2018) advocated that policy can be viewed as a means to support students through signaling inclusion. Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) suggested that administrators can foster a more inclusive campus climate via developing and implementing inclusive policies and recommended initiating an inclusive language campaign on campus as one example. The

institutional mission can be crafted to be more inclusive of queer-spectrum students and impact their perception of their campus environment in a positive light while a diffuse institutional mission outlining multiple commitments might signal a lack of support and inclusion for the LGBTQ community (Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Linley and Nguyen (2015) further explained that institutional culture can sometimes be shaped by its mission, particularly for religious colleges and universities. They provided an example of a Catholic institution where members support the belief that homosexuality is a sin and share those beliefs on campus (Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Wolff et al. (2019) discussed "disallowing religious universities" (DRUs) that have policies prohibiting – or even condemning – expression of LGBTQ identities, some of which result in disciplinary action if violated. The institutional policies at these DRUs also do not offer protection or benefits for sexual minority students. Wolff et al. explained how these policies create a campus climate with higher levels of bullying than non-DRUs and that bullied students were more likely to report symptoms of depression.

Nondiscrimination Clauses

Pitcher et al. (2018) described the increased addition of sexual orientation to institutional nondiscrimination clauses over the past 30 years but cautioned that the addition of sexual minority students – or any group of students – will not end microaggressions and marginalization. Nonetheless, Garvey (2020) found that institutions with nondiscrimination clauses inclusive of queer and trans* students are perceived more positively by these students. Likewise, Garvey et al. (2017) argued that adding sexual and gender identity to nondiscrimination policies would increase recruitment of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff in addition to establishing mechanisms for reporting discrimination. Woodford et al. (2018) discovered that institutions with nondiscrimination clauses inclusive of sexual and gender

identity may protect students from heterosexist harassment and that these clauses led their study participants to report lower levels of discrimination, which had indirect, positive effects on their levels of distress and self-acceptance. Pitcher et al. (2018) confirmed that nondiscrimination clauses made LGBTQ students feel supported by their institution through communicating institutional norms and values as well as a social contract.

Resource Centers

Institutions that provide resources specifically for queer-spectrum students may be viewed more positively by this population. Garvey (2020) highlighted the importance of queer and trans* resource centers in supporting and affirming this population and promoting a sense of inclusion. Kuczik (2016) touched on the validating effects of the LGBTQA resource center through offering a space where students can develop community, benefit from a mentoring program, and connect with a dedicated staff member who can serve as a mentor and resource. Pitcher et al. (2018) identified that LGBTQ resource centers provide students with physical spaces for connection, with community and professional support, and with a beacon for inclusion and support. Greathouse et al. (2018) also explained that resource centers for queer-spectrum students create opportunities for students to connect, develop support networks, and build community, which facilitates their sense of belonging. These centers also facilitate positive mental health among queer-spectrum students and lessen the burden of students having to find their own resources and support networks (Greathouse et al., 2018). However, it is important to understand that resource centers are not always viewed as welcoming or supportive, particularly among students of color. Kanagala and Oliver (2019) discovered that queer people of color (QPOC) students found campus LGBTQ spaces unwelcoming and unsupportive as well as that this group of students would not utilize center resources (p. 418). Pryor (2018) pointed out that

LGBTQ centers are often viewed as being for White gay and lesbian students where students of color do not feel welcome. Kuczik (2016) stressed the need for resource centers to better address the intersection of students' multiple identities. However, the primary impact of resource centers on campus climate is that they can respond to and reduce incidents of homophobia; educate campuses about, and increase the visibility of, queer-spectrum student issues; and better prepare faculty and staff to support this population (Greathouse et al., 2018).

Additional Resources and Supports

Garvey et al. (2017) offered that other institutional supports such as Lavender Graduation, Safe Zone programs, and resident assistant (RA) trainings about LGBTQ students were also viewed in a positive light, demonstrating a commitment of support. Linley and Nguyen (2015) specifically mentioned ally development – or Safe Zone – programs as positively influencing students' curricular contexts. Katz et al. (2016) also learned that campuses where Safe Zone symbols were displayed were perceived to have a more positive campus climate for sexual minority students than campuses not displaying these symbols. As discussed previously, Woodford et al. (2018) discovered that students attending institutions offering at least one for-credit LGBTQ course tended to report encountering less overall heterosexism on campus, which impacted their psychological distress and self-acceptance in positive ways. Garvey et al. (2019) also disclosed that queer and trans* students of color in their study felt more affirmed when LGBT and queer studies programs were available at their institutions. Queer-spectrum students viewed these mechanisms as positive, pointing to forms of interpersonal validation on campus indicating that they are welcome.

Lack of Institutional Support

Pitcher et al. (2018) signaled that a lack of policies related to inclusion of, and protections for, LGBTQ students can lead them to question their welcome on campus. An institutional support perceived as negative by queer-spectrum students might include the lack of mention of resources and organizations for queer-spectrum students in college admissions recruiting materials (Pryor, 2018). Garvey et al. (2019) relayed a student concern that their institution did not have financial aid policies to assist LGBTQ students, some of whom did not receive family support as a result of coming out. Garvey (2020), Garvey, BrckaLorenz, et al. (2018), and Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) exposed the exclusion of queer and trans* students from institutional data collection which means that they are largely invisible to campus administrators. As a result, institutions have no way of knowing how many queer-spectrum students may need specialized campus resources or specifically who these students are. Garvey (2020) highlighted that the lack of data regarding this student population results in "negative consequences for building community, sharing resources, and examining differences or trends in retention across sexual and gender identities" (p. 437).

Institutional Inaction. Institutional inaction to subtle and overt forms of harassment and discrimination can also send a message to queer-spectrum students about their value on campus and signal a negative campus environment. Blumenfeld et al. (2016) shared the story of a study participant who left their institution out of fear for their physical safety after receiving death threats, with the student claiming college administration did not care. Additionally, a student who feared for their safety during an anti-gay religious rally stated that they asked to have the speaker removed but that it was not seen as necessary or possible by administration (Blumenfeld

et al., 2016). Another student explained that a gay pride flag was burned on their campus but that the administration did nothing until the media learned of the incident (Garvey et al., 2019).

Institutional Spaces

Garvey et al. (2019) discussed the significance of symbolic campus gestures on queer-spectrum students. Seeing symbols such as Safe Zone signs supported students' beliefs that their institutions welcomed queer and trans* individuals. Similarly, Garvey et al. (2017) discovered that student perceptions of campus climate were positively affected by the visibility of LGBTQ symbols, such as the rainbow flag. However, while some campuses may be viewed as welcoming of queer-spectrum students, queer-spectrum students may perceive some campus spaces and events as unwelcoming.

Invalidating Spaces. Pryor (2018) revealed that LGBTQ students perceived the presence of Greek Life on campus as negative, affecting their sense of safety and security. The students described the Greek area of campus as unwelcoming and as an area where they had been harassed. They also expressed concern over the prominent display all the campus Greek organization flags in the student center which they also perceived as unwelcoming. Students in Pryor's study described recreational fields and locker rooms as eliciting feelings of discomfort because of their attachment to a heteronormative culture. The heteronormative culture felt by queer-spectrum students on recreational fields and in locker rooms is reflected in campus stadiums at athletic events. The University of Virginia fight song, "The Good Old Song," is traditionally sung by crowds at UVA football games. The song lyrics read: "We come from old Virginia, where all is bright and gay" to which a portion of the crowd typically shouts "not gay!" at football games, despite calls to end the practice in 2012 (Bell, 2019).

Religion in Campus Spaces. Blumenfeld et al. (2016) relayed the experience of an LGBTQ student who found themselves in the presence of anti-queer religious, Christian, preacher holding a rally on campus calling for homosexuals to be burned at the stake, which led the student to fear for their safety. Pryor (2018) also shared students' encounters with a visiting homophobic religious speaker on campus who harassed LGBTQ students in a designated public speaking area on campus. Another student in Pryor's study expressed concern upon seeing a flyer for a Christian student organization, fearing that this group might be one that works against the LGBTQ community. Similarly, the on-campus presence of Christian businesses that actively and publicly support anti-LGBTQ causes such as opposition to same-sex marriage may also impact students' perceptions of climate. In 2019, faculty at the University of Kansas protested a Chick-Fil-A on campus fearing that the presence of the restaurant could be harmful and send dangerous messages to students (Wynne, 2019). Blumenfeld et al. (2016) discussed how the presence of Christian denominations in campus spaces had a "negative, damaging, or destructive impact on campus climate" (p. 14) for LGBTQ students.

Residence Halls. Kortegast (2017) discovered that LGBTQ students had mixed experiences in residence halls. While LGBTQ special interest housing was found to promote inclusion and support student interests, it was viewed as exclusionary because students had to apply and participate in an interview, which led Kortegast to question the inclusivity and availability of on-campus housing for all LGBTQ students. Despite the efforts of many residence life departments to be inclusive, Kortegast also reported that LGBTQ students did not feel consistently supported by staff and expressed concern that staff would not be able to intervene during incidents of heterosexist harassment. A study conducted by Garvey et al. (2019) further revealed that living in campus housing negatively related to outness for queer and trans* students

of color versus students who lived off campus. Rankin et al. (2019) summarized literature focusing on the discrimination that LGBTQ students have experienced in campus housing, maintaining that encouraging these students to move off campus is not an effective solution because it isolates them and reduces access to campus resources they may need, a concern echoed by Kortegast.

Geographical Influences on Perceptions of Climate

Lastly, queer-spectrum students may perceive their campus climate more positively or negatively based on geographical location (Garvey, 2020; Garvey et al., 2017). Garvey (2020) and Garvey et al. (2017) cited studies explaining that queer-spectrum students perceived urban campuses as more welcoming than rural campuses. Urban institutions typically have more support due to the more liberal ideologies of city-dwellers who may be more accepting of diversity as opposed to rural campuses, which were found to be inhospitable and isolating for LGB individuals (Garvey et al., 2017). Garvey et al. found that students who attended a rural or small-town college viewed their campus climate more negatively than those who attended colleges in urban settings. Blumenfeld et al. (2016) provided an example of how a person at a rural institution did not feel like they were supported in the surrounding community. Garvey and Garvey et al. also summarized the impact of geographical location on perceptions of climate for queer-spectrum students, sharing that campuses in the New England/Northeast region are perceived more positively than institutions in other regions of the United States. As such, queer-spectrum students may find more validating experiences on urban campuses, particularly in the Northeast.

Summary

In summary, Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) concluded that queer-spectrum students who found their campus climate to be warm, inviting, and responsive had positive outcomes related to their academic success and persistence. By studying their interactions with faculty and peers, along with the impacts of institutional supports, it is possible to determine how queer-spectrum students, and more specifically gay/queer cisgender men, find academic and interpersonal validation (and invalidation) within their campus environment. Understanding validation theory and reviewing previous applications to other student populations provides an example of how validation theory might be utilized as a framework to support the persistence and success of gay/queer cisgender men.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation throughout their college career utilizing Rendón's (1994) validation theory as its primary framework and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) human ecology theory as its secondary framework. The study employed narrative inquiry as its qualitative research design within a social constructivist paradigm to reconstruct the stories of seven men, seeking to understand where and how these men experienced validation – or invalidation – on their campus and found the support to tackle any obstacles they may have encountered in order to develop and/or sustain self-efficacy to persist and ultimately succeed. I will begin this chapter with an introduction to the chosen research paradigm, social constructivism, and follow it with a discussion of narrative inquiry, the chosen research design for this study. Also, I will provide an overview of the research site, participant sampling and recruitment plans, and data collection and analysis methods. The chapter will conclude with a subjectivity statement that guided me as the researcher throughout this study.

Research Questions

This study was driven by the following research questions which are anchored in Laura Rendón's (1994) validation theory:

1. Where do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience?

2. How do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience?

3. How do gay/queer cisgender men overcome the challenges they encounter within their campus environment in order to believe in their ability to succeed in college?

Research Paradigm: Social Constructivism

Schwandt (2001) described a paradigm as a worldview or perspective composed of shared beliefs, values, and methods used to guide research. The paradigm I selected for this study examining validation of gay/queer cisgender men in college is social constructivism. Within this paradigm, meaning is not discovered but constructed by individuals who make meaning through interpreting their interactions with the world (Crotty, 1998). Schwandt (2001) further posited that social constructivism emphasizes "the actor's definition of the situation–that seek[s] to understand how social actors recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions and how they come to share an intersubjective understanding of specific life circumstances" (pp. 31-32). Studying the actor's definition permits the researcher to learn about the subjective meanings of each individual in order to construct a rich picture of the phenomenon being studied and identify patterns of meaning, while at the same time enabling the researcher to co-create knowledge by interpreting findings through the filter of their own experiences and background (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My objective was to learn about how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – and invalidation – during their college career, recognizing that each research participant would have a unique experience filtered through their view of the world. Examining all of the participants' varied experiences together through the lens of my own experiences and background enabled me to construct a broad picture of how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation on campus and to identify patterns across their narratives.

Ontology centers on the study of reality and the nature of being (Schwandt, 2001). Under social constructivism, there is not one valid truth but multiple realities – and it is possible to interpret the same reality in many ways (Crotty, 1998). As I conducted my research, I reminded myself that none of the gay/queer cisgender men I interviewed had the exact same experience with validation at their institution. Each participant had a unique, valid story that is their reality. This study incorporated this ontological dimension through presenting the varied perspectives of the participants as themes in the research findings, with each perspective and emerging theme deemed equally as valid as the next.

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology considers the nature and scope of knowledge and provides a basis for determining what types of knowledge are possible, adequate, and legitimate. Within a social constructivist paradigm, knowledge is defined by the actor's subjective interpretation of their situation or experiences, revisiting the example previously provided by Schwandt (2001). Creswell and Poth (2018) further explained that participants share subjective evidence with the researcher who attempts to connect and co-construct reality with them. The research participants in this study shared their individual experiences with validation on campus in order to co-create knowledge related to college experiences of gay/queer cisgender men. Biddix (2018) highlighted the individualistic nature of evidence within constructivism and the importance of including data that shares the richness and complexity of participant experiences. This study incorporated this epistemological dimension through the use of quotes as a method of presenting evidence from the participants.

Axiology focuses on the role of values and ethics in research inquiry (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The researcher employing a social constructivist paradigm shares values that influence their interpretations and findings along with honoring and negotiating values with

research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I addressed axiological concerns during this research study by journaling throughout the process to reflect on how my values, and those of the participants, shaped the findings in relation to validation of gay/queer cisgender college men. Being mindful of ethics throughout the study, especially when designing and conducting my research, was another point of journal reflection.

Crotty (1998) maintained that methodology is the plan or process behind the choice and use of methods which are ultimately tied to the desired outcomes. Biddix (2018) observed qualitative research as a set of "methods that seek to explore and represent reality as it exists in context and to enlighten the ways in which individuals experience reality" (p. 298). The qualitative researcher employs inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design, while within a social constructivist paradigm, the researcher employs a more literary writing style as well as an inductive method of emergent ideas through interviewing, observing, and analyzing texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I interviewed the participants, analyzed the transcripts, and generated themes based on what I found, understanding that these themes may have evolved as I continued to interview and review transcripts. When reporting the study findings, my writing style adopted more of storytelling tone in sharing the unique experiences of the participants. Qualitative research aligns with a social constructivist paradigm because it enabled me to explore the multiple realities and experiences of the research participants and led me to recognize patterns or themes that will help us better understand how to provide validating experiences supportive of persistence and success for gay/queer cisgender men in college.

Research Design: Narrative Inquiry

I selected narrative inquiry as the research design for this study examining validation of gay/queer cisgender college men. Nora et al. (2011) specifically advocated for the use of narrative inquiry to examine validating practices, processes, and experiences. Clandinin (2013) indicated that this form of qualitative research centers on the idea that humans lead storied lives, and that narrative inquiry is dynamic, reflective of a constant interplay between human thought and the personal, social, and material environments. Mertova and Webster (2020) added that "people make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them. Stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events because they do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives" (p. 2). They highlighted temporality in the human experience and shared that individuals' stories reflect the notion that experience results from growth as understandings are continuously – and often informally – created, reformed, and retold. Narrative inquiry, according to Clandinin (2013), "begins and ends with respect for the ordinary lived experience" (p. 18) and results in a picture of that experience which has been created and lived over time.

Narrative inquiry enables the researcher to co-construct knowledge through studying participants' experience of the world, one "that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing and interpreting texts" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). Through paying attention to time, place, and relationships, the researcher and participant co-construct evolving and complex stories using narrative threads, tensions, and plot lines (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Czarniawska (2004) interestingly presented the idea of the interview as a narrative production site and offered that it is the job of the researcher to create a narrative out of the interview, through writing, re-writing, or interpretation. They also discussed the importance of

explicating the narrative, not simply summarizing it, but responsibly re-constructing it while respecting the interviewee.

Mertova and Webster (2020) remarked that narrative inquiry enables researchers to collect the richness and complexity of the human experience which can then be used in teaching and learning to address problems. The authors further established that narrative inquiry reveals understandings not typically revealed by traditional forms of inquiry, which can prove valuable to research. This form of research can augment our understanding of individuals' experiences so that we can use that understanding to enhance and transform the lives of those individuals and others in the future (Clandinin, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Through employing narrative inquiry, I hoped to co-create knowledge with participants by asking them to share their lived, complex, evolving stories of how they experienced validation in college. The interviews were designed to serve as a narrative production site (Czarniawska, 2004) involving the participants, and part of my role as the researcher was to responsibly and respectfully re-construct their lived experiences related to validation on campus. My first step was to re-story each interview in a chronological sequence and then analyze each one in order to identify themes related to validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). College faculty and staff, especially student affairs and academic advising professionals, can increase their knowledge from the participants' stories and the themes found within them to better understand the college experiences of gay/queer cisgender men. My hope was that the resulting knowledge would also provide insight into how college staff can enhance and transform the college experience of gay/queer cisgender men by providing more validating experiences.

Research Site and Rationale

For my research site, I chose a large, public research university with approximately 38,000 students located in the Southeast. The institution was assigned the pseudonym of Southeast State University (SSU) as a means of concealing the identities of the participants. I chose SSU primarily because I had an affiliation with this institution. Biddix (2018) discussed how "a researcher's role on campus influences access to data sites and sources" as well as that "a researcher with affiliation to campus (such as being faculty or staff) will have easier access to data (individuals, documents, and sites) than a non-affiliated researcher" (pp. 121-122). I initially believed that conducting my study at SSU would facilitate easier access to research participants since I was a current student at the time I conducted the study. Another reason for choosing SSU as a research site can be found in Rendón's (1994) initial writing about validation theory when they explained that "It was interesting to note that many students from a large research university talked about the importance of interpersonal validation" (p. 42). Selecting a large research university such as SSU allowed me to explore how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation at a large research institution and to determine if they deem it to be as important as the students in Rendón's initial study. I opted not to conduct this study at my institution of employment for several reasons. Because I am an administrator, I felt this might create a power dynamic with students where they might not feel comfortable participating in the study or sharing as much – if any – of their narrative with me. Additionally, conducting this study elsewhere avoided any complications resulting from being both staff member and researcher, particularly in the event that my institution of employment was not supportive of this study or its research findings.

Sampling Plan

I initially employed purposive sampling to identify my research participants. Johnson and Christensen (2017) defined this type of sampling as one where "the researcher specifies the characteristics of a population of interest and then tries to locate individuals who have those characteristics" (p. 268). However, several weeks after I launched my recruitment campaign, I had not received the level of responses I had hoped for so I also relied on snowball sampling, asking participants to recommend this study to peers who meet the study criteria (Biddix, 2018). A few of the men in this study revealed that they learned about it from another participant.

As I employed both sampling methods, I searched for gay/queer cisgender men in their third or fourth year of college who matriculated at Southeast State University (SSU) as first-year students. As Mertova and Webster (2020) highlighted the temporal nature of narrative inquiry and Clandinin (2013) revealed that participants' stories are lived and experienced over time, interviewing juniors and seniors allowed me to capture a more holistic and evolving story than if I were to interview first-years or second-years. Mertova and Webster also explained that narrative inquiry captures and analyzes life stories and critical events in great detail. As a result of capturing these in-depth lived experiences, we might expect to use a smaller sample size in narrative research. In the end, I interviewed seven students who identified as gay/queer cisgender men – who were also juniors, seniors, or recent graduates – from Southeast State University.

Recruitment Plan

My primary recruitment method was via email. I developed a recruitment email (see Appendix A) and flyer (see Appendix B) that I sent to two Southeast State University (SSU) LGBTQ student organizations: SSU Pride Coalition and Spectrum. I asked the organizations to share the information on their social media accounts and forward the email to their members. I

also requested that they post the flyer in any physical or electronic group spaces. The email (see Appendix C) and flyer were also sent to the director of the SSU LGBTQ Center. Their assistance was solicited with sharing the recruitment email with gay/queer cisgender men and posting the flyer in the center's physical and virtual spaces. I did not receive a response from SSU Pride Coalition while a graduate assistant responded on behalf of Spectrum and the SSU LGBTQ Center that they would include the study recruitment information in the center electronic newsletter and post the flyer in their physical space.

I also sent a recruitment email (see Appendix D) and the flyer to faculty who taught upper division courses offered by women's studies such as Queer Theory, LGBTQ Studies, and Gender, Race, Class, and Sexuality; faculty who taught sociology courses, such as Sociology of Gender; and faculty who taught psychology courses such as Human Sexuality. Several of the faculty responded that they would share my study information with their classes. After several weeks, however, I had not received any participants so I also contacted the women's studies, sociology, and psychology faculty again in addition to the directors of the undergraduate programs in social work and women's studies and requested that they share my study recruitment information with their students. In an effort to attract additional participants, I sent my recruitment materials to theatre faculty who taught 3000 and 4000 level courses after the first two participants mentioned that this department was a validating place for them. In my messages to faculty, I requested that they make an announcement and share the flyer in class as well as post information about the study in the course announcement section of the university's online learning platform. In all of my recruitment materials, I mentioned that students would receive a $50 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the data collection process as an incentive for participating if selected.

Students interested in participating were asked to contact me directly through my SSU student email account. Students who expressed interest in participating were sent a brief Qualtrics questionnaire (see Appendix E) to determine if they met the study criteria. In my correspondence with the theatre faculty, I also included the link to the Qualtrics eligibility survey. Those who met the criteria were contacted by email (see Appendix F) and asked to schedule a Zoom interview. The email included basic information about the purpose of study and an informed consent form (see Appendix G) was attached for them to review before the interview. In total, seven students responded who met the criteria to participate in the study. See Table 1 for a list of participants including their classification and major in order of how their narratives are presented in the following chapter.

Table 1

Study Participants

Name	*Classification*	*Major*
Rocky	Recent graduate	Risk Management and Insurance
Phil	Fourth-year	Theatre
Atlas	Third-year	Theatre
Charlie	Fourth-year	Cognitive Science (Theatre minor)
Teddy Wilde	Third-year	Theatre and Media Studies
Jack	Third-year	Theatre (Portuguese minor)
Frank	Third-year	Political Science, Sociology, and Women's Studies

Students who did not meet the study selection criteria were notified by email (see Appendix F) that they were not selected and thanked for their interest. Two students responded who did not meet the criteria for participation.

Data Collection

Josselson (2011) explained that since narrative inquiry centers around detailed stories that uncover how individuals understand their lives, interviews are the primary method of collecting data. As such, I conducted one recorded interview with each of the seven participants, with an average interview time of 70 minutes, which served as the main point of data collection for each individual. The interview was conducted via Zoom mainly out of concerns related to social distancing, since this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview script (see Appendix H) began with reviewing the purpose of the study with each participant. I asked them if they had any questions about the study or the informed consent form (see Appendix G) they received previously before asking for their verbal consent to participate. From there, I used a semi-structured interview format with a series of open-ended questions. According to Biddix (2018), a semi-structured interview is moderately standardized and allows for flexibility where question order can be modified and questions can be omitted if necessary. Specifically, I was interested in learning about the participants' stories related to validation – or invalidation – from their first year on throughout their entire undergraduate experience. I began with three general questions designed to help the participant feel comfortable talking with me. In general, all of the questions were designed to assist me with learning about the participant's narrative where they might share their experiences in class with faculty, out of class with peers, or generally within the campus environment, similar to how queer-spectrum students describe their experiences within the literature discussing their perceptions of campus climate (e.g., Blumenfeld et al., 2016; Garvey et al., 2018). Two of the questions asked the student to share incidents where they felt validated or invalidated, either in or out of class, during their interactions with faculty, staff, peers, or others. These incidents could be related to their academic experiences and/or peer

interactions. These questions were rooted in Rendón's (1994) validation theory as they asked the student to share stories related to academic and/or interpersonal validation that happened in or out of class. Rendón also discussed how students from underrepresented populations sometimes faced challenges and doubted their ability to succeed in college. One of the interview questions asked the participants if they ever encountered a challenge that may have affected their belief in their ability to succeed, and if so, how they overcame that obstacle. This question was designed to elicit a response where a student might have felt invalidated within their environment and/or doubted their ability to succeed, but then found validation somewhere on campus that provided them with the confidence to persist. The last question provided an opportunity for the student to share anything they felt was important to their college experience that they may have omitted earlier, would like to expand upon, or would like to add. My hope was that participant stories might reveal a turning point or epiphany when they first believed in their ability to succeed in college. Mertova and Webster (2020) defined these as critical events and maintained that these are commonly found within narrative inquiry. At the conclusion of the interview, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity and sent the electronic gift card to thank them for their participation.

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing the narrative interviews was to have them transcribed by a transcription service. I used Otter to transcribe the audio files. After that, I reviewed each raw transcript while listening to the corresponding audio file, making corrections as needed, which allowed for greater accuracy in the data. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, the next step was to review them in order to re-construct a narrative of each participant's experience in chronological order, following Czarniawska's (2004) concept of the interview as a narrative

production site. I also analyzed the transcripts in search of what Mertova and Webster (2020) referred to as critical events in the participants' stories, commonly found within narrative inquiry. In the document margins, I wrote segment memos to identify key ideas, turning points, and time periods within each narrative while I also wrote document memos to summarize each narrative and its key ideas after reviewing each transcript (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Biddix (2018) explained that coding is a process of uncovering patterns and themes within qualitative data to reveal findings, and that each piece of data is coded and then further organized into categories and subsequent themes. The segment memos were useful during the initial or first-stage coding process where I created unique codes corresponding with ideas found in the data, which Johnson and Christensen (2017) referred to as inductive codes. When I found those critical events or turning points commonly discussed in narrative research (Mertova & Webster, 2020), I marked those with a unique code. If a section of the transcript contained multiple ideas, it received multiple codes.

Saldaña (2009) discussed the cyclical nature of coding as well as that first-cycle coding is rarely perfect. According to Saldaña, "[t]he second cycle of coding (and possibly the third and fourth, and so on) of recoding further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory" (p. 8). I engaged in second-stage coding to organize the codes into categories and then themes, which also ensured for intracoder reliability (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

After organizing the data into themes, I conducted a holistic and categorical analysis of the data found within the participants' narratives. Josselson (2011) described how with the former, the participant narrative "is considered as a whole and sections of the text are interpreted

with respect to the other parts" (p. 226), while with the latter, portions of the narrative are compared to similar parts from other narratives via coding. I drafted a holistic participant narrative for each interviewee that re-constructed their story into a chronological sequence and illuminated the key themes found within related to the research questions. From there, I composed a categorical analysis of themes shared across all participants' stories with the goal of illuminating major ideas found within my study to answer my research questions.

Trustworthiness

There are several ways I addressed trustworthiness during this study, specifically in relation to validity, reliability, and transferability. After the data was analyzed, I engaged in member checking where I asked the participants to review and confirm my findings since "the trustworthiness of narrative research lies in the confirmation by the participants of their reported stories of experience" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 83). Four of the participants responded to my request to review their narratives. I also practiced reflexivity throughout the study by journaling, which allowed me to self-reflect on my how my biases, assumptions, and experiences might have influenced my emerging research findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). This was important since I shared at least one identity with the research participants.

To assist with study reliability, I reviewed the initial transcripts while listening to the interview files (as discussed previously), which provided for greater accuracy in the data. Reviewing and coding each transcript twice allowed for greater reliability in coding and organizing the data. Throughout the study, I maintained an audit trail in a separate document in order to describe my findings as I uncovered them and explained my thought process in real time, essentially retracing how I arrived at my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Mertova and Webster (2020) proposed that transferability in narrative inquiry is achieved through the use of critical events. The authors explained that "the use of critical, like and other events described in the context of narrative inquiry provide such richness of detail and accessibility that a reader should be able to make applications in another setting" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 85). In my study, I attempted to employ rich, thick description in writing about critical events – and general events – found within participants' narratives as well as in writing about the themes found across them to assist with transferability. My hope was that this would enable others to understand how my findings related to validation of gay/queer cisgender men might apply to students on other college campuses.

Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Subjectivity and positionality are key within qualitative research studies. Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, and Caricativo (2017) explained that "[t]he researcher's positionality/ies does not exist independently of the research process nor does it completely determine the latter. Instead, this must be seen as a dialogue – challenging perspectives and assumptions both about the social world and of the researcher him/herself" (p. 427). It is clear to me that my positionality played a role in my dissertation. My research study focused on the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men in college, specifically, where and how they find validation on campus that enables them to persist and be successful, engaged learners.

I identify as a gay cisgender White male. My family was lower-middle class and I grew up in a large, diverse, metropolitan Texas city. I am not a first-generation college student and I attended a small, private liberal arts institution in Central Texas for my undergraduate degree. The messages I received from society about being gay when growing up and going to college were not very positive and the term "queer" was viewed as derogatory throughout my childhood

and into my early adulthood. College campuses were not as accepting of gay students as they are today, and support mechanisms and resources for gay/queer students on campus were sparse. As a result of these factors, I did not come out until shortly after graduation. From there, I attended a large public research university in the Southeast. More resources were in place for gay/queer students at my graduate institution and the environment was more receptive of sexual minority students than my undergraduate institution. Since completing my master's degree, I have worked in higher education for 24 years. For the past 12 years, I have worked at a large, public urban university serving as an academic advisor and advising supervisor, and working directly with students. Throughout my time in higher education, I have not been involved in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) advocacy or organizations on campus.

My research participants and I shared identities of being gay/queer cisgender men. We have had experiences coming to terms with our sexual identity, coming out, and living as gay/queer cisgender men. Though I conducted this study at an institution that is predominantly White, I had the opportunity to interview some gay/queer cisgender men of color who have had vastly different experiences than I have had as a White man. Strayhorn (2012) specifically discussed how the coming out experience is noticeably different for men of color than for gay men in general while Garvey (2020) highlighted that there are differences in outness across racial identities. Additionally, as attitudes and perspectives toward gay/queer men have shifted since I was in college, my participants' experiences and mine differed from a generational perspective. Generation Z participated in my study while I belong to Generation X. Lastly, I have a better understanding of how universities function and how to navigate the college experience than most students from working in student services. I am an "administrator," which some participants

might have found intimidating, although I identified myself primarily as a doctoral student to the participants in this study.

Josselson (2011) maintained that the researcher must consider their standpoint as an observer in relation to their research findings as a key tenet of reflexivity. Reflexivity was crucial to this research study, particularly due to the overlap of some of my identities with the participants. I journaled during the process to reflect on how my experiences and thoughts might have influenced the research process and the interpretation of the data. This enabled me to be "more aware of my own perspectives to assist me in listening carefully to their experiences, rather than relying solely on my experiences to interpret their findings" (Linder, 2015, p. 542).

Summary

This qualitative research study examining the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation on college campuses was rooted in a social constructivist paradigm. Narrative inquiry was the research design and the primary method for data collection was semi-structured interviews. Following data collection, I reviewed each interview transcript through two stages of coding through which themes were identified within each narrative as well as across all of the participant narratives. I employed several strategies to ensure trustworthiness with this study and engaged in reflexivity while conducting my research.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men with validation on campus using Rendón's (1994) validation theory as a primary framework and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) human ecology theory as a secondary framework. Examining the participants' interactions with faculty and peers and the impacts of institutional supports on them will shed light on where and how gay/queer cisgender men experience academic and interpersonal validation during their college career. These emerging findings can provide university faculty and administrators with a better understanding of how to support the persistence and success of gay/queer cisgender men on their campus. As such, this study asks the following questions:

1. Where do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience?

2. How do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience?

3. How do gay/queer cisgender men overcome the challenges they encounter within their campus environment in order to believe in their ability to succeed in college?

To answers to these questions, I recruited participants from a large, public research university in the Southeast, which I assigned the pseudonym of Southeast State University (SSU). I then conducted a Zoom interview with each participant and asked them to select a pseudonym to conceal their identities. After reviewing and coding the interview transcripts, I

organized the data into themes to construct an analysis of the findings. These findings follow in the subsequent paragraphs, first via a narrative for each participant that seeks to re-construct their story into a chronological sequence and embed themes tied to the research questions, and second via a categorical analysis of common themes across the participants' stories. Throughout the narratives, I assigned pseudonyms to faculty, peers, organizations, events, and buildings described by the participants to assist with protecting their identities.

Participant #1: Rocky

Rocky is a gay cisgender Hispanic man from a suburb of a major city an hour from Southeast State University (SSU). He is Catholic and revealed his religious identity plays an important role in his life. Rocky graduated a year early from SSU in May 2020 with a major in risk management and insurance. He described himself as someone who loves getting involved and who loves interacting with and getting to know different types of people. He is very open and has a big personality in groups but one-on-one he is usually more laid-back and soft-spoken. Rocky also does not like to talk much about himself and is more of a listener. He felt that his independence and self-reliance is what has gotten him through school and life successfully. Rocky prefers either "gay" or "queer" to describe himself, though he primarily used the former during the interview. He inadvertently came out to his parents during his senior year of high school while feeling the effects of medication from having his wisdom teeth removed. He was nervous about coming out to his parents but found them to be accepting and supportive. For the rest of high school and beginning of college, Rocky tried to hide his sexual identity as a means of self-protection. Growing up in the South, he said, "…you don't know who you're talking to. You don't know how they'll react if you act more feminine or if you say that you're gay."

Validation in Orientation: The Fish Fry

One particularly validating experience occurred for Rocky in the summer between his senior year of high school and first year at SSU. Rocky attended the SSU Fish Fry, a weekend camp that assists students with their transition to college and assigns them mentors to help them through their first year. He was in a small group of students during the Fish Fry where they discussed topics such as identity and diversity. He recounted the validation he felt discussing his sexual identity with peers he had just met. In fact, Rocky found so much validation in the weekend that he later became a counselor for the Fish Fry.

Validation in a Straight Roommate

Rocky purposely chose a straight roommate for his first year at SSU. He explained that: "A lot of other gay and queer people reached out to me but…I didn't want to room with them because I knew that I didn't want that to be linked to me because I feel like that would make it more obvious that, you know, I was gay and that was like, my whole personality."

He did not want his sexual identity to be most salient, and instead wanted others to view him as a "regular man." Rocky reflected on this as "very toxic to hear" now and explained how this was rooted in what he described as a toxic masculinity problem in the South. Nonetheless, Rocky's roommate knew he was gay and Rocky found validation in the acceptance he received from his roommate.

Invalidation: Heteronormativity in the Residence Hall

Rocky and his roommate lived in Cooper Hall their first year. The first three floors of Cooper housed women while the fourth housed men. Rocky felt like the odd man out because:

The guys in my hall were the stereotypical, stereotypical guys that I would normally be

intimidated by. You know, like, super Southern, hyper-masculine…and right off the bat,

that's something that kind of put me out of ease, you know, especially like having to live

in the same hallway as them, having to shower in the same, you know, the community

showers. That would always freak me out because, you know, you hear stories all the

time about things that can happen.

Rocky lived on edge especially during his first few months in Cooper Hall and kept a low profile

during the entire year. He was concerned his safety and comfort would be in jeopardy if his floor

mates perceived him to be gay.

Invalidation in Fraternity Rush

Rocky described how the toxic masculinity problem in the South led him to feel the need

to connect with other men, so he participated in fraternity rush his first year. Some of the

fraternity members told him, "…you'd be a great diversity pick, but we already have one of you,

so we don't need you," which Rocky found invalidating. Other fraternity members told him that

"…if you're in our fraternity and they know you're gay, they're gonna think that there are other

people who are gay in our fraternity – and we can't have that." While Rocky did not want his

sexual identity to be most salient, he also did not want to go back into the closet. He ultimately

realized that fraternities were not for him.

Religion and (In)Validation

Rocky regularly attended a worship program for first-years coordinated by the SSU

Catholic Student Association. One of the weekly programs referenced dating between men and

women and did not use language inclusive of same-sex relationships. Because of this lack of

mindfulness, whether intentional or not, Rocky did not feel validated by that organization so he

never returned. Rocky felt a similar vibe from the SSU Catholic Student Association as whole. However, he met a group of young Catholic students through attending mass and shared that "young Catholics are the most open-minded people I know." He explained how "We talked a lot about intersectionality, especially, specifically with religion and how specifically the Catholic Church…how that kind of like, traumatized us in all these different ways." These young Catholics were a source of validation for Rocky.

Invalidation in Academics: College of Business

Rocky's major was risk management and insurance in the College of Business. He shared that the demographics in the college were very much White, straight, cisgender men. He explained:

> I didn't see literally any other gay or queer men so there is no one I could…easily connect with just based off, just based off that. It's something that was very intimidating and something I have to, you know, deal with for three years, of feeling alienated right off that bat.

Rocky estimated that 70% of male students in the College of Business belonged to fraternities, "…a group that I, when I first came to SSU, who intimidated me and who I didn't want to be with…Those are the people I was kind of stuck with for three years." He survived those three years by keeping a low profile because he was not sure how his business peers would react if they learned of his sexual identity. In contrast to his experience with business, Rocky also participated in theatre early in his college years, where he found validation through interactions with peers and faculty in the department.

Validation through Involvement

Rocky served as a counselor for the Fish Fry his first two years and became an SSU Ambassador in his second year. Each year the SSU Ambassador program chooses 36 students reflecting the diversity of the institution. The ambassadors provide tours and participate in welcome events for prominent people such as politicians and university presidents. Rocky felt it was validating to interact with these prominent people, saying that being able to share "…my experience as a gay man, sometimes, if I was comfortable telling them, that sort of…helped me come to full realization, like full acceptance of my sexuality…just kind of talking about it with other people on campus." The faculty, staff, and peers Rocky met through his campus involvement were a source of validation for him, specifically the vice president for student affairs and the directors of the Fish Fry and SSU Ambassadors. While participating in the ambassador program, he engaged in an activity called the identity walk where participants were required to reveal something about themselves. Rocky was able to get closer to the other participants through the exercise and explained how "Having that sort of bond right off the bat, those are the people who, who I felt validated most by because I also kind of knew their story."

"Involvement Gays" and Invalidation from the Gay Community

During his second year, Rocky developed a concern for being a "top gay." He referred to himself as "an involvement gay, a gay man who just did everything on campus…And there are the involvement gays and the party gays at SSU. And it, looking back on it now, it seemed very, very cut-throat." Rocky also shared how the SSU gay community was very small, with everyone knowing one another, gathering at a downtown bar called Sanctuary, and that it was not a friendly or validating environment for him. Reflecting on his experience with the SSU gay community, Rocky said, "You think that it'd be the place where I feel the safest, but it's the

place where I was kind of on my toes the most because I didn't know what people would like, say about me."

Validation in LGBTQ Resource Center

Rocky first visited the SSU LGBTQ Center his third year and it became a place where he found validation and met new friends. He shared how "…being in a space where I could kind of, you know, have a sigh of relief…like I'm just in a place with other people like me and not even if I'm talking to someone, I just feel calm." However, Rocky avoided the center during his first and second years because of the toxic masculinity he felt, wanting to avoid anything that might indicate he was gay. However, by his third year, Rocky was able to move past this concern and engage with the SSU LGBTQ Center.

Rocky's Challenge

When asked if he faced a challenge in college, Rocky explained that he struggled with group activities his first two years, such as public speaking, because "There are different traits that, that people correlate being gay to and my first couple of years, that's something I didn't want." He felt the need to alter his character and manner of speaking so others would not perceive him to be gay. Rocky reflected on his first two years:

> I feel like, because of everything that I've been through…everything that I dealt with, like with fraternities, with like the Catholic Student Association, with like every single time I felt uncomfortable. I felt like it kind of made me the person who I am today.

Whenever he interacted with people on campus where he felt out of place, he reminded himself that interacting with those people was only temporary. He explained how, when he was faced with uncomfortable situations, "If I stick through it, have thick skin, don't really think about how

…what they're saying affects me or how uncomfortable I am in this situation, I don't let that affect me and I'll come out just fine."

Participant #2: Phil

Phil is a gay cisgender White man from a small town about 120 miles northwest of Southeast State University (SSU). He is a fourth-year theatre major. Phil grew up Baptist in a town where his family founded and still operated a Baptist church. However, he does not identify as Christian but rather as a "spiritual person." Phil first came out in seventh grade and felt his family has been accepting of him ever since. He described himself as an extrovert who likes to communicate and make many friends. Phil is usually upfront with – and not ashamed of – his sexual identity, and is very outspoken, blunt, and authentic. "I want everyone to be able to be open about who they are and what they support," he said. Phil shared that many of his interests are stereotypically gay and that he is more effeminate than other men but that this is "…who I am authentically, and it does lead to people…knowing that I'm gay usually without me telling them." He thought most would view him foremost as gay and that his race is not especially important to him but acknowledged the privilege he holds as a gay cisgender White man.

Validation from Theatre, Faculty, and Creative Spaces

Early in his first year, Phil attended a theatre department event where he met the "…first and only gay male teacher I've ever had in my life." Dr. Scott directed Phil in a production in his second year and taught one of his courses in his third. Phil did not have many gay role models growing up so interacting with Dr. Scott was particularly validating for him because he was:

Seeing someone like me, especially like, in my field and interests, like being able to be successful. And you know, people rave about him and love him. And so it made me feel

like, you know, hopefully someday…when I get into whatever career path I fall into, I'll

receive the same acceptance and like, love for just being authentically who I am.

Phil generally found the theatre faculty to be validating, explaining how "…I feel like I could

talk to any of the professors about like, hey, here's what I'm going through and all of them are so

open and honest and like, open-minded that I wouldn't feel uncomfortable sharing." He found

the theatre building to be a welcoming, validating space where everyone was his friend and he

felt comfortable. Phil shared that creative spaces such as the visual arts and music buildings were

also welcoming and said, "Anytime I'm in a building where I feel like I'm surrounded by

creatives, or like, I'm in a room with creatives, I feel a lot more affirmed and a lot safer."

Peer Validation from in Theatre Student Organization

Phil joined Curtain Call, a musical theatre organization, in his first year and later served

on its board. Curtain Call produced LGBT-friendly musicals and was a safe space for him. "I

made instant friends, which is difficult, you know, coming in as a freshman, especially, you

know, a gay person not knowing how people are going to perceive you…And they immediately,

I guess, kind of became like a family." In Curtain Call, he felt validated as a gay man because he

found a place where he could practice his craft and his identity was valued.

Invalidation at the Football Game

Phil remembered attending one particular football game around a time when he explored

painting his nails. He visited the concession stand where a staff member called him "ma'am."

When Phil responded that he was not a "ma'am," the staff member "...just laughed and handed

me my card back and made like, a comment about like, if you aren't a ma'am, then why are your

fingernails painted?" Because of that experience, Phil later removed the nail polish and decided

he would not wear it again in public out of concern that "somebody on campus is gonna say

something. Somebody on campus is going to assume something about me." Phil attended a few more games but did not visit the concession stand by himself again.

Invalidation in Male-Dominated Spaces

In addition to the stadium, other male-dominated spaces such as bathrooms and locker rooms made Phil uncomfortable. He recalled when he took a class in the rec center and would not visit the weight room:

> I would go in like, the room where…there were more females present, or things like that. And I mean, I think that comes a lot from my friends always kind of being female. I've never really had a friendship with a heterosexual man that's been positive or turned out in a good way.

Phil further explained that he presents as more effeminate "And for me going to those [male-dominated] spaces, I just feel like that, that leaves me more vulnerable for criticism."

Invalidation in the College of Business

Phil liked eating at a restaurant in the College of Business but did not feel comfortable there, even though no one had been outwardly homophobic toward him. In his interactions with people from the college, "…I've never had a positive experience about my sexuality. Like, a lot of the people who have made remarks towards me, or might have said something to me are business majors or related to the College of Business." Phil felt he should not associate an entire school of people with a few negative experiences but was uncomfortable in the College of Business.

Invalidation by Student Organization

During the spring of his first year, Phil attended the annual dessert theatre presented by SSU Student Baptists. Phil hoped to participate in this production during his second year.

However, the organization chose a musical and removed all of the gay references. "If they can't even, like, include a one-liner about being gay, like, I don't feel comfortable, like, auditioning for these people so I never ended up working with them," Phil explained. In his mind, the group did not value representing his identity so he did not want to affiliate with them.

"Mixed-Bag" Spaces

Phil generally does not feel comfortable attending events if the sponsoring group does not outwardly express support for gay organizations. He referred to it as a "mixed bag," and said, "You never know what you're going to walk into. And for me, that uncertainty of knowing whether an organization is accepting of me is scary." Phil described the current national political climate as divisive and explained how his friends present as liberal people, with their identities at the forefront physically and verbally. "You just never know who's going to be there and how they're going to react to your presence or presentation," he stressed.

(In)Validation from Campus Offices

Phil found his advising office during his first and second years to be a validating place. He described his advisor, Sara Lee Bunn, as "a very sweet lady [who] had all these posters all around her office that were about identity" and who was open to assisting him outside of advising. One particular campus office where Phil felt uncomfortable was the SSU LGBTQ Center. He explained:

> They offer groups for people who are questioning their gender identity, and people who identify differently than their birth gender. They offer a…women who love women group. They offer a questioning and closeted group. And they offer LGBT Ambassador positions. But they don't, all of those spaces, don't feel like they welcome me because I don't fall into any of those identities.

Phil wanted to engage with the SSU LGBTQ Center but did not feel its programs offered a way for him to connect.

Invalidation at Work: Don't Dress Like "That"

In his second year, Phil started an on campus job with the School of Music and recalled his first day:

> They didn't explicitly tell me a dress code. So I wore, like, denim shorts and a button up shirt. I had, you know, my hair dyed like a grayish blonde and I had a nose ring in…it was a cute outfit. I liked it. And I walked in and she was giving me a tour of the office and she said, um, so like, why are you wearing this?

Phil was not sure what the supervisor meant so he asked for clarification. The supervisor could not give Phil specifics but simply told him not to dress "like that." The incident weighed heavily on his mind so he asked his supervisor for a copy of the dress code. She responded that there was nothing written but that he should not dress "like that" once again, as well as that his attire should be business appropriate, though she also said he could wear gym shorts and a t-shirt. Because the supervisor could not pinpoint a dress code and was contradictory, Phil speculated she did not find his outfit to be gender appropriate.

Invalidation in a Kiss

Although Phil overwhelmingly described his theatre department experiences with faculty and peers as validating, he recalled one incident that made him uncomfortable. Phil was performing in a show with a bisexual male peer who kissed Phil at a cast party in front of the other attendees. He questioned the kiss, sharing his discomfort with friends who relayed his feelings back to the peer. The peer maintained Phil was overreacting and that the kiss was a joke.

This response made Phil feel uncomfortable about his sexual identity: "…people think because I'm gay that they can just, like, kiss me and it's a joke."

Phil's Challenge: Can I Do This?

Phil recalled a critical event during his second year that presented a challenge for him. For his acting class, he had to play what he described as an "awful womanizer." His two scene partners said they would not be able to perceive Phil as a straight man who loves women. Phil related, "But in a class where my whole grade is determinant on my performance and selling the situation, it was disheartening." This led him to question if he should proceed with a career in acting. "And I mean, also just moving forward into the field of acting, like my desired career field, you know, like, if I couldn't do an assignment for class…could I do it?" he wondered. Phil talked with the professor who helped him work through the issue so that he was able to pass the assignment and earn an A in the class.

Validation in Supporting Other Gay/Queer People

During his third year, Phil attended a TedX presentation on campus given by a queer man. He related how:

> If I know of another gay theatre student doing a project about, like, or performance about queerness, like, I'll, you know, go support them…I just think it's important for me, I guess, to help support queer individuals when they put themselves out there. And so, like, events like that, I guess, have also affirmed me, like, even though it's not my success.

Phil also explained how he receives validation through watching his gay and queer peers graduate and find success out in the world.

Invited but Not Welcomed at the Party

Phil recalled a party he attended his junior year at the invitation of a female friend who was in a sorority. He explained what happened when he approached a group of fraternity men:

I said, hi, nice to meet you. And all of them just stared at me, and didn't say anything, and just looked at me, and then just moved on with their conversation. And I was like…I wasn't welcomed in a space that I was invited to.

He speculated that his female friend had discussed his identity with her friends or that perhaps the fraternity men were aware of his identity and did not want to engage with him. Phil recounted that, in general, the invalidation he experienced at SSU came primarily from other students in social settings where they might make a remark or treat him differently. He also cited fraternities as invalidating to him as a gay man.

Overcoming Challenges

Phil believed he was able to overcome the challenges he faced throughout college because of his ability to self-motivate. He described himself as a very driven, hard-working person. He often had times when he doubted himself and felt overwhelmed but would fall back on his friends, many of whom hold identities outside the mainstream. He explained: "I surround myself with other people who might be experiencing similar stressors or similar worries…part of what drives me is that I know that I have like, friends, who are going to support me 100% regardless of my identity."

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Participant #3: Atlas

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Atlas is a gay cisgender Black man from a suburb of a major city about 45 minutes from Southeast State University (SSU). He is a third-year theatre major, also working toward a master's degree in non-profit leadership and management. Atlas usually uses the term "gay" to

describe himself but sometimes uses "queer." He described himself as funny with an easy-going personality. At 6'2", Atlas commands attention as a tall Black man, "taking up space" and sometimes receiving stares from others because of this. He came out to his family one day after he turned 18 so he could "…find a way to possibly support myself if that time comes. Thankfully it didn't come." Atlas did not expect his mother to be accepting; however, his father was the one who was somewhat unaccepting. He related, "I think when I told my father, it kind of sent me back a little bit because I was ready to step out and then, you know, he basically told me that I was gonna get AIDS and die," which pushed him back into the closet. His parents are now much more understanding and he also has a close relationship with his older sister. She recently came out as pansexual and has been a source of validation and support for him.

Validation in Meeting Others "Like Me"

Atlas was still coming out of his shell when he arrived at college. "I was still really repressed. So I think my identity was more, um, in my ethnicity and race. And I think that was just because I, growing up, I grew up really religious," he explained. During his first year, he still questioned his sexual identity and presented as a person he did not want to be. However, as he began to meet others like him at SSU, he began to challenge the negative thoughts he learned growing up about being gay. Atlas said, "I thought it was so much easier in college, like nobody knows you, at least where I'm from. So it's easier just to start on a new foot and then you kind of just roll with it."

Experiencing Life as a Gay Man in College: Losing Virginity

Atlas divulged how he was a virgin when he arrived at SSU and related, "I think my big thing like coming into college, like I can finally like try these things and do these things and it's going to be really cool." He wanted to experience life as gay man to see what it felt like and

prove to himself that he could do it. He also wanted to understand the experiences his gay friends described, in part to feel validation from the SSU gay community and to assimilate into it. A critical event happened for Atlas during his first year when he lost his virginity, which he thought was initially a big deal for him. He reflected:

> I, you know, made it like this big sacred thing that I was taught. But like, I think just losing it in college, I think I thought it would solidify me as a gay man. And like, I would feel differently about things…I don't really know what I expected. I think I just expected to walk out a completely different person…But, nothing really happened.

In hindsight, Atlas did not feel he needed to lose his virginity to feel validated as a gay man.

A Validating Professor: Queer People Can Be Smart

During his first year, Atlas met an openly gay professor for the first time, Dr. Scott, when he served as assistant stage manager for a theatre department production. He explained how Dr. Scott "…really made emphasis in our classes to say that queer people can be smart." Atlas also learned from Dr. Scott that "being queer does not like limit who you are, what you do with anything. It's helping you, you know along your journey, becoming the best version of yourself you can be and who each of you are." Atlas continued to interact with Dr. Scott throughout his time at SSU, taking a class with him in his second year.

Validation through Theatre Peers

Overall, Atlas found the theatre department to be queer-friendly. His professors and peers were open and inviting, sharing a common basis of theatre from which they built relationships with one another. Atlas related how the theatre students congregated in a designated space called The Corner between classes or around rehearsals:

The outside world just kind of clouds out and you really get validation there…Like if I did not have that foundation of like people telling me it's okay, and like walking you through things, and um, talking things out with me, helping me process things, I don't think I would be where I am today just in terms of how far I am along in my journey.

Spending time with theatre peers in this space felt like spending time with family to Atlas, which he found validating.

Validation at a Gay-Friendly Bar

Because Atlas spent so much time in the theatre building for class and rehearsals, he did not visit many other campus spaces. However, he started venturing downtown with the new friends he met his first year to a gay-friendly bar called Sanctuary. He explained that he never went to parties in high school so it was fun to visit Sanctuary and loosen the reins, though he felt that he was still responsible. Atlas likened Sanctuary to a bar called Babylon in the television show, *Queer as Folk*. "I thought it was so cool. I mean, I felt completely safe," Atlas shared. He felt the bar was a space for everyone in the LGBTQ community.

Invalidation through Republican Peers

Atlas worked at a summer camp for young adults with special needs between his first and second years where he befriended a group of fellow SSU students also working there. Atlas recounted how he and these peers later visited a Confederate-themed bar downtown called Rebel Yell. He described how the bar theme included racist overtones and how he did not feel safe there as well as at many other downtown bars. Atlas is no longer friends with the summer camp peers explaining that "I just had assumed like since were doing all these good things, we must all be very liberal, which was not the case." Atlas later learned some of these peers were members

of the Young Republicans, a student organization he found invalidating to him as a gay man because of its political ideology.

Invalidation at Downtown Bars and Fraternity Parties

Atlas also recalled how he and his queer friends were denied entrance to some of the downtown bars. "It's normally because we look stereotypically queer. Like some of us might be in crop tops or some of us might be wearing makeup," though he normally has no problems getting into some of the bars alone. Another place where Atlas felt unsafe and invalidated was the Greek housing area off-campus. He shared, "I guess they, they know what they want to uphold, and will continue to uphold those, those traits and qualities and things like that." Atlas explained how he was invited to fraternity parties and was turned away, though he speculated this might have been because of his race as opposed to his sexual identity.

A Validating Roommate

Atlas moved to an off-campus apartment for his second year with Chad Sommers whom he met through the theatre department. "I think we've both been amazing for each other," Atlas said. He further described his relationship with Chad:

> We talk about literally everything, work through everything, probably experience
> everything together now because of COVID and we're just in the same house. So I would
> say he's probably been my top supporter and proponent for that validation [which] is
> helping, kind of helping each other, having that symbiotic relationship.

For his third year, Atlas continued to live with Chad as the two rented a house together.

Validation in Queer Peers of Color and Invalidation in Racism within LGBTQ Community

During his second year, Atlas became aware of the culture shock he felt at SSU. He explained:

I had never been around so many people who identify as queer or trans*…And that was

so cool to see and experience versus something that, you know, I watch on like a

documentary or so something like that. And more I can be friends…with everyone here.

Atlas also felt culture shock coming from a predominantly non-White high school to SSU where

he had classes with White people for the first time. Atlas did not feel comfortable talking with

others about this because he did not think they would understand. Most of his SSU queer friends

were also White and he explained how his friends have asked him "…why do you always make

it out to be such a big thing? But it really is a big thing. Like, like, I don't know how to explain it

but it really is a huge determining factor." He also discussed the racism he found in the SSU

LGBTQ community:

I think I expected coming to college just because you identify as queer, LGBT, like you

can't, you're probably not racist. You're more, you know, open, liberal, things like that,

or you don't have those common stereotypes. But like that's unfortunately not true. And

that was really surprising to me.

Atlas was able to connect with other queer students of color and began to understand they shared

similar experiences.

Facing Challenges and Finding Motivation as a Gay Man

Overall, Atlas felt accepted and safe on campus. He did not feel he had experienced any

challenges in college because of his sexual identity and shared that what kept him motivated was

remembering how "I'm doing this for myself." Atlas recalled his mother saying that people can

take anything away from you except for your education, a statement that has helped him

mentally get through tough times. He shared, "I want to do this for myself, but I also won't be

able to survive in the means that I want to without this education." Atlas also explained how he

had been self-critical, sharing that "you really have to check in with yourself and figure out like, pinpoint the ways that you are helping and hurting yourself."

Participant #4: Charlie

Charlie is a queer cisgender White man from a mid-sized city an hour from Southeast State University (SSU). He is a fourth year majoring in cognitive science and minoring in theatre. Charlie described himself as "pretty chaotic of an individual" and was candid about the mental health issues he has faced throughout life, explaining that he has Type 1 bipolar disorder and ADHD. He related, "And those are some of the things that I usually let people know if they're ever curious to talk about it because I feel like de-stigmatizing mental health is just as important as de-stigmatizing sexuality and gender identity." Charlie's mental health issues do not define him. He is simply "…a person who happens to be bipolar, happens to have ADHD, happens to be queer." Charlie further explained his sexual identity:

> The way that I, I view people in a sexual term is through the scope of their personality and what it is that makes them, them. And so I usually say I don't really do any labels, but I have a whole lot of love. And that's always my go to answer is I'm just a loving person.

Overall, Charlie has a hard time labeling his identity but expressed he is first queer – and not heterosexual. He explained how he could not have conversations about his identity with friends prior to college: "If I ever brought up any kind of bi-curiosity, it was immediately shut down or I was ridiculed." When he attempted to come out, he found some shame in it, especially when close friends did not believe him or thought he was making a choice. During his first year at SSU, Charlie came out to his parents who also resisted him, though they knew of his experiences

with men and non-binary people. Despite this resistance, Charlie was fully out and known to most of his peers as queer by his second year.

Validation through Theatre

Charlie attributed finding himself to the theatre department, where he saw many others like himself and interacted with faculty who were unbiased and open to students' identities. Even though Charlie changed majors, he exclaimed:

> My home is the theatre and film department. And there I have had more validation than I think I have had my entire life, being surrounded by people that are identified in all different kinds of ways, looked all different kinds of ways, spoke all different kinds of ways. And first and foremost, like me for me before any of that, before, before any label.

Charlie has only interacted with theatre-related student organizations, which he also found to be inclusive and non-judgmental. "They are my friends," he said.

A Validating Professor

Charlie named one theatre professor as particularly validating. He met Dr. Scott during his first year through other students and watching productions Dr. Scott directed. Charlie had multiple interactions with Dr. Scott over his time at SSU through class, callbacks, productions, and counseling sessions. He explained their relationship:

> I have been able to talk to that man about pretty much anything and everything. And he was always willing to give me advice from his perspective and his learned experience and make room for me…And that, having that as a resource was…really validating.

Charlie also said it was comforting on a spiritual level to have Dr. Scott as a mentor and that "validating somehow doesn't even feel like it's enough of a word" to describe their relationship.

Validation in a Coffee Shop

In his second year, Charlie worked as a campus barista for ten months where he felt that the environment was particularly inclusive. His manager spoke to him about "…pretty much anything and everything, and made it absolutely clear that it didn't matter who you were, as long as you were a good person to him." Charlie also found his coworkers to be accepting. Ultimately, though, he left the coffee shop job to focus more on his academics.

A Turning Point: Can I Commit to This?

Charlie began to doubt whether acting was the right path for him in his second year. He explained:

> Historically there has been just a denial of bisexual, pansexual, and everything betwixt identity if it's not black or white. And in the realm of theatre and film, the most attractive candidates for roles, the most attractive, the most successful people tend to be the ones with the most expressive, explosive, or identifiable looks, or personal behaviors. But if you're a person that somewhere lost in the middle the way that I am it might be harder for you to find your footing.

Charlie did not feel strong enough in his identity to continue with theatre, recalling the disbelief of others when he came out. He realized he needed to find another path "Because if I'm not fully committed to this and if I don't really believe that people are going to accept me for who I am and for what I am, then I'm going to have extreme struggles."

A Critical Event: It Was All Falling Apart

During his second year, Charlie also experienced a critical event when he faced a lapse in his mental health. Charlie worried about his well-being while performing in multiple shows, working, and studying harder than he had before. He withdrew from five courses and recalled

how "That year, I really questioned if, if college was right for me, in regards to my health, both physical and mental, or if it was something I needed to come back to." When asked if his sexual identity played a role in this critical event, Charlie explained that it was indeed a factor. He explained his thoughts at the time:

> I have no idea who I am or the kind of person that I should love. I'm terribly lonely. And I feel like I'm going to be alone because I'm somewhere in the middle. And I don't know how to connect with people as a result of that. And that was an anxiety that weighed on me heavily.

Through family and friends, Charlie found the inner strength to move forward. "I was able to find the faith that there would be a hand that would reach back to me, and then there always was," he related.

Validation in a New Major and Advisor

Charlie returned to SSU and pushed ahead with a cognitive science major and a theatre minor. His new major involved courses across several disciplines, including psychology, a department he described as an incredibly inclusive place. In general, Charlie explained that "across the university, I don't think I've ever interacted with a member of faculty or staff that I would have interpreted as being worried about being open with me about who I am, my story." Charlie specifically mentioned his academic advisor, Maura Bean, as one staff member who was particularly validating to him.

More Validating Faculty

In his third year, Charlie participated in a production directed by another theatre faculty member he found particularly validating, Dr. Pemberton. Charlie interacted with Dr. Pemberton

during his second year but their relationship blossomed while working on this production. Charlie recounted how, with Dr. Pemberton:

> There have been multiple times that I have gone to her about, about moments of a bullying, about moments of uncertainty in my life and about moments of uncertainty in the world. Like, especially during the pandemic, gosh, I was, I'm a high-risk individual…She was a person of comfort to talk to you whenever I felt a little overwhelmed.

Similarly, Charlie met Harry Martini, a musical theatre professor, in his third year and shared how Martini was "…always willing to talk to me about anything about my sexuality, about my mental health, about my, my academic well-being and about working together professionally. He's…been a person who has validated me."

An Invalidating Roommate

For his fourth year, Charlie roomed with a close friend he had known since childhood. Charlie described this roommate as conservative and viewed him as a brother even though they fought at times. He felt oppressed by his roommate regarding his mental health and sexual identity. "He's been the kind of person to say, it's just all in your head, bro. Just get over it. Like, just choose to be happy. Just, bro, you need to go get a girlfriend." Charlie also explained how his gay friends denied his identity because it was somewhere in between hetero and homosexual. "There have been classmates of mine who have been like, are you even gay?" Charlie related. Because he is not strictly homosexual, some of his peers believed – on more than one occasion – that he was not queer, which he found invalidating.

Validation at Work

Charlie began working for the College of Business Information Technology Office (ITO) during his fourth year. He recounted how his ITO student manager:

> Made it known that it was an extremely inclusive space, and that they were happy to have me on board. My, my manager told me all the ways that they identified and was, was open to conversations about, about me as a person, and about the things that I like doing, and about the, what, what pronouns made me feel comfortable, and what subjects I felt comfortable talking about.

From day one, Charlie felt he could be himself and hoped he could continue working in the ITO the following year, if accepted into a SSU graduate program.

Invalidation in the College of Business and Fraternities

Though the ITO was validating for Charlie, he had heard stories about how the College of Business harbored heteronormativity, which he also sensed. "There is a seeming correlation between fraternities, sororities into the College of Business," Charlie maintained. He recalled interactions with fraternity members he had found to be bigots and explained how he found fraternity parties heteronormative. Charlie did not attend these parties because "I don't feel particularly safe amongst people that are part of fraternities, just from slurs that I've heard called out by people that are in fraternities."

Invalidation from Slurs on Campus and Downtown

Charlie revealed that generally speaking, "When it comes to places and spaces that I don't feel safe, it's always the student body" whether on campus or downtown. He usually wears colorful and flamboyant clothing when not working and described how he had heard slurs coming from groups of students walking through campus because of his attire. Charlie explained

how peers might laugh and call you "flaming" as they pass by because of what you are wearing and that "you hear people shout at you from cars, honk their horn at you, on campus, downtown. It just happens."

More Invalidation Downtown: The F Word

Charlie expressed that "downtown is a very, is a very chaotic place and you hear a lot of slurs get thrown around. And it's a place where you have to be careful no matter who you are." Charlie specifically recalled an incident when he was called "f*ggot" and physically threatened. He recalled the exchange:

> I know I was just going about my business and having a good time with my roommate.
> And I got called this word and I said, 'What now, what did you say?' And then basically
> they threaten me and I said, 'Oh, okay, what then? You wanna talk about it? Let's talk
> about it.' And they walked away.

Although Charlie found it to be an empty threat, the incident infuriated him. However, despite the invalidating experiences he recounted on campus and downtown, Charlie summed up his SSU experience as a queer man by saying "It's honestly been great. It's been a great experience."

Participant #5: Teddy Wilde

Teddy Wilde is a queer cisgender White man from a midsized city 100 miles from Southeast State University (SSU). He grew up in the Presbyterian Church of America and said his religious upbringing still affected him in working through his sexual identity. Teddy described himself as intense and exciting, saying it is like "…bouncing around a lot, and the bouncing is fine, but you do hit the wall a bunch of times." He is a third year, with a double major in theatre and media studies. In terms of his sexual identity, Teddy primarily identifies as queer and explained how many of his interests are informed by his queerness. He also identifies

as male but "…sometimes the whole gender thing I'm like, you know, I'm sure not thinking about that. Like, um, so I would probably say definitely a queer person."

Invalidation before Classes Started

Teddy "really wanted to go to college somewhere up North, somewhere cold, somewhere away from the South because I hated the South." He recounted an event the week before classes started his first year when the first year students congregated in the stadium for an activity where they practiced cheers and physically formed the university initials together on the field. Teddy reflected on the event:

> I think part of it was just the extreme like sports of it. And like, that I mean we are singing along to an old Dixie song, you know, it's very aggressive. It's football…the only sports my high school and middle school had were swimming golf and for two years, tennis, so it was very out of place for me.

As a result, Teddy found the event to be upsetting and invalidating to him as a queer person.

Invalidation in the Residence Hall, Validation from Mentor in Coming Out

Teddy lived on campus in Higgins Hall his first year. He recalled how the community bathrooms "were definitely a place of terror" for him but that, fortunately, his room was next to the handicap accessible bathroom, which he used when he had the chance. During his first year Teddy found validation from a close friend who supported him as he was struggling with his sexual identity his first semester. The two grew close and the friendship developed into "very much a mentor relationship."

Validation by Major Professor

Another individual Teddy found validating was a theatre professor named Dr. Scott. Teddy conducted research through the Honors College for several semesters and many times, his

topics focused on queer theatre, film, or theory. He explained how Dr. Scott's office "…has just been a very affirming place for me to explore and exist as a queer man, not just like, literally as a person, but also in a very validating way academically." Dr. Scott made Teddy feel like "Your life is worth studying. It's worth getting a $1,000 grant to do, you know, in a way that is very literally affirming." He also described Dr. Scott as a good mentor and role model.

Validating Academic Spaces

When asked about validating campus spaces, Teddy explained how the theatre and journalism buildings where he took major classes were fairly queer-inclusive and generally affirming spaces. He shared how:

> If I am presenting on a film for a class, I don't have to worry like, oh, if I pick a gay film people are like, might be, UGH, you know, and so those tend to be pretty affirming rooms, even if not everyone in them is maybe affirming.

He recalled memories from classrooms in the theatre building, including Dr. Scott's office. Teddy mentioned a lounge in the theatre building that served as a safe haven for students but is no longer there.

Validation in Student Organizations

Along with finding validation in Dr. Scott and the theatre building, Teddy participated in theatre-related student organizations, which he found validating because they were "very artsy spaces." He also recalled a theatre performance he attended his first semester developed by queer theatre artists from Brazil, which was a documentary about the queer experience. Teddy found this performance particularly moving and validating as a queer man.

Invalidating Space and Religious Activity

Teddy did not spend much time on campus outside of the theatre and journalism buildings, "Partially just because I don't have a lot of free time," he stated. There were, however, some spaces he found invalidating, one of which was the student center plaza. Teddy recalled the preachers who spoke on the plaza about homosexuality and said, "…you're going to hell," which he found "A little invalidating, especially because it seems really pertinent to my personal past, like Christianity." He primarily stayed in his major classroom buildings and the library partly because they were secluded from the religious activity he encountered on the plaza. Teddy said, "Like, most people who believe gay people are going to burn in hell probably aren't going to be taking a class on musical theatre" and shared that he found "…any Christian in any Republican leaning organization" to be invalidating to him.

Critical Event: A Break Up

Teddy was in a relationship for nine months at the end of his first year and reflected on how it "…made sort of like queerness an act. Because I was like, I was performing. I was enacting queerness in a very visible way that I was conscious of." When the relationship ended, he questioned whether he would hide his identity since he was no longer performing it in the relationship. However, after the relationship, he was more comfortable with himself, not feeling the need to hide or diminish himself nor to perform his queerness. Teddy has not dated since the breakup, though it was not for lack of trying.

This breakup was a critical event for Teddy. "I really was not in the best place when that happened actually," he admitted. Teddy's ex-boyfriend transferred to another institution even though Teddy wanted them to stay together. He explained how the ex-boyfriend was a negative force in the theatre department and how he had been feeding off – and associated with – that

negativity. "I definitely thought about transferring several times. And then also like changing my major several times," he revealed. Teddy also described negative energy within the department at the time and thought, "I should just like quit theatre. And I'm like, no, I love theatre. I should quit Southeast State University. That way, I can keep doing theatre and be in an environment that like doesn't make me hate myself."

Teddy auditioned for a production after the breakup and recalled his ex-boyfriend saying, "…there's no way you'll get the lead. They'll give it to a grad actor…That's when I said, well, I have to prove him wrong and I did. So I think that anger really fueled me." Teddy pushed through the negativity of the relationship and breakup by focusing on theatre and was cast in the lead role of a queer-themed play. Teddy shared how "…that was actually a really validating space to get to explore it through my art and my study." After the breakup, Teddy visited the counseling center, which offered a validating space where he could work through the breakup. "I made sure to get one of the counselors with like, the special sticker on the window," he related.

Invalidation in Football

Teddy attended football games during his first two years and described the stadium as an invalidating space. "I went to games my first two years, and those were always really scary spaces for me. Just because, like you know, the size, the volume in general," he revealed. He continued: "Football is very masculine. It seems very straight to me. And…I get a spitting sense that, if something were to go wrong, I would not be on the side with the most people."

Invalidation: A Friend Turns Their Back

Teddy recalled another major event that occurred around the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit in his second year. The friend who helped Teddy work through coming out in his first year divulged personal information Teddy shared in confidence with members of their queer

theatre peer group. The former friend turned into a bully and a ringleader of the group who turned their back on Teddy. He found the betrayal from his former friend and peers to be invalidating, saying that they had been "…shaking the ground out from under me" as well as that "these safe spaces that I thought I had, I don't have them."

Invalidation through Straight Peer Dominating Class Discussion

While Teddy found the theatre department as a generally validating space, he recounted some invalidating experiences in his queer theatre and film class during his second year. He explained how a straight White male peer dominated the class conversation despite prefacing his comments with "…as the straight White man in the room" as a way to acknowledge that the class was not his space as a straight man. Teddy did not feel that the peer's words matched his actions of dominating the class discussion. He said, "You shouldn't be the one talking the most." Teddy thought that the man was not aware of what he was doing and that it was part of "…the dominant power just not realizing that they have power, they just think it's assumed."

Invalidation in a Critique: Is it Too Gay?

Teddy described a class experience where he felt invalidation from a professor. He explained how a guest lecturer was discussing a genre of films he had researched. Teddy expressed his opinion but was shot down by another professor sitting in who was not the class professor and who was also the department head. In general, Teddy questioned some of the critiques he received from professors in his major classes. So much of his sexual identity related to his class assignments, Teddy explained, that when he received a negative critique he was not certain if it was a coded critique for something else. He questioned the critiques:

> Is that just because it was too gay? Or is it like an actual critique? And so a lot of
>
> language used by like, older faculty members…I have no way of knowing your intention.
>
> It's like oh is this about me? Or isn't it?

Teddy perceived many of these film professors to be straight.

Devalued for Presenting Queerness

Similarly, Teddy explained how certain professors with whom he had general interactions in classroom buildings or productions made him feel devalued or emasculated because of his queerness. He received looks in the hallways from some professors, heard comments under their breath, and perceived general negative body language and attitude from them. Teddy had not taken classes with them but felt they were reacting to him because of how he flaunts and loudly presents his queerness. Teddy speculated that these film studies professors knew only him as an actor. He also believed that these professors have a distaste for actors and that they viewed him as a clown who is beneath them.

Validation in the Film Club

Recently, Teddy recently joined the Film Club, which met via Zoom because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He found it to be a validating space because many of the films discussed touched on queer themes. Teddy exclaimed, "…it's a very open place just where everyone engages earnestly with what we see and so that's been really affirming." When reflecting over his entire experience at SSU, Teddy considered it slightly negative because of the difficulties of being in the South "but there are definitely pockets I found that have been really beautiful and fun and like, lively to be a part of."

Participant #6: Jack

Jack is a gay cisgender biracial man from a mid-sized city 100 miles from Southeast State University (SSU). His mother is Black and his father is White; both were in the military, so as a self-described "military brat," Jack moved around during his childhood. He is a third-year student majoring in theatre and minoring in Portuguese. Jack was inadvertently forced out of the closet in the 11th grade during an argument with his mother when she revealed she knew he was gay. Once he came out, he felt that a weight had been lifted and that he was later able to develop a stronger relationship with his mother. His parents divorced and, though he described his father as a conservative "redneck," Jack generally felt that his family is accepting of him. Jack explained his sexual identity is typically most salient and that he loves everything about himself, including being gay. When describing himself to others, "actor" is among the first things he mentions. He also shared that he presents himself unapologetically and described himself as naturally flamboyant and unforgettable. Jack has always been outgoing and extroverted. He added, "I'm very opinionated, very, like, if I have something on my mind, I'm going to say it and I'm gonna say it like respectfully."

Validation in Exploring Drag

During his first year, Jack lived on campus with a friend from high school. He shared how when he got to college, "I was like, this is the place to be free. And so I just kind of went wild…I was wearing booty shorts. I was wearing crop tops. I was doing anything and everything I wanted to." Around the same time, he was into *RuPaul's Drag Race* and connected with the local drag community, where one of the local queens encouraged him to explore drag. Jack commented:

It's just like something that seems so fun especially when you don't have to listen to the strict like gender norms. I feel like that is so exhausting, like exhausting in a way when you just have to be so performative…So I feel like with drag, it kind of gives you the opportunity to do like whatever you want to do.

He dressed in drag his first time for an event downtown and stepped outside of his comfort zone, commenting, "…I was like, even shocked by myself that I did, because like, that dorm was crowded. And I was just walking around in some like six inch heels like going down the stairs…it was an adventure." Jack was grateful he could openly experience drag and not feel he was in danger. He recounted the validation from his roommate saying, "He was just like, oh my gosh, you look great!"

Validation from the Locals

Jack found the local queer community to be close-knit and welcoming. He mentioned a downtown bar called Sanctuary as a validating place and two other local businesses nearby as queer-friendly. "You met so many different people. That just allows you to be who you are without asking any questions, without looking at you weird. It's just like, they just accepted you for who you are," he recalled. Because of the validation he found within the local community, Jack felt he could call the town his home.

Invalidation in Campus Employment

Jack started working on campus in October of his first year. One of his on-campus jobs was working for food service in the student center. Jack described some of the supervisors as old, White, straight, cisgender men who he felt were closed-minded. He recounted how they would give weird looks to those who might be acting too flamboyant or would make comments about

appearances and outfits of others. There were times when Jack felt he could not be himself in that job but was concerned he would lose his job if spoke out.

Invalidation as Business Major

Until the middle of his second year, Jack majored in business – an experience he found invalidating. "That was just because no one looked like me, no one was, like me. Everyone was kind of like, kind of heteronormative and very boring," he recalled. According to Jack, many of the business students were rich and White, and lived a different life from his, not having to worry about the harassment he might face. Even though was never harassed, Jack felt that others in the college stared at him. He also shared his thoughts about business and STEM majors:

> I feel like your personal being does not matter…And I don't feel like it should be that way. And I feel like when you are gay, and even when you are of color, it's too, that's too, like that's too vital of a part of your being to, to place on the back burner when you're considering your field.

Jack felt these majors are dominated by heteronormativity, which caused students outside of the mainstream to mute their identities.

Switching to a Validating Major: Theatre

In his second year, Jack changed his major to theatre, sharing that "when I got to the theatre department, it's like, there's so much diversity that it's so easy to be yourself" and that being queer is widely accepted in the department because "…queer people have given so much to that community." Whenever he walked into the theatre building, he felt safe and comfortable. "I feel like I can just walk around and just do me. Whenever I'm in class, I feel like I can offer my perspective as a gay man and not be ridiculed," he explained.

Validation through Exploring Identity in a 'Brave Space'

Jack mentioned two theatre professors who provided him with a validating experience:
Dr. Pemberton and Dr. Zimmer. At the beginning of his second year, Jack participated in a
production with these professors, which touched on issues related to slavery. The professors
included a "brave space" for participants to reflect on their identities. The participants found
ways to connect their experiences as Black artists, queer artists, artists of color, etc., to the
various individuals portrayed in the production in order to uplift them and give them voices.

Validation from Gay Professor

Jack named another theatre professor, Dr. Scott, as validating. "I think the reason being is
because like he's a gay man himself." Jack was unsure whether to pursue a theatre-related study
abroad program in London or one in Brazil where he could study Portuguese. Dr. Scott explained
how Jack had a once in a lifetime opportunity going to Brazil because the department had been
waiting for a student studying Portuguese to work with a Brazilian theatre professor. He
described his talk with Dr. Scott as "…definitely a very validating experience because I feel like
I was just very doubtful of what I was capable of." Dr. Scott helped Jack realize that he could
have a world where theatre and Portuguese co-exist, which would set him apart from others.

Validation in Portuguese Minor

The Portuguese department was also validating for Jack because he found it queer-
friendly. The department brought in Fulbright Scholars every year, many of whom Jack believed
to be queer. Because of this, he felt queer people were accepted in Brazil, which made him feel
safer traveling there for his study abroad experience. Jack also knew that two of his teaching
graduate assistants in the department were queer men. "I knew that they were succeeding…they
were accomplishing their dreams," he said, and "Just seeing gay people succeed, it gives me

hope, and I feel like I definitely found that in the Portuguese department." Jack briefly mentioned the women's studies department as validating because his professor "…would ask people of different backgrounds and stuff like, the same question and see how they felt about it and she would never shame anyone for it."

Validating Student Organizations

Jack described how the two theatre student organizations he joined, Curtain Call and SSU Thespians, were queer-friendly and how SSU Brazilian Students (SBS) was particularly validating for him because it studied and welcomed different perspectives, including feminist and queer literature. Jack said that "I feel like that is definitely an organization [SBS], um, that is very excepting of just queer voices and stuff like that." He also found the SSU Catholic Student Association welcoming to queer students saying, "They don't really care if you're queer or not."

Invalidation in Organization: No Space for Queer Voices

Voices of African Students (VAS) was one student organization Jack identified as potentially unwelcoming to queer students. He attended an event hosted by VAS and described it as amazing. He further explained his thoughts about VAS: "In terms of like, it being like a safe space for queer folk and like a place where queer voices can be heard, no. That doesn't exist, because…within like the African community…it's not safe for them to exist."

Validation from SSU LGBTQ Center

Although Jack did not spend much time at the SSU LGBTQ Center due to his busy schedule, he considered it a validating space because of the resources it offered and felt welcomed when he had time to visit. Additionally, he appreciated that the center offered programming for queer people of color, which he felt had been neglected in the past. He added, "So the fact that…that perspective is starting to be acknowledged, especially at SSU, is

something that is remarkable to me because, I don't know if it's still the case but like, last year, SSU was only like, 8% Black."

(In)Validation in Study Abroad Office

Jack worked in the Study Abroad Office (SAO) at the time of the interview. The office was led primarily by women of color who were queer-friendly, provided him with a safe working environment, and made him feel his experiences were valid. However, the SAO presentations did not touch on the queer study abroad experience. "One way the Study Abroad Office specifically was invalidating in the sense that they just didn't really, they just kind of ignored the queer voice and they didn't find it relevant enough to include in their PowerPoint," given that some countries might be less welcoming to openly queer students.

General Invalidation from Student Body

When asked about other times Jack felt invalidated as a gay man at SSU, he said:

Every once in a while you get to people that have…like there's people in the dorms, the

high-rises that have like, Trump in their window. You get people that have, like, that are

from like, the small hick towns in the state, that are like, they don't understand you at all.

He added, "It's a lot of like, weird looks. It's a lot of just being kind of dismissive, but like it's nothing that I feel like, unsafe."

Racism in Gay Community: Understanding Intersection of Identities

Jack acknowledged the racism he feels exists within the SSU gay community. He shared how:

A lot of White gays that are very spiteful…You go to Sanctuary and there's just like,

White gays, White theatre gays, just glaring at you…looking like you are just the most

terrible person in the world. And for the life of me, I don't understand it.

He felt White gays were quick to invalidate the feelings and successes of Black and queer individuals and did not understand why. Jack expressed how the gay community does not know how to deal with the intersection of identities and felt that it needed to be addressed further.

A Challenge Playing Any Role – Gay or Straight

A challenge Jack faced was that he felt people assumed he could not perform straight roles and that he would be typecast into playing flamboyant characters. Jack explained how some professors tell students what type of role they should play, which some students found invalidating. As a result, Jack felt he had to prove he could play any role – straight or gay. "If you like, put that to the side…there's nothing that you really can't do," he related, and continued that "whenever someone says no, I'm going to find another way…Like, every aspect of my life is someone like, someone like slamming a door in my face and me like going in through the window." Despite this, Jack maintained a strong belief in himself and his abilities to push forward. He continued: "…my acceptance of people, my kindness, my persistence, my drive, I feel like that is from me…without that I don't think I would've survived… if I am sure of myself, then like, why does anyone else matter."

Participant #7: Frank

Frank is a gay cisgender White man from a suburb of a major city an hour from Southeast State University (SSU). He is a third-year majoring in political science, sociology, and women's studies, and minoring in theatre. Frank uses the term "gay" but is also comfortable with "queer." When asked how he described himself, Frank said he is a theatre person because it was a big part of his life, particularly in high school. He also described himself as functionally disorganized and as someone who is sympathetic, cares about people, and tries to be a good friend. Frank came out in middle school and shared that he has a great relationship with his mother and the rest of his

family, who are supportive. Frank was out of the closet and had queer friends in high school but revealed, "…I just didn't really click with them this much as I click with people in college." At SSU, he was in a bigger bubble where he could meet more queer people.

Finding Validating Peers Early

Frank revealed that, although he was fortunate to attend college, SSU was not where he thought he wanted to attend college and orientation did not help to generate excitement. He discussed how it took a few months for him to find the SSU queer community but he was able to connect relatively quickly once he did. Frank explained how at SSU:

There's really an opportunity to grow where you're planted and to find your people, especially if it's, you know, a big school like here. So I was very quickly able to, you know, find like a good like, close group of friends that, you know, a few of them are also queer.

Finding this group of peers during his first year allowed Frank to feel more like himself. He explained how his friends "…appreciate me and they support me in everything that I do. You know, and they're there for emotional support."

Validation from Theatre Professor, Peers, and Space

Frank recalled his theatre professor during his first year as someone who inspired him to pursue a theatre major. Through her class and instruction, he connected with the theatre community, a group of people he found to be fun. Frank is still friends with some of those he met in that class his first year and shared that "…my closest friends today are the people who I met in my very first theatre class here. And, you know, we are best friends, you know, stay very much, you know, stable to this day." The theatre building was also a validating space on campus for

Frank because he spent a large amount of time there and has fond memories with his theatre peers.

Invalidation from Professor Expressing Conservative Views

In contrast to his theatre professor, Frank recalled a political science professor named Dr. Beale whom he found invalidating. Frank described Dr. Beale as a conservative, older professor who was close to retirement and who would go on "long-winded rants very frequently." Frank recalled how Dr. Beale said that multiculturalists were taking over America and related this to the downfall of the country. Frank is able to be respectful when he disagrees with people but described his hesitancy to speak in class:

> But I felt very much that like if I had spoken up and like, you know, maybe tried to debate him on like, his political ideas, or if I had like, yeah, if I had like engaged in that, it was really just for him to talk. It wasn't for us to talk back to him.

Because of Dr. Beale's outspokenness surrounding his conservative political beliefs, Frank did not feel comfortable being open about his sexual identity during class discussions.

Invalidation from Spaces with Masculine Energy

When asked if there were spaces where Frank did not feel validated as a gay man at SSU, he cited the stadium, rec center, and Greek area near campus. He explained:

> Those three spaces to me have like…traditionally masculine energy, I'll say. And, you know, sometimes like, I have earrings, sometimes I paint my nails. And sometimes I'm like, walking through the spaces and I'm like, you know, I just, I worry, you know, that I'm getting sideways looks or that, like, what people are maybe thinking. And yeah… Being visible in those areas sometimes, you know, sometimes anxiety inducing.

While nothing ever happened to Frank in these spaces, he had a general feeling about them. "I feel like I know the type of people that frequent these spaces, and I feel like I am not, you know, I'm not their people." reflecting back on campus spaces, particularly Greek Row.

Validation from Boyfriend

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of his second year, Frank met his boyfriend whom he found as a source of validation. Frank and his boyfriend leaned on one another when they were both experiencing anxiety because of the pandemic. Since they could not go anywhere else, they spent a lot of time together during the pandemic. Frank's boyfriend helped him understand that the "…world isn't going to end…Having him be able to support me, I was like okay, like, things are going to be okay."

Validation from Local Community and Downtown Spaces

Frank described a specific area downtown adjacent to the SSU campus as particularly validating. This area houses a bar called Sanctuary as well as two other establishments Frank found to be queer-friendly and where the community would congregate and have a good time. Frank recounted great memories from these places and felt comfortable as a gay man there because of the validation he felt from the local queer community, which he found to be relatively tight-knit. He related that people within the community recognized one another frequently and that they were "…uniquely validating, in a way that, you know, I really didn't experience in like, high school." Frank attended drag shows downtown and described his interactions with the local drag queens and how "Cultivating relationships with them, I find very validating because…I'm like, friends with this like local celebrity. And I really admire them. I admire what they do. And like, to me, they're like really cool people…to hang out with." In general, Frank also described the queer people in the local community as cool people.

Being Cat-Called Downtown

One incident occurred off campus that was invalidating for Frank. He was walking home with his boyfriend and roommates and as they were walking, a car passed by and people inside the car screamed at them. Frank recalled hearing the word "fag" shouted from the car, though he did not recall specifically what else they yelled. "But that kind of caught me off guard," he said. "I was like, I think that's the first time I've ever been cat-called." Frank was not able to discern if those in the car were SSU students or local community members.

Overcoming an Academic Challenge

In reflecting on his time at SSU, Frank did not feel that he faced any challenges because of his sexual identity. He described himself as an A student and that A- grades "…get to me a little bit." One challenge he faced happened when the coronavirus hit and his classes moved online. Frank described how he has an ADHD-type brain, "And so like sitting on the computer and like, organizing and focusing as a challenge for me." He was taking a sociology class during the spring of his second year when the pandemic hit. He missed a class early in the semester because he was not feeling well and, as a result, he did not do well on an exam. Frank received the lowest grade in the class and faced a challenge in recovering from that grade but was eventually able to bounce back, earning an A- in the course. "I think that applying myself and being dedicated was the way to, like, overcome that challenge."

Motivation and Support from Validating Peers and Family

When asked how Frank stayed motivated to succeed in college, he explained how he believes that he can do anything he puts his mind to do and recalled how his mother instilled that belief in him. "I feel that if I just put enough effort into something, like, you know, I can really succeed, and I can really thrive." Whenever Frank feels a challenge, begins to doubt himself, is

having a rough time emotionally, or feels that his responsibilities are insurmountable, he reminds

himself he has peers and family who will support him. "They'll always be super supportive of

me," Frank shared. He continued: "…generally speaking, I really do believe in myself, and then I

also know that I have other people who believe in me as well."

Themes across Participant Narratives

While reviewing the data to construct individual participant narratives, some

commonalities emerged across their stories related to how and where they found validation and

invalidation on campus and how they overcame challenges they faced as gay/queer cisgender

men. The following paragraphs will examine their shared experiences related to validation across

several categories: faculty and academic validation, peer and interpersonal validation, and

validation through institutional supports, which includes campus offices and spaces.

Faculty and Academic Validation

The data illuminated how the men found validation from specific professors and

generally from faculty within certain academic departments. Additionally, the data highlighted

how certain academic disciplines played a major role in providing validating experiences for the

gay/queer cisgender men in this study.

Validation from Faculty: Being Queer Does Not Limit Who You Are

Several of the men described how faculty provided them with experiences that made

them feel validated as gay/queer cisgender men. Most notably, multiple participants discussed

their repeated interactions with Dr. Scott throughout their college career. As with several of the

men, Phil recounted how Dr. Scott was the "…first and only gay male teacher I've ever had in

my life." Teddy and Charlie shared how Dr. Scott provided validation by serving as a role model

and mentor for them, with Teddy specifically stating how Dr. Scott explained to him how "Your

life is worth studying." Atlas described how Dr. Scott provided validation by making "…emphasis in our classes to say that queer people can be smart," and expressing how "…being queer does not like limit who you are, what you do with anything. It's helping you, you know along your journey, becoming the best version of yourself you can be and who each of you are."

A few of the men also mentioned Dr. Pemberton as validating because of the experiences they had participating in a production with her. Jack recalled how he was able to explore his identity in a "brave space" while Charlie recounted his interactions with her, "…I have gone to her about, about moments of a bullying, about moments of uncertainty in my life…She was a person of comfort to talk to you whenever I felt a little overwhelmed."

In general, the men discussed how the theatre faculty provided them with validation by fully accepting and supporting them throughout their college journey. Phil expressed how "…I feel like I could talk to any of the professors about like, hey, here's what I'm going through and all of them are so open and honest and like, open-minded that I wouldn't feel uncomfortable sharing." Others briefly mentioned validating experiences they had with faculty in class who were accepting of their identities, such as Jack who explained that "Whenever I'm in class, I feel like I can offer my perspective as a gay man and not be ridiculed for that." Jack echoed this with his women's studies professor who welcomed his perspective in class. Charlie explained how "Across the university, I don't think I've ever interacted with a member of faculty or staff that I would have interpreted as being worried about being open with me about who I am, my story." Frank was the only participant who described invalidation from a faculty member. He shared how his political science professor openly espoused conservative views in class, which made him feel uncomfortable sharing his perspectives as a gay man.

Validation within Disciplines: More Validation Than I Have Had My Entire Life

The data highlighted how the men found validation within academic departments related to their majors and minors, most notably theatre. Several of the men described validating experiences through courses such as queer theatre and film and within the department in general. Teddy also related how "If I am presenting on a film for a class, I don't have to worry…if I pick a gay film people are like, might be, UGH, you know, and so those tend to be pretty affirming rooms." Though he changed majors, Charlie still called the theatre department home, saying that "there I have had more validation than I think I have had my entire life, being surrounded by people that are identified in all different kinds of ways…And first and foremost, like me for me."

In addition to the theatre department, Jack related how the Portuguese department was validating for him because it sponsored queer visiting scholars and hired queer graduate teaching assistants, saying that "seeing gay people succeed, it gives me hope, and I feel like I definitely found that in the Portuguese department." Charlie further explained how the psychology department tied to his cognitive science major was a validating and inclusive place. Additionally, Frank learned of this study about gay/queer cisgender men via his sociology course.

In contrast, Rocky recounted how he did not feel validated as a risk management and insurance major in the College of Business because "I didn't see literally any other gay or queer men so there is no one I could…easily connect with just based off, just based off that." Jack shared a similar sentiment: "…because no one looked like me, no one was, like me. Everyone was kind of like, kind of heteronormative and very boring," because he did not see others like him there. Jack also highlighted how business and STEM majors did not make space for queer people saying, "…I feel like your personal being does not matter… And I don't feel like it

should be that way." Phil and Charlie likewise expressed feelings of invalidation from the College of Business, primarily due to interactions with business majors.

Peer and Interpersonal Validation

The data indicated the men found a significant amount of validation through connecting with like-minded peers both on campus and in the local gay/queer community. It also revealed how they found validation through participating in specific student organizations. At the same time, the data showed how the men felt moments of invalidation from student organizations, the general SSU student body, and even at times from within the gay/queer community.

Validation from Peers: Friends Who Support Me 100%

Many of the men described how they met more gay people like them and connected with validating peer groups within the queer-spectrum community when they came to SSU. Frank recalled how, during his first semester, he was able to find "…this group, and they really allowed me to, you know, honestly like, feel like more of myself, like every day, you know. They really, like, appreciate me and support me in everything that I do." Similarly, Atlas recounted how he was able to find validation through connecting with gay/queer peers to help him come out of his shell. Phil expressed how he preferred to attend activities led by gay/queer peers saying that "And so, like, events like that, I guess, have also affirmed me, like, even though it's not my success," while also receiving validation from seeing his gay and queer peers graduate and find success after college. Phil further described how "…part of what drives me is that I know that I have like, friends, who are going to support me 100% regardless of my identity."

Several of the men, including Jack and Frank, shared how they found validation within the local gay/queer community. Jack described how in the community, "You met so many different people. That just allows you to be who you are without asking any questions, without

looking at you weird. It's just like, they just accepted you for who you are." Frank found his interpersonal interactions and the relationships he developed with members of the local gay/queer community to be "…uniquely validating, in a way that, you know, I really didn't experience in like, high school."

The men also described how they felt validation from their roommates, significant others, and individual peers they met at SSU. Rocky discussed his straight roommate his first year who was accepting of his sexual identity. Likewise, Jack recalled how his roommate was encouraging of him dressing in drag his first year. Atlas found the symbiotic relationship with his roommate to be validating, sharing how they:

> Talk about literally everything, work through everything, probably experience everything together now because of COVID and we're just in the same house. So I would say he's probably been my top supporter and proponent for that validation [which] is helping, kind of helping each other.

Frank felt validation from his boyfriend and maintained, "…having him be able to support me, I was like okay, like, things are going to be okay." A few of the men revealed how they developed relationships and found validation from peers within their majors. Atlas recalled his friendship with Pollyanna Barton, a master's student in the theatre department, saying that "she's helped me so much since my first year…She really set me up for my, my, the rest of the journey that I'm going through right now." Jack described the validation he found from Stella Gunderson, a theatre peer he met during his first year. He expressed that he was "…grateful for people like that, because…there exists a lot of amazing people on this campus who are so accepting and literally want to hear your story. They want to know who you are."

The men shared how they felt a general sense of invalidation from their SSU peers. Charlie explained that when it comes to places and spaces "…that I don't feel safe, it's always the student body." In addition to describing the incident downtown where he was called a slur, Charlie shared how "…you might be wearing something that makes you look 'flaming,' and then you hear people as they pass by, laugh at you." He also described other students honking their horns and shouting from their cars as they drove by, similar to an incident Frank recounted. Jack explained how "It's a lot of staring. It's a lot of weird looks. It's just a lot of being dismissive." Phil recalled how a group of fraternity men ignored him when he attempted to speak with them at an off-campus party, "And all of them just stared at me, and didn't say anything, and just looked at me, and then just moved on with their conversation. And I was like…I wasn't welcomed in a space that I was invited to."

Several of the men also described invalidation they felt from the SSU gay/queer community. Rocky revealed the "cut-throat" nature of the gay community and the competition to be "top gay" saying that "it wasn't a friendly environment, really." Jack also shared similar feelings of invalidation, particularly from White gay men explaining how they are "…so quick to invalidate the feelings of someone that is Black and queer." Teddy explained how a former friend and group of queer theatre peers turned their back on him, "…shaking the ground out from under me" and causing him to feel he had lost a safe space. Charlie recounted how "There have been [gay] classmates of mine who have been like, are you even gay?" because he chooses to identify as queer as opposed to strictly gay, which he found invalidating.

Validation from Student Organizations: Accepting of Queer Voices

Many of the men described how they found validation through participating in student organizations, many of which were theatre-related. Phil described how Curtain Call "…kind of

became family for me," and that it has been "…a huge part of my experience of being…a gay man and feeling validated," as well as that it was a safe space. Jack also mentioned that he found validation in Curtain Call and SSU Thespians while Charlie described the theatre organizations as inclusive and non-judgmental. Others discussed how they found validation within other student organizations that created a safe space for discussing queer-related topics. Teddy explained how the Film Club was "…a very open place just where everyone engages earnestly with what we see and so that's been really affirming," while Jack found that SSU Brazilian Students (SBS) was "…an organization, um, that is very accepting of just queer voices." Rocky found validation within student organizations such as SSU Ambassadors where he was able to explore and disclose his identity with other students who were accepting of him as a gay man.

The men revealed how several organizations were invalidating toward them as gay/queer students. Phil described how he generally did not feel comfortable attending an event by "…an organization that doesn't like outwardly express their support of gay organizations" and specifically mentioned the Young Republicans, while Atlas and Teddy also touched on the invalidation they sensed from Republican-leaning organizations that can sometimes be unsupportive of the LGBTQ community. The men further shared invalidation they received from religiously affiliated student organizations. Rocky decided he would no longer attend weekly first-year programs through the SSU Catholic Center because it did not use language inclusive of same-sex relationships in one of the programs he attended. Phil also revealed he would not participate with SSU Student Baptists in their dessert theatre because "If they can't even, like, include a one-liner about being gay, like, I don't feel comfortable, like, auditioning for these people so I never ended up working with them." Jack shared that he did not find the Voices of

African Students (VAS) to be a validating organization because he felt that "queer people don't really exist…because it's not safe for them to exist" within the African community.

The majority of the men revealed how they found Greek-letter fraternities to be invalidating toward them as gay men. In addition to Phil recounting the invalidating interaction he had with a group of fraternity men at an off-campus party, Frank described how he found the masculine energy of Greek Row to be invalidating and anxiety inducing to him. He shared that "I feel like I know the type of people that frequent these spaces, and I feel like I am not, you know, I'm not their people." Likewise, Atlas felt unsafe and invalidated around the Greek housing area while Charlie added that "I don't go to frat parties, mainly because frat parties seem incredibly heteronormative," and that "I don't feel particularly safe amongst people that are part of fraternities, just from slurs that I've heard called out by people that are in fraternities." Rocky relayed his invalidating experience participating in fraternity rush where some members said: "If you're in our fraternity and they know you're gay, they're gonna think that there are other people who are gay in our fraternity – and we can't have that."

Validation through Institutional Supports

Outside of their interactions with faculty and peers, the participants shared validating and invalidating experiences they had with institutional supports, which included campus offices and spaces. Additionally, the participants discussed how the geographical location of the institution influenced their college experiences related to validation.

Validation within Campus Offices: An Extremely Inclusive Space

Several of the men found validation within specific offices on campus. Phil described the validation he received in his advising office from his academic advisor, Sara Lee Bunn, who "…had all these posters all around her office that were about identity" and who was open to

assisting him outside of advising. Similarly, Charlie expressed that he felt validation from his advisor. Rocky described receiving validation from members of the student affairs staff, most notably the vice president for student affairs, through his involvement in SSU Ambassadors and as a Fish Fry orientation counselor. He revealed how he initially found validation as a participant in the Fish Fry prior to the start of his first year, where he was able to share his identity with peers who were accepting of him. When Teddy experienced a break-up at the end of this first-year, he "…made sure to get one of the counselors with like, the special sticker on the window," who was able to provide him with a validating space to discuss the break-up. Jack found his supervisor in the Study Abroad Office (SAO) to be validating as she provided a space that welcomed his identity. Likewise, Charlie described how his supervisor and the staff in the College of Business Information Technology Office (ITO) "…made it known that it was an extremely inclusive space, and that they were happy to have me on board." Several of the men found the SSU LGBTQ Center to be a validating place as it was welcoming of their identities. Rocky shared how "…I'm just in a place with other people like me and not even if I'm talking to someone, I just feel calm." Jack also found validation in the programming about queer students of color offered by the SSU LGBTQ Center relating that, "I feel like that's something that's often neglected."

In contrast, Phil described the SSU LGBTQ Center programming for students of various identities and expressed that he did not "…feel like they welcome me because I don't fall into any of those identities." Phil also described how his supervisor in the School of Music provided an invalidating experience for him by telling him not to dress "like that," which he interpreted as a call to dress in a manner she felt was gender-appropriate manner. While Jack found validation from the work environment in the Study Abroad Office (SAO), he found it invalidating that the

SAO "kind of ignored the queer voice and they didn't find it relevant enough to include in their PowerPoint."

Validation within Campus Spaces: I Don't Have to Perform for Anyone

Since many of the men were involved with the theatre department and spent a sizeable amount of time there, they named the theatre building as a validating, safe space. Jack said, "I feel like I don't have to perform for anyone. I feel like I can just walk around and just do me," when he walked into the building. Atlas specifically mentioned the theatre lounge, The Corner, where he said it was as if he was spending time with family in that space and felt that "the outside world just kind of clouds out and you really get validation there." Teddy also mentioned Dr. Scott's office as a validating space. Likewise, Teddy shared that he found the journalism building as a validating space because he took many of his classes there and felt safe. Rocky found the student center as a validating space because it was where he was able to connect with peers from student organizations where he felt accepted as a gay man.

Teddy named the plaza outside of the student center as a place of invalidation for him because of the preachers who spoke against homosexuality by saying "…you're going to hell," which he found "A little invalidating, especially because it seems really pertinent to my personal past." Many of the men cited several campus spaces to be invalidating because of the hyper-masculine energy they sensed within them. Frank described how he did not feel comfortable in the rec center, the stadium, and Greek Row because they "…have like a very much masculine energy…And, you know, sometimes, like, I have earrings, sometimes I like paint my nails" and "being visible in those areas is sometimes, you know, sometimes anxiety inducing." Similarly, Phil revealed the general invalidation he felt in "male-dominated spaces" on campus such as men's bathrooms and locker rooms saying that being in those spaces "…leaves me more

vulnerable for criticism." Phil also recounted an invalidating incident at a football game in the stadium when a concession staff member called him "ma'am" because he had painted his nails. The football stadium was another space commonly described as invalidating by the men, with Teddy relaying that "if something were to go wrong, I would not be on the side with the most people." Teddy also reflected on an orientation event in the stadium he found invalidating when the first-years participated in cheers and formed the SSU initials on the field saying, "It was very out of place for me." In addition to Frank's concern for the Greek Row area, Atlas shared that "the Greek life houses are places I don't usually feel safe," which relates back to the discussion of Greek-letter fraternities in the previous section. Similarly, the participants cited the College of Business as an invalidating space, in part because of the other students who majored in business but also because of the perception that there was not room for their identities within business disciplines, as was discussed in the previous two sections.

Lastly, some of the men felt invalidation in the residence halls because of the masculine energy they felt there. Rocky recounted how his floor mates during his first year were hyper-masculine and "…right off the bat, that's something that kind of put me out of ease." Teddy also discussed his level of discomfort with the community bathrooms in the residence halls.

Although not a part of campus, the men recalled invalidating experiences that occurred downtown, adjacent to campus. Frank recounted the word "fag" being shouted at him from a car and that it "…kind of caught me off guard." Likewise, Charlie recalled how "I was just going about my business and having a good time with my roommate. And I got called this word and I said, 'What now, what did you say?' And then basically they threaten me." Atlas shared that he did not feel safe at many of the downtown bars and recalled how he and his group of friends had

been denied entrance to some of the bars: "It's normally because we look stereotypically queer. Like some of us might be in crop tops or some of us might be wearing makeup."

Validation and Geography: Difficulties of Being in the South

Several participants described how SSU's location in the South affected their college experience. Teddy related how his overall college experience had been "…a little negative, just like difficulties of being sort of in the South, and around the atmosphere." Rocky also discussed "…a very big toxic masculinity problem in the South" which influenced his decision to participate in fraternity rush his first year and to avoid the SSU LGBTQ Center during his first two. He also felt this toxic masculinity of the South while living in the residence halls his first year. Jack described how the invalidation he generally felt from some other SSU students who were from "the small hick towns" in the state.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter illustrated both where and how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation and invalidation on their college campus. The data also described some of the challenges the participants faced resulting from their sexuality identity and how they overcame these obstacles. Through the narratives constructed for each participant and the commonalties identified across all of their stories, the data highlighted the importance of faculty and academics, peers and interpersonal interactions, and institutional supports in providing both validation and invalidation within the collegiate environment over time. In the following chapter, I will discuss the meaning and implications of the data presented in this chapter as well as some recommendations for practice and future areas of study.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The seven participants in this study recounted their unique, lived stories at Southeast State University (SSU) to create a better understanding of how and where gay/queer men experience validation in college, which aligns with the purpose of this research study. The following questions guided the study research: 1) Where do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience? 2) How do gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience? 3) How do gay/queer cisgender men overcome the challenges they encounter within their campus environment in order to believe in their ability to succeed in college? In the following sections, I will discuss my findings within a framework of literature related to validation theory (Rendón, 1994) and proxies for validation such as students' perception of campus climate and experiences within the campus environment guided by human ecology theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). I will also outline the study implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Rendón (1994) detailed two types of validation, academic and interpersonal, which are key in transforming college students into motivated learners who believe in their ability to succeed. Academic validation occurs largely in the classroom via faculty interactions and focuses on a student's academic success while interpersonal validation occurs mainly outside the classroom primarily through peer interactions, which assist students with social integration,

sense of belonging, and belief in their ability to succeed. Related to this, the study findings uncovered how the participants found academic validation through faculty interactions and academic disciplines, and interpersonal validation via interactions with peers informally and within student organizations. Additionally, the data indicated that the men found validation through institutional supports, which includes university offices and programs as well as campus spaces. These institutional supports contribute to creating a therapeutic learning community, which was included among Rendón's recommendations for facilitating validation on campus. The study findings also reveal the importance of the proximal processes discussed by Bronfenbrenner (1995) within students' immediate environments in providing validation through faculty and peer interactions and institutional supports.

Faculty and Academic Validation

The gay/queer cisgender men in this study found validation from faculty and within certain academic majors. Most of the men discussed relationships they developed with specific faculty members at Southeast State University (SSU). These faculty members provided validating experiences along the lines of what Rendón (1994) described in their original study: "What had transformed the students were incidents where some individual, either in or out of class, took an active interest in them – when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment" (pp. 43-44). Similarly, the men discovered validation and affirmation within certain academic majors where they were able to be authentically themselves, similar to findings in previous studies (e.g. Blumenfeld et al., 2016; Garvey et al., 2017; Pryor, 2018).

Faculty (In)Validation

Many of the men in this study (Atlas, Charlie, Jack, Phil, Teddy) praised theatre professor Dr. Scott as a faculty member who offered them validation throughout their college careers. He advised the men about their academic, career, and life goals and encouraged them by reminding them of their self-worth and abilities, telling them that gay people are smart and their lives are worth studying. Dr. Scott's interactions with the men aligned with Rendón's (1994) model of how faculty can provide validation to students. Specifically, Rendón emphasized the importance of faculty reviewing personal, academic, and career goals with students, giving students extra assistance and meaningful feedback, being approachable and showing authentic concern, designing learning experiences that encourage students to believe they are capable learners, and promoting pride in aspects of students' identities including sexual identity. Additionally, the repeated interactions the men detailed with Dr. Scott, which became more complex over time and are crucial to the participants' student development, relate to the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1995). Dr. Scott's interactions with the men drive home the key role that individual faculty members serve in providing validating experiences to this unique student population.

Two men (Atlas, Phil) indicated that Dr. Scott was the first openly gay faculty member they had ever met and described him as a mentor and role model. One man (Phil) specifically expressed how having a faculty role model such as Dr. Scott was validating for him because it showed him that gay people could be successful in life. Garvey, Squire et al. (2018) maintained that faculty who "embrace their identity can give hope to students that they can live an openly fulfilling life, providing guidance and aligning students' social identities with their aspirations" (p. 100), a theme also touched on by Kanagala and Oliver (2019) and Linley and Nguyen (2015).

Linley et al. (2016) similarly related how it is affirming for queer-spectrum students to view a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) person in a position of power who is out and visible on campus, while Garvey et al. (2017) concluded that LGBTQ students who knew more LGBTQ faculty had more positive perceptions of their campus climate. Simply by being open about his sexual identity, Dr. Scott demonstrated how out faculty members can provide validation to students. In Dr. Scott, the men see someone like them who is successful and respected on campus – someone they can aspire to be like.

Aside from Dr. Scott, three of the men (Atlas, Charlie, Jack) recounted how Dr. Pemberton provided them with validating experiences while at SSU. One (Charlie) related how he could talk to Dr. Pemberton about life issues and how he met with her when he faced bullying on campus. Two of the men (Atlas, Jack) described how Dr. Pemberton created a "brave space," as did Dr. Zimmer, which allowed them to explore their identities as gay/queer men, among other identities, as part of a production they participated in with these faculty members. Dr. Pemberton's validating interactions with students illustrate how providing interpersonal support and developing a positive relationship enables students to develop a connection with their campus environment (Woodford et al., 2015). Linley et al. (2016) stated that students felt supported by faculty (such as Dr. Pemberton, Dr. Zimmer, Harry Martini, etc.) who understood LGBTQ issues and offered support and mentoring. Dr. Pemberton also served as a buffer from a negative campus environment for one of the men (Charlie) when he experienced bullying, which was a role discussed in previous studies (Garvey, 2020; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). In general, the men mentioned other faculty members in the theatre department and across campus as welcoming, open-minded, and affirming, who provided them with a safe space where they could

be authentically themselves. In short, the faculty members described by the study participants provided validation to them in the ways recommended by Rendón (1994).

The men recalled few invalidating interactions with SSU faculty. Only one (Frank) indicated he had an invalidating experience with a faculty member (Dr. Beale) who espoused conservative views throughout the semester in a political science course. Garvey (2020) and Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) explained how queer-spectrum students' negative classroom experiences with faculty who do not understand their needs and experiences may lead them to perceive their environment in a negative light, which may influence their decision to leave campus. Fortunately, the invalidating interaction with this professor did not affect the participant's decision to persist.

(In)Validation within Disciplines

The majority of the men chose to major or minor in theatre and explained how they found validation within this discipline. They felt welcomed, affirmed, and free to be themselves in the theatre department. This theme of the theatre or performing arts major as a safe space reflects findings by Garvey et al. (2017) and Pryor (2018). Two men (Charlie, Frank) ultimately chose majors within the liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences areas, which were found to be generally welcoming of queer-spectrum students in studies by Blumenfeld et al. (2016) and Linley and Nguyen (2015). Linley and Nguyen further explained how LGBTQ students in social sciences and humanities majors experienced a positive climate because they are able to bring their whole self to the table. The participants' stories highlight the role that choice of major and minor can play in providing validation to gay/queer cisgender men.

Specifically, within the theatre department, several of the men explained how they took a queer theatre and film course, while one learned about this study through his queer-themed

sociology course. Taking courses with LGBTQ-related content can serve as a source of validation for these gay/queer cisgender men because they see themselves reflected in the curriculum, a concept included in Rendón's (1994) discussion of how to create a therapeutic learning community to facilitate validation. Participating in these courses can also positively influence queer-spectrum students' perceptions of the campus environment (Woodford et al., 2018), which can serve as a proxy for validation.

One of the men (Jack) revealed how negative experiences in his business major led him to switch to theatre. He expressed that he did not feel welcome in the College of Business because he did not see others like himself and ultimately changed majors because of this. Jack felt that majors in business and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) do not make room for queer people. This was a theme reported by Linley and Nguyen (2015), who explained that certain disciplines are not welcoming to LGBTQ students and do not allow for students to bring their whole self, leading them to feel invisible. Another participant (Rocky) recalled similar experiences in his business major where he kept a low profile to avoid attracting attention, essentially rendering himself invisible. However, he decided to persist with this major. Related to this, Garvey (2020) and Garvey et al. (2017) explained how academic disciplines affect LGBTQ students' perceptions of campus climate and how a chilly campus climate can influence students' choice of major. Negative experiences within certain majors – and major choice in general – can lead to invalidation, as illuminated by the study participants.

Peer and Interpersonal (In)Validation

Other key components of validation theory are that students need active intervention from others, including peers, to navigate their college experience and that success in the first year is contingent upon becoming involved on campus or receiving interpersonal validation from

external agents, such as peers (Rendón, 1994). Related to the concept of campus climate as a proxy for validation, Garvey et al. (2017) maintained that LGBTQ students' campus climate is strongly influenced by peer interaction and co-curricular involvement. The gay/queer cisgender men in this study detailed how peers provided them with interpersonal validation as well as how their participation in campus activities early on – and throughout – their college experience also provided them with validation.

Validation from Peer Group, Invalidation from Student Body

The men in this study generally described how, when they first came to SSU, they connected with a peer group of other gay/queer students they did not have in high school. Coming to college allowed the men to start fresh, where nobody knew them. Attending a large, research university also enabled them to escape the fishbowl of high school and be more anonymous, while also allowing them to find more like-minded peers. In their original study, Rendón (1994) revealed how participants in their study attending a large research university felt the need to find interpersonal validation within their environment, which the men in the current study were able to find relatively soon after matriculating. The study participants further discussed how their peer groups provided them with validation because they were able to connect and interact repeatedly with others like them, which again provided them with those crucial proximal processes described by Bronfenbrenner (1995). This peer interaction is key to the participants' experience with validation because it enabled them to be more open about their sexual identity and be authentically themselves.

Some of the men (Atlas, Frank, Jack) recounted validating relationships with specific individuals such as roommates, significant others, or peers. Others (Jack, Phil) explained how seeing the success of their gay/queer peers on campus and after graduation was another source of

validation because it showed them that they could be successful as gay/queer men. Likewise, several of the men (Atlas, Frank, Jack) described the validation they felt when they were able to connect with members of the local LGBTQ community at a downtown bar. Generally, the men related how they surrounded themselves with like-minded peers who were 100% supportive of them regardless of their identity and who helped them work through challenges they faced during their college experiences. The importance of the participants' peer interactions was emphasized by Woodford et al. (2015) who stated that "larger LGB social networks might provide a more consistent form of social support, as well as a more diverse group of peers with whom to relate different experiences of discrimination" (p. 82). Garvey et al. (2017) shared how informal peer interaction impacted LGBTQ students' perceptions of their campus climate as well as how those in their study who knew more LGBTQ students had more positive perceptions of campus climate. Garvey (2020), Woodford and Kulick (2015) and Woodford et al. (2015) further maintained that having LGBTQ friends may buffer students from the negative impacts of a hostile campus climate and lead them to perceive their campus climate more positively.

Several participants (Frank, Charlie, Jack) recalled microaggressions that happened to them on or near campus from peers within the general student body. Two (Frank, Charlie) remembered how they had been called derogatory names with one of them (Charlie) narrowly escaping a physical confrontation, while another (Jack) described weird looks, negative comments, and dismissiveness he received from other students. Several studies reported the negative impact of heterosexual peers' use of derogatory peer remarks, which are subtle forms of microaggressions, and how these can negatively affect LGBTQ students (Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Mathies et al., 2019; Winberg et al., 2019; Woodford et al., 2012). Although the literature discussed how the college experience has generally improved for queer-spectrum students over

the past 20 years, the men in this study highlighted that microaggressions are still a concern in 2020. These microaggressions can induce feelings of invalidation, which can impact the college experience of gay/queer cisgender men and potentially their belief in themselves and their ability to succeed. Fortunately, the men in this study persisted despite these invalidating experiences.

A few of the men (Jack, Rocky) touched on invalidation by other members of the gay/queer community. One (Rocky) described the cut-throat nature of the SSU gay community, saying that the environment was not friendly. Two of the men (Atlas, Jack) discussed racism within the community, with one (Jack) explaining how White gays were dismissive and rude to him and felt that there was a general lack of understanding about the intersection of identities. Another (Atlas) related the uniqueness of his experience at a predominantly White institution and how others did not understand his experiences as a gay Black man. Students in previous studies shared similar experiences (Garvey et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2012). Atlas also felt racism existed in the community even though one might expect members of the LGBTQ community to be more open-minded. The participants' stories uncovered the racism and lack of understanding about intersecting identities within the LGBTQ community as well as that invalidation can unexpectedly come from their queer-spectrum peers.

Organizations and (In)Validation

The majority of the participants recounted how belonging to student organizations that were welcoming, accepting, and affirming of their sexual identity was validating for them. They were able to meet like-minded peers who were supportive of them and their identities within these groups. Linley and Nguyen (2015) generally described how peers can support LGBTQ students out of class through forming social clubs. Garvey (2020) wrote about the positive effect queer and trans* student organizations have on perceptions of campus climate because they

create networks that facilitate a sense of belonging, mentorship, and connection with resources. While the student organizations the men mentioned may not have been purely LGBTQ-related, they welcomed the men in the study regardless of their identity and fostered discussion of LGBTQ-related topics or ideas. This was the case with SSU Brazilian Students and the Film Club. Other organizations, such as the theatre organization Curtain Call, were centered on queer-friendly themes. Some of men said that these organizations felt like their families as well as that these groups were friendly, welcoming, and affirming – validating. Additionally, one of the men (Rocky) felt validated through participating in an organization (SSU Ambassadors) that allowed him to share and explore his sexual identity in a safe space with other students, faculty, and staff who accepted him. The study participants' validating experiences within these affirming groups stress the importance of peer interaction through participating in organizations.

Conversely, the participants discussed how they perceived some student organizations tied to certain political or religious ideologies to be invalidating. One (Atlas) found the Young Republicans to be invalidating because of its political ideology. A few others (Phil, Rocky) identified religiously affiliated organizations such as the SSU Catholic Student Association, which did not use language of same-sex relationships in one of its programs, or SSU Student Baptists, which removed all gay references from its musical production. Additionally, several men (Charlie, Phil, Rocky) shared how they found fraternities invalidating because of their negative interactions with fraternity members on campus, downtown, or at off campus parties. Similar feelings of invalidation from fraternities were echoed in a study conducted by Pryor (2018) who reported how LGBTQ students perceived the presence of Greek life to have negative impacts on their sense of safety and security, describing the Greek area of campus as unwelcoming and where they experienced harassment. Related to this, several of the men in this

study (Charlie, Rocky, Jack) reported feelings of invalidation within the College of Business primarily because they associated business majors with fraternity members. The data highlights how the participants' invalidating experiences with these student organizations can negatively impact their college experience, which could influence their decision to persist at the institution.

(In)Validation from Institutional Supports

The participants described how institutional supports provided them with both validating and invalidating experiences. Institutional supports can be designed to be more inclusive for queer-spectrum students as part of creating a therapeutic learning community designed to facilitate validation, as recommended by Rendón (1994). Garvey, Squire, et al. (2018) and Woodford et al. (2018) also discussed how structural inclusion via these institutional supports can positively impact LGBTQ students' perceptions of their campus environment. The men in this study related their experiences related to validation and invalidation with institutional supports such as resource centers, Safe Zone programs, and campus spaces. Lastly, they described how the geographic location of their campus affected their experiences with validation.

Validation in the SSU LGBTQ Center

Two men (Rocky, Jack) indicated that the SSU LGBTQ Center was a validating space for them, underscoring the need for these centers on campus. The men recalled how they connected with like-minded peers in a safe space and recognized that center offered programming for students of various identities. Several studies indicated the importance of LGBT resource centers in supporting interpersonal validation (Kuczik, 2016) through offering physical spaces that support and affirm the community, offering programming and resources, and fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion (Garvey, 2020; Greathouse et al., 2018; Kuczik, 2016; Pitcher et al., 2018). One of the men (Jack) specifically mentioned how he appreciated the programming

related to the intersection of identities, which was a need identified in several other studies.

Kuczik (2016) stressed that resource centers need to better address the intersection of students'

multiple identities while Kanagala and Oliver (2019) discussed that queer people of color

students found campus LGBTQ spaces unwelcoming and unsupportive. The SSU LGBTQ

Center had taken steps to address these concerns found at other institutions in order to provide

programming that was perceived as validating by one of the men.

Validation through Symbols and Safe Zone Training

One of the men (Teddy) mentioned the importance of a Safe Zone sticker in helping him

find a counselor to discuss the breakup of his same-sex relationship. Another (Phil) discussed

how an advisor had posters related to sexual identity in her office, which made him feel validated

as a gay man. These examples drive home the importance of Safe Zone programs and symbols

in providing validation to gay/queer cisgender men. Katz et al. (2016) maintained that campuses

displaying safety zone symbols were perceived to offer a more positive campus climate for

sexual minority students than campuses that did not. Other studies indicated the positive impacts

of Safe Zone programs (Garvey et al., 2019, Linley & Nguyen, 2015). Garvey et al. (2017)

offered that institutional supports such as Safe Zone trainings and Lavender Graduation were

also perceived in a positive light as demonstrating a commitment of support for LGBTQ

students. An example of this can be found in one of the participants (Phil) who expressed interest

in becoming a member of Lavender Graduation, which celebrates LGBT students at graduation.

Invalidation from Hyper-Masculine Campus Spaces

The men generally spoke of feelings of invalidation from hyper-masculine spaces on

campus, such as the stadium, rec center, locker rooms, residence halls, and Greek Row area.

Participants in a study conducted by Pryor (2018) who perceived these spaces to belong to a

heteronormative culture also shared these feelings of invalidation. Two of the men (Phil, Teddy) in the current study recounted stories of events in the stadium where they felt invalidated as gay/queer men by individuals or activities, with one (Teddy) specifically expressing concern over attending football games out of fear for his safety. Likewise, a few of the men (Frank, Phil) described feeling uncomfortable in locker rooms, gyms, or the rec center out of concern they would be called out if perceived to be gay. Lastly, some participants (Rocky, Teddy) felt invalidated in residence halls because they sensed a hyper-masculine, heteronormative energy on their all-male floor or in the same-sex community restrooms. The participants were concerned for their safety and comfort, which relates back to the general discrimination of LGBTQ students faced in the residence halls described by Rankin et al., (2019).

Invalidation and Religion on Campus

While some men (Rocky, Phil) recalled their interactions with religious student organizations related to invalidation, one (Teddy) shared the invalidation he felt in a campus public space when visiting preachers spoke out against homosexuality and told students that gays would burn in hell. The invalidation described by the participant relates to similar stories from previous studies where an LGBTQ student found themselves in the presence of anti-queer religious Christian preachers holding a rally on campus calling for homosexuals to be burned at the stake, which led the student to fear for their safety (Blumenfeld et al., 2016). Another study recounted how a group of students encountered a visiting homophobic religious speaker who harassed LGBTQ students in a designated campus public speaking area (Pryor, 2018).

Invalidation in the South

Lastly, several of the men (Jack, Rocky, Teddy) related how being in the South influenced their experiences in college as gay/queer cisgender men in a negative light. One

participant (Teddy) summarized his overall college experience as slightly negative because he was in the South. Another (Rocky) discussed what he described as a toxic masculinity program in the South, which he also sensed on campus. Yet another (Jack) spoke of the invalidation he felt from peers within the student body, some of whom were from smaller Southern towns. Garvey (2020) and Garvey et al. (2017) outlined the impact of geographical location on perceptions of climate for queer-spectrum students, which indicated that institutions in the New England/Northeast region are perceived more positively than those in other parts of the United States, such as the South. The participants' comments about attending college in the South support the notion that geographic location can influence where a gay/queer cisgender man decides to matriculate as well as his persistence at an institution.

Discussion Summary

The research questions focused on where and how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation and invalidation on campus as well as how they overcome the challenges within their college environment. In the findings, several of the men revealed how they were able to find themselves, be out, and be authentically themselves when they came to SSU as a result of the validation they discovered through establishing strong, supportive gay/queer peer groups, peers they often relied on when they faced challenges. They also shared how they received validation from faculty members such as Dr. Scott, an out role model, who led them to believe that they could succeed as gay/queer men. The validation they received from peers and faculty relates to two key components of validation theory, which state that students need intervention from others, such as faculty, staff, and peers to navigate their college experience successfully as well as that success in the first year hinges on whether students become involved on campus or receive academic and interpersonal validation from external agents. The majority of the men in

this study explained how they connected with – and received validation from – faculty such Dr. Scott, their LGBTQ peer group, student organizations, and institutional supports during their first year and sustained these interactions throughout their undergraduate careers.

Another key concept of validation theory is that students in need of validation initially expressed doubt about their ability to succeed (Rendón, 1994). The study findings indicated that the majority of the gay/queer cisgender men in this study did not express this doubt and did not face major challenges in college resulting from their marginalized identity as did the students in Rendón's (1994) initial study. Most of the study participants began their undergraduate experience with an underlying sense of validation from their families, which may have facilitated their self-efficacy. However, the data uncovered that the men still needed validation to sustain and enhance their self-efficacy and they gravitated toward people and spaces that provided it. The proximal processes described by Bronfenbrenner (1995) within the campus environment provided sufficient levels of validation through repeated interactions with faculty, peers, and organizations, which is partially what may have sustained the participants' self-efficacy. The men likely would have had fewer validating experiences had these proximal processes with external agents not occurred to buffer the invalidation from the microaggressions they encountered. Had the men not had these sources of validation, they may not have been able to maintain or sustain their self-efficacy, which underscores the importance of these validating agents for gay/queer cisgender men and the overall relevance of validation theory in supporting retention, persistence, and graduation for this student population.

Implications for Practice

The gay/queer cisgender male student population has been largely invisible to college administrators within institutional data collection, while information is sparse related to their

persistence and student success (Garvey, 2020). Additionally, few studies – quantitative or qualitative – have employed validation theory to understand the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men and the broader queer-spectrum student population. The current study sought to research this understudied population within the framework of validation theory to understand their experiences with validation in addition to what drives their persistence and success in college. These understandings can provide university faculty, administrators, and staff with insight into how to better serve and meet the needs of these students. Specifically, the study findings have implications for practice within the campus environment which accentuate the need for out faculty as role models; faculty as allies; training for faculty, staff, and students on the unique experiences and needs of this student population; LGBTQ resource centers; and Safe Zone programs and symbols. These implications for practice align with Rendón's (1994) call for offering a therapeutic learning community to facilitate validation on campus.

Implications for Faculty and Staff

The narratives shared by the men in this study emphasize the importance of finding out role models in gay/queer faculty and staff, as evidenced through their discussion of Dr. Scott. Therefore, it is crucial that LGBTQ faculty and staff feel comfortable being out on campus and are visible to students who find validation in seeing these faculty and staff members be successful in their professions and in life. It is also key for faculty who are not LGBTQ to be available to offer unconditional support of students' identities, along the lines of what the men described receiving from Dr. Pemberton. In alignment with Rendón's (1994) recommendation for creating a therapeutic learning community, initial training related to the needs and experiences of LGBTQ students should be included at faculty and staff orientation as well as via regular workshops so that they can continue to learn how to support this population. Special

emphasis should be placed on providing additional support and resources in academic disciplines where queer-spectrum students have reported feelings of invalidation, such as business and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). These training sessions might assist all faculty, including Dr. Beale, with creating a more welcoming classroom environment for LGBTQ students. Related to this, gay/queer men – and the general student body – need to see this population represented in the curriculum within disciplines and through specific courses, especially in business and STEM.

Several of the men mentioned staff members who displayed Safe Zone stickers or items in support of their identities, which highlights the importance of Safe Zone programs or similar campus initiatives. The study participants' experiences underscore the need to expand these programs across the entire campus, particularly in those spaces, offices, or academic departments where the men felt invalidated. This would include spaces the men described as hyper-masculine, such as all-male residence halls, gyms and locker rooms, stadiums, and Greek areas of campus. It would also include academic departments such as those related to business and STEM majors for reasons discussed previously. The program expansion might focus on enhanced visible signage in these spaces as well as training for faculty and staff responsible for these areas on creating a safe space for queer-spectrum students and addressing microaggressions.

Implications for Students

The men described the validation they found in participating in events or organizations where they could explore their identities with other students such as trust walks, identity walks, or brave spaces. These exercises are beneficial during new student orientation as well as for participants in student organizations whether planned by faculty, staff, or other students. The

men felt a general sense of invalidation from the SSU student body on campus, at events, or in residence halls as well as from organizations with certain political or religious proclivities. This highlights the need for sessions during new student orientation designed to introduce other students to the perspectives of their LGBTQ peers as well as regular training sessions or workshops for leaders of student organizations and residence hall programming about LGBTQ student perspectives and experiences, particularly queer students of color.

The study participants' discussion of their experiences with invalidation from Greek-letter fraternities accentuates the need for additional training for the leadership and membership of these organizations. This outreach might focus on the unique needs and experiences of the queer-spectrum student population as well as on creating a safe and welcoming environment for these individuals, some of who may be fraternity members grappling with their sexual identity or who may already be out. These initiatives could be led by the Office of Greek Life, perhaps in conjunction with the LGBTQ Center and/or faculty experts in gender and sexuality studies.

Implications for Institutional Supports

Lastly, most of the men in the study recounted how they found validation through the SSU LGBTQ Center, which offered them a safe space and programming. One felt invalidated because he felt the center did not offer programming related to his identity, while another felt validated by the center's offering of programming related to queer people of color. This underscores the overall importance of campus resource centers for queer-spectrum students and the student demand for various types of programming reflective of intersecting identities. From what the men shared, there is also a critical need for educational programming within the gay/queer community to address racism and general invalidation, which could be addressed by the LGBTQ Center in partnership with the Office of Multicultural Affairs, queer-spectrum

student organizations, and key faculty. Lastly, the study participants described the validation they received from interacting with members of the local queer community, which highlights the importance of fostering positive formal and informal relationships and partnerships between the community and the institution, primarily with the LGBTQ Center and queer-spectrum student organizations. These strong partnerships might counter some of the invalidation the study participants experienced off-campus and might make them feel generally more safe and welcomed in the local community.

Limitations and Design

Conducting this research study during the COVID-19 pandemic created limitations related to both recruitment and collecting data. Recruitment was conducted electronically, primarily through email. Students had many stressors on their minds during the pandemic so participating in a research study via Zoom likely was not a priority. Collecting data via Zoom also presented challenges in that I was not able to notice non-verbal cues and body language as easily as if the interview had been conducted face-to-face. As such, it is less personal and therefore challenging to develop a rapport with the participants. The participants and I also faced technical issues with video, audio, and internet connection, which at times distracted focus from the interview and collecting data.

Recruiting participants was a challenge, and ultimately the common thread with the men was that they were somehow connected to the theatre department. This was not intentional but occurred after multiple attempts to recruit students through the SSU LGBTQ Center, queer-oriented organizations, and faculty teaching courses with LGBTQ-related content. Having a more diverse pool of participants in terms of major would have made for a richer set of data and

would have ideally highlighted diverse experiences, particularly related to faculty and academics.

Additionally, this population of college students – gay/queer cisgender men – is not homogenous. Sexual identity represents one aspect of their being, in addition to race/ethnicity and religious affiliation, among many others, as some of the men expressed. The combination of intersecting identities creates a unique lived experience for each individual. With this study, I focused on only one aspect of identity, but I recognize that examining the intersection of identities would make for a more complex story and might have yielded richer data.

As I mentioned previously, my experiences with college and coming out as a gay cisgender White man from Generation X in a different region of the country are vastly different that those of the men in this study, though I learned we share some commonalities. My undergraduate experience occurred at a time when men coming into college might have been more likely to doubt their self-efficacy to succeed in college because of societal messages. As a result, I may have come into this study thinking that gay/queer men would need higher levels validation during their college experience. However, with the current political climate it is likely that some gay/queer man in the country about to begin his undergraduate experience may hear invalidating messages and doubt his ability to succeed in college. In 2020, the increased need for validation among gay/queer cisgender men may still exist depending on factors such as family support, race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and region of the country, among others. I brought this lens to this research study, wondering if these men would come into college with some of the self-doubt that men of previous generations may have felt.

As is inherent with a qualitative study using narrative inquiry as its design, the sample size I used to examine the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men in college related to

validation was extremely small. The findings from this research study represent the stories of a small group of students at one specific campus in a particular region of the country. Naturally, gay/queer cisgender men around the country might have shared different stories related to their experiences with validation on other campuses.

Recommendations for Future Research

A key concept of Rendón's (1994) validation theory is that the students in their initial study arrived at college doubting their ability to succeed, with many holding some identity that had been historically marginalized from higher education such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or being a first generation student. Unlike the students in Rendón's study, the majority of the gay/queer cisgender men in this study did not express doubt about their ability to succeed in college because of their sexual identity. As previously mentioned, several of them did discuss racial and/or ethnic identities they hold; however, this study did not consider the intersection of identities. One direction for future research includes examining experiences with validation related to sexual identity and another aspect of identity included in Rendón's original research, where students may be more doubtful of their self-efficacy, such as race/ethnicity, lower socioeconomic status, and/or being a first generation student. However, it is important to note that the student populations considered in Rendón's original study may not hold the same level of doubt in 2020 – if much at all – about their ability to succeed in college given that higher education is more inclusive and welcoming of diverse student populations than in 1994. These students likely hear validating messages emphasizing their right to attend college. Examining the self-efficacy of the original student populations in 2020 and the role that validation plays in their college experience could be yet another interesting avenue for future research.

Several of the study participants discussed their experiences related to validation and invalidation as gay/queer men of color at a primarily White institution. They described how their unique experiences and the concept of intersecting identities was often not well understood by their White gay/queer peers. Studying the experiences of queer men of color or specifically the experiences of Black, Latino, or Asian queer men related to validation would provide an opportunity to examine the complexities of their intersecting identities, which could provide much-needed insight to their White peers and to institutions in general. Related to this, two participants described invalidation from the gay community, with one describing invalidation he felt as a queer man of color. Researching invalidation within the gay community and how this might affect self-efficacy – particularly with students of color – is another direction for future research.

Additionally, most of the men in this study had family support and began their undergraduate experience with an underlying sense of validation from their families, which may have facilitated their self-efficacy to succeed as gay/queer cisgender men in college. Studying participants who have been ostracized from their families financially and/or emotionally prior to attending college is yet another area of research stemming from this study. Those who lack familial support may hold more doubt in their ability to succeed and may require more validation from faculty, peers, and institutional supports within their campus environment to succeed.

The literature related to campus climate for queer-spectrum students described variations in perceptions of campus climate based on differences in academic disciplines. Since all of the men in this study had some connection to the theatre department where they experienced such high levels of validation, examining participant experiences with validation across different major types, including business and STEM, is another area of research emanating from this

study. Furthermore, conducting a study with participants from across different institution types (large vs. small, public vs. private, religious vs. non-religious) to compare experiences of gay/queer cisgender men would be yet another future area of study. Altering any of these factors would likely create a different campus environment for gay/queer cisgender men that may or may not have been as validating as Southeast State University (SSU).

Conclusion

Overall, the study participants expressed that they had a positive experience at SSU as gay/queer cisgender men, which reflects the high levels of validation they received within their campus environment, particularly from the theatre department faculty and their queer-spectrum peers. This is good news given a climate study review of two and four year institutions indicating that LGBTQ students generally view campuses in a negative light (Linley & Nguyen, 2015) and survey research describing how LGBTQ students generally still perceive college and university campuses to be less inviting than their straight peers (Pryor, 2018). Through providing a therapeutic learning community as described by Rendón (1994) and through the proximal processes described by Bronfenbrenner (1995), the campus environment likely provided sufficient levels of validation through faculty, peers, and institutional supports to sustain or increase the study participants' self-efficacy to succeed in college – and in life – as gay/queer men, which underscores the importance of creating validating campus environments for diverse student populations. However, their stories might have looked quite different had they not received the validating experiences they described at Southeast State University.

Despite the validation, resources, and supports the men described, the findings revealed they still experienced microaggressions on campus: name-calling and glares from other students, damnation from preachers on the student center plaza, ridicule at a football game for painting

their nails, erasure of their sexual identity from certain student organization activities, and unfriendly political beliefs shared by a professor in class, among others. The invalidation experienced from these microaggressions can negatively influence the college experience of a gay/queer cisgender man, particularly their sense of belonging, feelings of self-worth, and belief in their ability to succeed – all of which can cause them to drop out or transfer. As the data revealed, faculty such as Dr. Scott and Dr. Pemberton within affirming academic disciplines, the unconditional support of LGBTQ peer groups and queer-friendly student organizations that allow students to explore identity, and institutional supports such as LGBTQ resource centers with inclusive programming, Safe Zone programs, and Lavender Graduation are critical for countering invalidation within the campus environment. Though the gay/queer cisgender men in this study did not express doubts in their ability to succeed because of their sexuality as men of past generations may have, it is clear that these men still need – and find – validation from within their campus environment in order to sustain and augment their self-efficacy to succeed in college and in life. This study illuminates that, even in the 21st century, there is indeed a need for university faculty, staff, and administrators to espouse validating practices when working with gay/queer cisgender male students on their campuses and that validation theory offers a framework for institutions to be more intentional in supporting this unique population.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Student Organizations

Dear [First Name]:

I'm soliciting your help in finding students to participate in a research study. My study will focus on the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men, seeking to learn about where and how the men receive support on campus to be successful in college. My hope is that the stories shared by these men will provide insight into how faculty, staff, and administrators might better support them. Specifically, I'm looking for participants in this student population who began their college experience at [research site] as first-year students and who are currently in their third or fourth year.

Participation in the study will involve a recorded interview through Zoom lasting about 60 minutes. Students who are selected to participate will receive a $50 Amazon gift card after the interview. Interested students can contact me at sgm27558@xxxxx.edu for more information.

Please share this announcement and the attached flyer with your organization by email, posting to your group's website and/or social media accounts, and making an announcement at any upcoming virtual or in-person meetings or gatherings. Any other ways to distribute this announcement you can think of would be greatly appreciated.

I am currently a third-year doctoral student in the College of Education's Student Affairs Leadership program. This research study is part of my dissertation for the program and has IRB approval from the [research site]. Any questions about the study can be directed to me through the email address above.

Thanks for your time and assistance:
Steve Mendenhall (he/him/his)
Ed.D. Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership
College of Education
[Research Site]
sgm27558@xxxxx.edu

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

Narratives of (In)Validation: Experiences of Gay/Queer Cisgender Men in College

Study seeks to understand the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men – looking at where and how they receive the support and encouragement to be successful in college

Selected students will participate in a 60-minute recorded Zoom interview and will receive a $50 Amazon e-gift card after

To be eligible, students should:

1) Identify as gay/queer
2) Identify as a cisgender man
3) Be in their third or fourth year
4) Have been at xxxxx since their first year

Contact Steve Mendenhall at sgm27558@xxxxx.edu for more info

Study conducted through the College of Education as part of dissertation research under the direction of [dissertation chair]

Appendix C

Recruitment Email to LGBTQ Center Director

Dear [First Name]:

I'm soliciting your help in finding students to participate in a research study. My study will focus on the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men, seeking to learn about where and how the men receive support and encouragement on campus to be successful in college. My hope is that the stories shared by these men will provide insight into how faculty, staff, and administrators might better support them. Specifically, I'm looking for participants in this student population who began their college experience at [research site] as first-year students and who are currently in their third or fourth year.

Participation in the study will involve a recorded interview through Zoom lasting about 60 minutes. Students who are selected to participate will receive a $50 Amazon gift card after the interview. Interested students can contact me at sgm27558@xxxxx.edu for more information.

Please share this announcement and the attached flyer with students you think may be interested by email, posting to the center's website and/or social media accounts, and making an announcement at any upcoming virtual or in-person meetings or gatherings. Any other ways to distribute this announcement you can think of would be greatly appreciated. I will also be contacting the student leaders of [student organization 1] and [student organization 2] to enlist their help.

I am currently a third-year doctoral student in the College of Education's Student Affairs Leadership program. This research study is part of my dissertation for the program, under the advisement of [dissertation chair], and has IRB approval from the [research site]. Any questions about the study can be directed to me through the email address above.

Thanks for your time and assistance:
Steve Mendenhall (he/him/his)
Ed.D. Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership
College of Education
[Research Site]
sgm27558@xxxxx.edu

Appendix D

Recruitment Email to Faculty

Dear Professor [Last Name]:

I'm soliciting your help in finding students to participate in a research study. My study will focus on the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men, seeking to learn about where and how the men receive support and encouragement on campus to be successful in college. My hope is that the stories shared by these men will provide insight into how faculty, staff, and administrators might better support them. Specifically, I'm looking for participants in this student population who began their college experience at [research site] as first-year students and who are currently in their third or fourth year.

Participation in the study will involve a recorded interview through Zoom lasting about 60 minutes. Students who are selected to participate will receive a $50 Amazon gift card after the interview. Interested students can contact me at sgm27558@xxxxx.edu for more information.

Please share this announcement and the attached flyer with students in your [course title] course by email, posting to the course announcement section online, and making an announcement at any upcoming virtual or in-person classes. Any other ways to distribute this announcement you can think of would be greatly appreciated. I am reaching out to you because students who meet the study criteria may be taking this course since it may include content related to sexual identity. Additionally, students in this course may be more likely to know other students at [research site] who meet the study criteria.

I am currently a third-year doctoral student in the College of Education's Student Affairs Leadership program. This research study is part of my dissertation for the program, under the advisement of [dissertation chair], and has IRB approval from the [research site]. Any questions about the study can be directed to me through the email address above.

Thanks for your time and assistance:
Steve Mendenhall (he/him/his)
Ed.D. Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership
College of Education
[Research Site]
sgm27558@xxxxx.edu

Appendix E

Study Eligibility Survey (Qualtrics)

Narratives of (In)Validation: Experiences of Gay/Queer Cisgender Men in College

Thanks for your interest in this study. I am conducting research on the college experiences of gay/queer cisgender men. Specifically, I hope to learn where and how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience. Validation occurs when a student receives some type of support or encouragement to succeed within their environment. Additionally, I hope to understand how do gay/queer cisgender men overcome the challenges they encounter within their campus environment in order to believe in their ability to succeed in college.

Please answer the questions that follow. This will allow me to determine if you meet the criteria to participate in the study.

Your Name: _____

Your Email Address: _____

Your Major: _____

Are you classified as a third-year, fourth-year, or beyond fourth-year student?　　Yes　　No

Did you begin your undergraduate experience at [research site] as a first-year?　　Yes　　No

Do you identify as male?　　Yes　　No

Do you identify as either gay or queer?　　Yes　　No

Do you identify as cisgender?　　Yes　　No

Thank you for completing this survey! Please note that a limited number of participants are required for this study. If you meet the criteria and a slot to participate is available, you will be contacted and asked to participate in an interview. If you meet the study criteria and a slot is not available, you will be contacted by email and informed that the study is no longer seeking participants. If you do not meet the study criteria, you will be contacted and informed that you do not meet the study criteria and have not been selected to participate. Those who are selected will receive a $50 Amazon electronic gift card after the interview has concluded.

The data collected from this survey as well as the data collected from selected participants during the study will be kept confidential and will be permanently deleted once the dissertation tied to this study has been approved by the Graduate School. Selected participants will also be asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity. Participants will be referred to by this pseudonym in the research findings and any subsequent publications or presentations. Additionally, the [research site] will be assigned a pseudonym to assist with protecting the identity of study participants. Please direct any questions or concerns to Steve Mendenhall at sgm27558@xxxxx.edu.

Appendix F

Email to Respondents

Email to Selected Participants

Dear [First Name]:

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study related to the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men in college. Congratulations! You meet the study criteria and have been selected to participate.

The next step in the process is to schedule an interview within the next several weeks. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and will last about an hour. Note that the interview will be recorded. Please share your availability with me for weekdays between 5:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. and weekend days between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. within the next two weeks. We can arrange for an alternate time outside of those windows if need be.

During the interview, I will ask questions about your experiences as a [research site] student related to where and how you have found support to be successful in college. I'm interested in learning who provided you with support and how they did it. I'm also interested in learning about experiences where you felt validated or invalidated as a student. A validating experience would be one where you felt supported or encouraged in your pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

Also attached to this email is an informed consent form. Please review this document in advance and be prepared to provide your verbal consent to participate during the interview.

Please respond to me at your earliest convenience about your availability for an interview. Also, let me know if you have any questions about participating in the study or about the study itself.

Kind regards:
Steve Mendenhall (he/him/his)
Ed.D. Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership
College of Education
[Research Site]
sgm27558@xxxxx.edu

Email to Participants Not Selected

Dear [First Name]:

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study related to the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men in college. Unfortunately, you were not selected for participation in the study. Best wishes for a successful fall semester.

Kind regards:
Steve Mendenhall
Ed.D. Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership
College of Education
[Research Site]
sgm27558@xxxxx.edu

Appendix G

Sample Informed Consent Form

[RESEARCH SITE]
CONSENT LETTER
NARRATIVES OF (IN)VALIDATION: EXPERIENCES OF GAY/QUEER CISGENDER
MEN IN COLLEGE

Dear Participant,

My name is Steve Mendenhall and I am a student in the Counseling and Human Development Department at the [research site] under the supervision of [dissertation chair]. I am inviting you to take part in a research study.

I am doing research on the college experiences of gay/queer cisgender men. Specifically, I hope to learn where and how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – or invalidation – on campus during their undergraduate experience. Validation occurs when a student receives some type of support or encouragement to succeed within their environment. Additionally, I hope to understand how do gay/queer cisgender men overcome the challenges they encounter within their campus environment in order to believe in their ability to succeed in college.

I am looking for gay/queer cisgender men who are in their third or fourth year of undergraduate study and who began their undergraduate experience at the [research site] as first-year students to participate in this study.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a recorded interview. There will be one session. The session will be approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted via Zoom.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation in any programs on campus. There may be questions that may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Your responses may help us understand the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men on campus, specifically where and how they find validation (support and encouragement) they need to be successful in college. This information can help university faculty, staff, and administrators better understand the experiences of gay/queer cisgender men in order to better support these students.

At the conclusion of the interview session, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym. You will be referred to by this pseudonym in the research findings and in any subsequent publications or presentations. Once the interview has been transcribed, all identifiers that link to you will be removed.

Note that this information will not be used or distributed for future research. The findings may be published or presented, but only pseudonyms will be used.

If you have questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX, sgm27558@xxxxx.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at XXX-XXX-XXXX or by email at IRB@xxxxx.edu.

Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Steve Mendenhall
Ed.D. Candidate, Student Affairs Leadership
College of Education
[Research Site]

Appendix H

Interview Script

Introduction

Welcome and thank you for agreeing to participate in today's interview. My name is Steve Mendenhall and I am a doctoral student in the Student Affairs Leadership program at [research site] under the supervision of my advisor, [dissertation chair]. I will be taking notes and will also be recording the interview, which will last about 60 minutes.

The purpose of today's interview is to learn about how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation – and invalidation – during their time in college. Validation occurs when a student receives some type of encouragement or support, either academic or interpersonal, from someone at the institution such as faculty or staff. Physical spaces or places on campus can also serve as a source of validation for students. As a result of receiving validation, students feel affirmed and believe in their ability to succeed in college. Invalidation occurs when students have a negative experience where they may not have felt supported or welcomed on campus, and may have questioned whether they could be successful in college. The insights you share today will help college and university faculty and staff better understand the college experiences of gay/queer cisgender men. Please be assured that your comments will remain anonymous.

I sent the informed consent form and asked you to review it prior to this interview. If you are not comfortable answering any of the questions, you do not have to answer them. If you are not comfortable participating in the interview at any time, you are free to exit the interview. Do you have any questions about the consent form? Do you verbally agree to participate in this interview?

Now, I'd like to ask you a few questions related to your college experience as a gay/queer cisgender man at the [research site]. Specifically, I'd like for you to share stories and incidents with me about your college experience so that I can better understand how you have experienced validation and invalidation.

To reiterate, validation occurs when a student receives some type of encouragement or support, either academic or interpersonal, from someone at the institution such as faculty or staff. Physical spaces or places on campus can also serve as a source of validation for students. As a result of receiving validation, students feel affirmed and believe in their ability to succeed in college. Invalidation occurs when students have a negative experience where they may not have felt supported or welcomed on campus, and may have questioned whether they could be successful in college.

Questions

1. I'm so glad you decided to participate in this study. Why did you decide to talk with me today?
2. When people ask what it's like to be you, how do you describe yourself to them?
3. Please share with me what it has been like for you to be a gay/queer cisgender man during your time at [research site].
4. Now I want to focus on times that you've felt validated – remember that validation is when you feel supported and affirmed. This may be related to academics or interpersonal interactions, but it might be more general than that. First think about your interactions with people on campus – faculty, staff, friends, roommates.
   a. Are there people who have validated you? If so, what specifically about those people and your interactions was validating?
   b. What about places and settings?
   c. Offices, events, and organizations?
   d. Do any other times that you've felt validated come to mind?
5. Now I want to focus on times that you've felt invalidated – when you haven't felt supported and affirmed. This may be related to academics or interpersonal interactions, but it might be more general than that. First think about your interactions with people on campus – faculty, staff, friends, roommates.
   a. Are there people who have invalidated you? If so, what specifically about those people and your interactions was invalidating?
   b. What about places and settings?
   c. Offices, events, and organizations?
   d. Do any other times that you've felt invalidated come to mind?
6. Was there ever a time when you experienced a challenge as gay/queer cisgender man at [research site] that may have affected your belief in your ability to succeed? If so, how did you overcome this challenge? If not, how did you maintain your belief in your ability to be successful?
7. Is there anything we have not discussed related to your college experience that you would like to share?

Conclusion

Thank you again for participating in today's interview. I will be transcribing and reviewing what you have shared with me today in order to re-construct a narrative about your college experience. Once I have compiled the narrative, I will share it with you so that you can provide me with feedback regarding its accuracy and truthfulness.

If there are things that come to mind after we conclude today that you would like to add, please reach out to me directly by email or phone. If the discussion today has sparked any questions or concerns, please reach out to me by email for phone so that I can assist you with identifying the best resource(s) to help you.

To ensure your anonymity, please choose a pseudonym. I will use this pseudonym when referring to you in the study findings. Again, thank you so much for your time today. In

appreciation for your participation, I will be sending a $50 Amazon gift card electronically to the email address you provided to me.