THE LGBTQ STUDENT HIGH SCHOOL-COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

by

JAMES KENNETH JACKSON

(Under the Direction of Pam Paisley)

ABSTRACT

Professional School Counselors and counselor educators are instruments for social justice in schools; nevertheless, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students often encounter oppressive high school and college environments and a lack of counselor support. This study asked how LGBTQ college students described their experiences and how ecological and internal forces interacted in their experiences. This qualitative study consisted of multiple interviews with college students from a southeastern state flagship university who reflected on their high school and college experiences, the interaction of the forces, and their recommendations for self-empowerment. The goal of the phenomenological and advocacy approach was to determine what would have made those high school and college experiences more self-empowering. Findings supported that LGBTQ students in high school and college have unique experiences involving a variety of ecological and internal forces that included sexual identity; hostile or supportive educational environments and people; family; religion; self-confidence, social confidence and friends; college/career choice; and a sense of purpose and direction. Findings also involved the organic relationship of these forces, the effects of positive and negative interventions, and the central nature of sexual

identity. Implications for high schools and colleges are suggested with specific attention to the practice of school counselors and the need for comprehensive counseling programs with advocacy; internal and external school counselor role clarification; and LGBTQ awareness, training, and program integration. Suggestions for counselor educators included professional implementation of gatekeeping/development responsibilities, as well as teaching pre-service counselors comprehensive counseling programs, social justice implementation training, and LGBTQ competencies.

INDEX WORDS: Professional School Counselor, counselor education, comprehensive counseling programs, ASCA National Model, advocacy, ACA Advocacy Competencies, ecological, sexual identity, college, high school, sexual orientation, LGBTQ, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, qualitative, family, religion, career, self-empowerment, social justice, student affairs, LGBT resource center

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all the school counselors, counselor educators, and college student affairs personnel who work to make schools more socially just places. Their passionate and dedicated work nourishes individuals, promotes the missions of the schools, and helps foster a more peaceful productive world. It is also dedicated to those LGBTQ social justice advocates who work to make schools not only safe places for all students, but places where all students may thrive. Finally, it is dedicated to all of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning high school and college students—as well as aspiring straight allies. Your resiliency, strength, and hope inspire me and those around you.

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I am deeply grateful for the support community I have had with me in this journey. My academic mentors, and particularly my dissertation committee, have selflessly provided inspiration, time, and countless opportunities for growth. Dr. Pam Paisley was a gracious scholar providing that skilled blend of challenge and support. Dr. Deryl Bailey gave compassionate guidance into the role of counselor educators, especially in cross cultural development and advocacy. Dr. Anneliese Singh shared so authentically her life as a researcher-teacher-activist. Moreover, all of them provided access to the wonderful world of counselor educators and advocates. I was also privileged to have a PhD cohort of compassionate scholars –both action oriented school counselors and student affairs personnel. They inspired me, questioned me, and encouraged me. They also made me laugh and find joy in the doctoral experience. I can only hope that our work continues together.

My research was strengthened by the support I received from those involved. The University of Georgia LGBT Resource Center, and Jennifer Miracle specifically, were a model of graciousness and inspiration. The students who participated in this study probably do not realize the deep way that they affected me. Their vulnerability and willingness to share their stories, and well as their courage and passion, reminded me not only to share the message that "it gets better" for LGBTQ students once they leave oppressive schools, but to work to make high schools and colleges better now.

I was also fortunate to have a nourishing professional world. In my role as a Professional School Counselor, my peers and colleagues at my high school work place gave constant support. My school administration was not only flexible in working with me through the demands of my doctoral studies, but they provided me numerous opportunities to implement my learning into my practice and the program of the school. The students at my school, and particularly the LGBTQ students, provided a constant grounding into the realities of student experiences; they also gave me great hope.

My family and friends were both patient and encouraging. Not only did my parents, brother, and partner's family frequently ask about my progress and express genuine interest. They were also models of what it means to be a good person—loving, disciplined, and giving to those around you. It also mattered that I knew they cared about what I was studying. In addition, my friends not only encouraged me, but they also endured my physical and mental absences at different periods of my doctoral work as I would immerse myself in academia and then emerge to be restored and rejuvenated by them.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my partner, boyfriend, soul mate and chief cheerleader, Tim Murphy. I probably could have eventually made it to graduation without him; I could not have made it with any sense of balance, health, or energy. He made this rigorous doctoral journey one that I could enjoy. He reminded me to eat, asked about my work, and never made me feel guilty for all of the days and nights I was in another room researching and typing. In my times of complaint after hours of studying data during a vacation break, he gently reminded me that "It's a dissertation; it's not supposed to be fun." He was right for while much of it was enjoyable, there were times

when I questioned my use of time. Fortunately, we both believed in the topic I was studying. He never doubted that I would reach the end of finishing this study and then graduating. He also let me know constantly that completing this adventure is but the beginning of a next step and the continuation of our journey together.

Thank you, Tim.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM AND FOCUS

"I am so glad that you interviewed me and let me tell my story. That finally gave me some closure." I had just finished the first complete drafts of this dissertation prospectus when I spotted 23 year old "Ryan" at the restaurant bar. Ryan is a young gay man I had interviewed a year earlier for another research study about his experiences with school counselors. Ryan had shared his isolation and loneliness, as well as his resiliency and self-empowerment with me. He had noted the lack of counselor or school adult support in his life at that time. Ryan was strong, determined and confident (perhaps even a wise old soul), but he also carried with him some hurt and lack of direction from those high school years.

I first met Ryan a few years before when he was a waiter at a local restaurant along with a number of other gay young men. Many of them had recently graduated from high school and were now living in a metro area where they felt accepted. In conversations with them, they expressed stories about coming out as gay, hostile environments, and various levels of uncertainty about what they were going to do next in their lives. Many seemed lost and unsure, as well as relishing in the new freedom and openness they could now experience. I could not help but wonder what their high school experiences had been like, and if they had supportive counselors in the process. My earlier research with Ryan and others were a bi-product of that interest, but I realized that there were so much of their stories and experiences that I had not heard, and based on my

conversation that night with Ryan, I wondered if anyone has heard their stories and understood their journeys. All I seemed to know was that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) youth faced hostility and social stigmatization while discovering who they were and how they fit into their worlds. Moreover, they often experienced this negativity in high school and college unassisted by those around them.

Whole Persons, Complete Journeys

As a result, I wished to explore the high school-college experiences of LGBTQ students. In many ways, I felt these students were ships composed of many compartments that made up their whole. Some of these compartments were their general identity development, their sexual identity development, and their career development including their college choice process. While each of these areas was a research study field in itself, I believed they were interrelated; moreover, just as one cannot remove an essential compartment of a ship and have a successful voyage, removing an essential component of students' lives prevented us from understanding LGBTQ students' journeys and experiences. In our attempt to understand students more deeply and provide more effective services, we inadvertently did students disservices by fragmenting their lives and our support systems. By focusing on various aspects of students' lives and development, we were unable to understand holistically or see the experiences from the students' perspectives.

In addition to being composed of various compartments that created the whole, LGBTQ students were also located within various seas and harbors. The seas were often rough, and the harbors that should have provided refuge were often hostile. The sailing conditions interacted with these ships affecting their safety and the success of their

journeys. For students in the experiences I was studying, the harbors included the high school and the college environments. Again, we as researchers often discussed the environments and factors at each of these educational harbors separately, often treating the same student like two different students—the high school student and the college student. Certainly there are very significant developmental changes that occurred with a student journeying through high school and then later in college, but the student remained a whole. A ship may journey from one harbor to the next, but it moves in its entirety; it may experience upgrades and refurbishing in the harbor and appear new, but it remains the same ship. In our work looking at high school and college environments for LGBTQ students, separating the students' environments (harbors) did not allow us to understand the experiences from the students' perspectives (Appendix A). We as educators and counselors fragmented the LGBTQ students' experiences. We dissected students' compartments and experiences, concentrating on select compartments (sexual identity, career, family, etc.); we also separated the environments (high school and college) in which students were making their journeys, but students' lives and experiences, their voyage and selves, were as wholes. They may have chosen to ignore a compartment or find various strategies for understanding how to navigate, but they were still unified vessels experiencing their journeys. On these journeys, they rely upon effective supports.

Counselors

Counselors, and those who help develop them—counselor educators—are positioned to be supports for LGBTQ students. Counselors have the opportunity to engage in all the areas in students' lives and interact with the high school environment and preparation for the college environments. Working with students in career

development, personal/social development, and academic development, as well as engaging all students in a comprehensive counseling program, allow counselors the perspective from which to serve as guides to students in their experiences. Unfortunately, I found that researchers and counselors indicated that they struggled in being effective in providing a means of safety and support for LGBTQ students. Therefore, this paper is a call to action for Professional School Counselors to better support LGBTQ students by first understanding their high school-college experiences. Counselors must then act as advocates in creating opportunities for LGBTQ student self-empowerment.

Positionality

Since this study was designed to understand the richness of the journey and experiences of LGBTQ students, and the lens from which I undertook this voyage was my own, using first person seemed valid and scholarly. I used it as a means for authentically representing my thoughts, feelings, and contributions to the findings of the research allowing the reader to become engaged in my thought processes. This transparency, for all of its "messiness," will be a lens for the reader to understand and evaluate the experience.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter will lay a foundation for my research study by presenting the issues, purpose and constructs that frame it. This chapter's major topics are first about who is the focus of this study, including the terms "LGBTQ." I then present the relevance of this study for counselors and counselor educators. Following that I present a rationale for the research study including the ecological and internal forces in the LGBTQ students' experiences—such as environments, developmental areas and support systems—that I

anticipated to be relevant. (I noted in my later findings emphases on forces that I had not fully anticipated.) Finally, I give an overview of the research study I conducted.

Who and What are We Talking About?

"LGBTQ"

One of the challenges for any marginalized group is the language by which they identify themselves and are identified by others. Language itself means power particularly when one is referred in opposition to the majority; therefore, I try to limit the use of "non-heterosexual" after this explanation of terminology. For the purposes of this study, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) and Queer will be used interchangeably to refer to those individuals who did identify as non-heterosexual or express non-traditional gender identity or expression. Even these terms are limiting as some students chose not to use any of these indentifying labels and many sexual minority members preferred no labeling at all (Rankin, 2006). When referring to specific studies, the language of the researcher was often preserved, so that while a study may have focused on gay men and lesbians, the explication of that study may use LGBTQ or Queer.

Likewise, I acknowledge that the use of "queer" with its historical base as a disparaging epithet has connotative challenges; nonetheless, the reclaiming of the term by the LGBTQ community and the use in scholarly work, such as queer studies or queer theory, made it appropriate for this study. Generally, I have found asking students, participants or clients how they self-identify has proven a most supportive approach. It was indicative that even in the language used to describe sexual minorities there was a level of harassment and heterosexism, as well as an assumption of gender normativity.

Unfortunately, the oppression and marginalization that LGBTQ students experienced went far beyond use of language.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

I found myself faced with a quandary. Students with non-majority sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual students) and non-majority gender identification (transgender students) had many areas of oppression that overlapped, yet they also had divergent constructs of marginalization. Their experiences were therefore both similar and different. Research on transgender college students was rare and "the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity are not always well understood" (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 29). I was conflicted in including transgender students in my study. I saw that they were an oppressed, often neglected student population; however, I did not want to ignore their unique experiences and just add on the "T" to the study.

Since many universities, including the one in which I used participants, organized much of its larger support to the LGB and T communities together, as reflective in the LGBT Center, I decided that this study would seek to embrace students who had either at least one area of non-majority sexual orientation or gender identity. The purposeful participant selection I describe later allowed me to get the voices of transgender or gender queer students included.

Traditional College Age LGBTQ Students

College students span a wide range of ages, from those who begin attending college immediately after high school, to those who choose work, military or family responsibility options before later beginning or returning to college. Likewise, economic shifts or job dissatisfaction might prompt people to become college students later in life.

For the purpose of this study, I was interested in finding out about the high school-college experiences of traditional aged college students, 18-25.

Just as non-heterosexual students identify themselves with a variety of (or no) labels, they are in various stages of self-identification and public disclosure (being out). Due to personal and social factors and forces including race/ethnicity, religious membership, family structures and supports, and geographic area, sexuality may be fluid or fixed at different times in one's life (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). In addition, various sexual identity development models reflected various approaches to self-identification (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Troiden, 1979; Savin-Williams, 1990). My study took a broad approach and considered participants who were at a developmental level in which they did not identify as fully heterosexual. The study did not include either those students who had not self-labeled, or students who had self-identified but not publically disclosed. In addition, since I wished to explore the various aspects of LGBTQ students' high school-college experiences, the study embraced participants who came to an understanding of their non-heterosexuality regardless of when this understanding was achieved. I was interested in understanding the experiences of students who either self-disclosed (came out) in high school or who reached personal and public sexual identity understandings later in college. All of these LGBTQ students encountered similar ecological and internal forces, though they may have experienced their individual journeys differently.

Relevance: Should this Matter to Counselors?

Competent Counseling: Multicultural and Advocacy Competencies

Understanding and supporting the LGBTQ's students in their high school-college experiences reflected the mission and purpose of counselors and counselor educators. With the adoption of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Multicultural and ACA Advocacy Competencies, counselors had evolved to an understanding of the role that they played in social justice, having moved through various paradigms regarding their function in society (Ratts, M. J., DeKruyf, L., & Chen-Hayes, S. F.,2007; Ratts, M., Toporek, R., & Lewis, J., 2010). They were now arriving at the current, but growing professional realization of society's effects on individual wellness—and the unique role and responsibility that counselors have in alleviating the effects of systemic oppression (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). My look at the current state of counseling and counselor education found multicultural sensibilities firmly embedded in discussions of practice. Since 1991, counselor educators had seen multicultural competency become more of an integral part in the training of counselors, and in 2005, counselors began referring to social justice as the "fifth force" in counseling (Ratts, D'Andrea & Arredondo, 2004; Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008).

Likewise, the AMCD Multicultural Counseling Competencies set as foundational developing the attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills of counselors; this would include awareness of the client's worldview, mindfulness of their own culture and biases, and practicing culturally appropriate intervention strategies (Arredondo et al., 1996). Therefore, the person of the counselor regarding cultural empathy and acceptance was most important, regardless of which theoretical approach one chose. Moreover, since

1991 when multicultural counseling was first labeled as the 4th force in counseling, the definition of minority had expanded to include such groups as gay men and lesbians (Lowe & Mascher, 2001). Even so, almost two decades later, the LGBTQ community and many LGBTQ students in schools indicated that they continued to feel directly the hostility of society and a lack of support from school counselors (Fontaine, 1998; Goodenow, Kosciw, Diaz, & Gay, 2008; Rutter and Leech, 2006; Szalacha, and Westheimer, 2006; Satcher & Leggett, 2007).

This feeling of a lack of support ran counter to the belief that the counselor role was to include action and advocacy. Recognition of the systemic oppression of society and the role of counselors as change agents led to the development of the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). Reflective of Bronfenbrenner's multisystem approach, the ACA Advocacy Competencies were built upon an understanding of the individual, school, and societal forces that act upon students (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Moreover, they concentrated on the counselor's acting both *on behalf of* the client and *with* the client at each system level (Ratts et al, 2007). Through this, counselors could create an environment where the students and clients advocated for themselves. The dual concepts of action on behalf of the client and providing opportunities for self-empowerment were central in the role of the counselor. The webpage for Counselors for Social Justice, an ACA division, indicated that "Social justice counseling includes empowerment of the individual as well as active confrontation of injustice and inequality in society as they impact clientele as well as those in their systemic contexts" (Counselors for Social Justice, 2008, Homepage).

American School Counseling Association

Another ACA division, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), had made strong statements supporting LGBTQ students in schools. Their current Position Statement was explicit that

> The professional school counselor works with all students through the stages of identity development and understands this development may be more difficult for LGBTQ youth. It is not the role of the professional school counselor to attempt to change a student's sexual orientation/gender identity but instead to provide support to LGBTQ students to promote student achievement and personal well-being.

Professional school counselors:

- are aware of their own beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity
- are knowledgeable of the negative effects that result from stereotyping individuals into rigid gender roles
- are committed to the affirmation of youth of all sexual orientations and identities (ASCA Position Statement, p. 28).

Counselor Education Programs

Even though supporting of LGBTQ students was clear in such professional statements of ethics and competencies, advocacy support from counselors could not come without counselor education programs grounded in social justice theories. Counselor leaders have lamented that counselors must move beyond verbiage and begin meaningful implementation of social justice principles (Ivey & Collins, 2003). Working with the client to act on the client's behalf, allowing clients the voicing of the narratives of their

resiliency, or advocating for the client requires a reframing of counselor education programs (Ratts, 2006). Counselors need to be trained to see the relationship between the environment and individual and thus be trained to intervene on the individual, group and social levels (Greenleaf and Williams, 2009).

One challenge for counseling programs, counselor educators and practicing counselors is that many have been raised with the majority privilege and have been educated in a system that marginalizes students (Mitcham-Smith, 2007). One result from this is that counselors with societal privilege have to be cognizant not only of hearing the voices of the oppressed but also hearing their solutions for changing conditions, rather than creating solutions for them. Majority counselors can then avoid creating disempowering situations and acting as a "savior." A related challenge for counselor educators concerns both understanding and then communicating the reasons those in the majority should be motivated to change their practice, paradigm and privilege. Such collaborative persuasion presents a major obstacle in moving forward with more just and equitable counselor programs.

Counseling has a long history of advocacy, seeking wellness for individuals and society. It must build upon that legacy for the next generation moving social justice to the forefront. "Social justice advocacy in counseling, guided by the ACA Competencies and grounded in an ecological recognition of the intimate interaction of person-in-environment represents a holistic approach to counseling that seeks personal healing for clients though both intrapsychic and environmental change" (Greenleaf and Williams, 2009, p. 8). Over ten years ago Kiselica and Robinson (2001) recommended training future counselors to be social justice advocates with specific attributes that included a

capacity for commitment, an appreciation for suffering, communication skills, a multi-systems perspective, intervention skills, knowledge of media, and research/assessment skills. Such skills will allow theory to become practice and was a foundational goal of my study aimed at examining support systems for LGBTQ students.

Overview of Rationale

Before such skills can be developed, though, we needed an understanding of LGBTQ students' journeys and of their needs. Researchers and practitioners already suggested some of the conditions in this journey. While I wished to approach my study with openness to an understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ students, I was also informed by what was already in the field.

Hostile Environments

First, I believed that LGBTQ students faced oppressive environments in high school and college. LGBTQ students continued to feel unsafe and harassed in their high schools (Gay, 2010; GLSEN, 2006; Kim, 2009). Researchers reported continued incidents of LGBTQ bullying that resulted in disconnection from school, higher absenteeism and lower academic achievement (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Gay, 2010; Peterson & Rischar, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). In addition, LGBTQ students experienced social ostracizing, often with rejection by friends or family (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). As a result of these oppressive forces, LGBTQ students experienced higher rates of depression, illegal drug use, and attempted suicide (Johnson, 2011; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

Likewise, many LGBTQ college students experienced direct homophobia through high rates of verbal harassment, physical assault, and negative campus climates (Rankin,

2006; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld and Frazer, 2010). LGBTQ students when compared to heterosexual students more often feared for their safety and avoided disclosure of their sexual identity out of fear of negative consequences or intimidation (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). Colleges created an environment that was heterosexist, where all members were treated as if they were heterosexual and researchers continued to report issues of prejudice, harassment and violence on university campuses (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). The result not only created an environment that led to damaging mental health and deadly consequences, it also actively undermined the academic purpose of the university and equity in education as LGBTQ students considered leaving college more often than their heterosexual peers (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010).

Influencing Forces

Sexual identity development. The research also led me to conclude that LGBTQ students experienced challenging identity development issues. Sexual identity was an important topic of conversation, but one rarely had between adolescents and their parents, peers or school counselors even though the age of self-awareness of same sex attraction occurred between 6th and 10th grades (Peterson and Rischar; Ryan and Futterman, 1998; Vavrus, 2009). The absence of sexual identity concerns from the daily curricula within schools left students with no alternative for such discussions except in a few uncomfortable conversations, yet it was likely that students entering college had begun or were progressing through the coming-out process (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Vavrus, 2009).

Traditional models of sexual identity development had reflected the stage model paradigms, primarily considering the *coming out process*, focusing on the awareness of

same gender feelings followed by behaviors and emotional engagement with homosexuality (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979; Savin-Williams, 1990). These models indicated fluidity in development with behavior, attraction and identification as separate issues in the coming out process; students may have had other-sex experiences or no same-sexual experiences and identify as LGBTQ (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Nevertheless, these stage models of sexual identity development were not only too linear, but they also failed to include social factors and forces such as racial/ethnicity, religious membership, family structures and supports, and geographic area (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). By contrast, D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model presented parallel and simultaneous processes that individuals encountered in sexual identity development, emphasizing that sexuality may be fluid or fixed at different times in one's life (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). In the case of LGBTQ students journeying into college, not only did the oppressive or supportive environments of high school and college affect their development, the change of one environment to another was in itself a contributing factor in their development. As a result, LGBTQ students moved to various levels of identification as they changed environments, navigating their coming out from an ecological perspective; they considered the physical, institutional, and social environment in which they existed (Stevens, 2004).

A blending of internal pressures (a desire to be closer to others, affirming self-worth) and environmental conditions (supportive/unsupportive relationships, affirming/hostile environments) influenced a student's decision to come out (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Stevens, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). As a result, these factors affected the timing, outcome and duration of sexual identity development

(Peterson & Rischar, 2004). A sense of feeling valued and accepted in the school community was an important force in identity development and positive mental health (Cawthon & Guthrie, 201; Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Parents in particular seemed to be one of the last groups with whom students self-disclosed, but whom they felt had the greatest impact on their sense of personal security; students may therefore have distanced themselves from parents in anticipation of expected rejection or disappointment (Peterson & Rischar, 2004; Stevens, 2004).

Disclosure may have reduced personal stress and increased intimacy and relational connections, but it may also have resulted in rejection, abandonment and harm (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). LGBTQ students struggling with sexual identity reported increasing the extra-curricular activities or focusing on academic success in order to compensate for perceived inadequacies (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). However, they also reported feeling deprived of social and emotional growth opportunities compared to their heterosexual peers who dated; they also reported high levels of depression and social isolation (Peterson & Rischar, 2004).

Student development. Sexual identify development took place within the larger context of student development in multiple areas and compounded the challenges for LGBTQ students (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). Developmental approaches such as Chickering's Seven Vectors provided powerful tools for understanding and supporting LGBTQ students and made assumptions that showed how LGBTQ students were at risk (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Fassinger, 1998). LGBTQ students faced the same stressors that affected development as their heterosexual peers, but had the additional stress of managing social stigma related to sexual identity, often without the support of

family and friends (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). As a result, an LGBTQ student fearful of social stigmatizing might be challenged in developing mature relationships and thus of developing identity (Fassinger, 1998). Chickering's vector of Development of Identity cannot be legitimately separated from the society structure in which LGBTQ students live.

Career development. Simultaneously, LGBTQ students had unique career development and college choice concerns. Students developed multiple identities simultaneously (Fassinger, 1998). LGBTQ students concerned about safety, identity, and acceptance inadvertently ignored career plans and life goals (Fassinger, 1998; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). As the age range of sexual awareness attraction to full identity development spanned from late childhood/early adolescence and continued to adulthood, students from grades 6-16 would be directly served by a career development theory that accommodated queer needs (Fish & Harvey, 2005). Sexual identity formation interacted with all other developmental areas. The identity development phase of a student was critical in career counseling and showed that not all queer students' career counseling needs were the same (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994). This placed great doubt on the use of personality trait assessments as a key tool for queer client student counseling (Chung, 2003; Pope, 1995).

The developmental process and focus of queer youth did not parallel heterosexual students (Olive, 2010; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). College students could be particularly susceptible to being underserved by trait theories. Queer students, especially college students, who suddenly found themselves in a more supportive queer environment (like

college) might become immersed in their sexual identity search. Career development and academic studies might become subordinate and students appear unmotivated.

College choice. There was no one reason students chose to go to a college, or even to go to college at all, but included a variety of factors such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, ability, parental education and expectations, as well as peer support and peer college choice (Bergerson, 2009a; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman & Schmidt, 2009). Academic achievement, gender, parent income and education level, location and residence of high school, and extracurricular participation had been some of the strongest factors associated with college choice and application (Bergerson, 2009b; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman & Schmidt, 2009).

The theories used to understand why students, much less LGBTQ students, chose a particular college were only partially useful (Bergerson, 2009a; Bergerson, 2009b). In their career development process, students chose colleges for a variety of reasons including campus atmosphere, academic issues, and personal preferences; however, most of the research in the field focused on racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups rather than LGBTQ students (Burleson, 2010; Taulke-Johnson, 2010). As a part of career development, college choice was also related to the coming-out process of students (Burleson, 2010). LGBTQ students might have chosen to move far from home, particularly if their sexuality was undisclosed or if they had experienced harassing environments in their high schools (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). While campus climate might not be the primary consideration in LGBTQ students' choice of a college, many students made it part of their considerations in their college choices (Burleson, 2010).

College life/success. High school students' had ambivalence concerning their perceptions of new freedom, seeing both the anticipated benefits, as well as the additional responsibilities they would encounter (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). In addition to responding to external factors, transitioning college students indicated an additional theme of pursuing a goal based on a self-defined meaning of success (Clark, 2005). LGBTQ students were especially cognizant of being able to experiment with new ways of being, possibly redefining their identity in relation to the community in which they were leaving (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008).

Success in college was related to developing strategies based on persistence and self-confidence in one's ability, as well as comfort on the university campus, pride in identity, self-education, and activism (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008; Stevens, 2004). Students transitioning to college saw peers, relatives, and the community as a strategy for their success (Daigneault and Wirtz, 2008; Kurotsuchi-Indelas, Daver, Vogt, and Brown-Leonard, 2007). Involvement with LGBTQ groups and individuals could influence one's understanding of one's sexual identity (Olive, 2010; Evans & Herriott, 2004).

Conversely, while institutional supports increased a sense of community, victimization at school because of one's sexual orientation could decrease connectiveness and create a different experience for LGBTQ students (Burleson, 2010; Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). College was more difficult for LGBTQ students, with increased stress as they develop their sexual identities (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). Acts of harassment, including vandalism, "disturbing hate-filled letters in student publications, and antigay actions at support rallies illustrated…that the university was not wholly a safe environment to be out" (Stevens, 2004, p. 197). Moreover, since family rejection had

been associated with poorer health, more attempted suicides, higher depression, and greater use of illegal drugs, determining the relationships and experiences of LGBTQ students with their families was an important component in determining a student's risk profile (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). LGBTQ students showed college persistence if they we able to establish other personal resiliency strategies including self-care practices of physical, emotional, and counseling supports; "Resiliency has many origins and the ability to deal with life's challenges and society's pressures is a skill learned over time, and for those we are lucky, with the support and guidance of others" (Olive, 2010, p. 210).

Professional school counselor support

Unfortunately, even when presented with these multifaceted needs, counselors lack competency in knowledge, skills and attitudes in supporting LGBTQ students. Researchers indicated that counselor active engagement was necessary for queer youth; nevertheless, Professional School Counselors have struggled with having positive attitudes toward LGBTQ students and assisting in their attaining equity and social justice (Fontaine, 1998; Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer, 2006; Satcher & Leggett, 2007). Giving competent support to all students was the role of the Professional School Counselor; however, counselor beliefs in their own competency in counseling queer students was quite low (Dillon & Worthington, 2003; Fontaine, 1998; Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995).

Counselor attitude and self-efficacy. While knowledge of queer student issues and needs may not be a predictor of self-efficacy, it was an essential component in multicultural counseling competency; however, counselors found this area also

challenging (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Dillon et al., 2004; Hollier, 1996; Savage, Prout, & Chard, 2004). Counselor attitude toward LGBTQ students was interrelated with knowledge level and more resistant to change. Counselors who knew the most about homosexuality were the least homonegative; those who knew the least were the most homonegative (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009). There was a significant strand of homonegativity in counselor trainees and counseling students were more likely to be intolerant than beginning social work students (Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002). There was a correlation between homophobic attitudes and a desire not to work with LGB clients (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001; Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995).

Attitude affected counselor ethical competency in supporting LGBTQ clients and students. The highest indicator of homonegativity included belonging to certain religious denominations (more than race or ethnicity), not having a relationship with a gay or lesbian, and being a member of the Republican party (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Bidell, 2003; Kim, 2009; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Satcher and Schumacker, 2009). LGBTQ students were often uncomfortable talking to their school counselors and perceived that they knew when their counselor had homonegative attitudes (Kosciw, Diaz, & Gay, 2008; Rutter and Leech, 2006).

Counselor education. We should expect that counselors would be challenged in supporting LGBTQ students as counselor education programs struggled to prepare counselors to support LGBTQ students. Mental health professionals who did receive any training with LGBTQ issues typically got only a "single, time-limited lecture, in the

course of a class discussion, or through professional activities associated with their program" (Savage, Prout, and Chard, 2004, p. 207). Nevertheless, these could have effectiveness in some areas, particularly in knowledge gains; counselor educators have had significant impact on the students' LGB knowledge with even short term trainings (Israel & Hackett, 2004). Even so, counselor educators should understand the relationship between deeper knowledge of LGBTQ issues and homonegativity as they develop opportunities for counselor trainees to interact directly and vicariously with LGBTQ individuals (Alderson et al., 2009). Short attitudinal intervention have served the counter intuitive purpose of having counselors self-report increased homonegativity after examining their true feelings regarding LGB clients and issues (Israel & Hackett, 2004). It is the place of counselor education programs to provide opportunities in a safe environment for counseling students reconcile their personal beliefs with their ethical responsibilities (Dillon et al., 2004; Rainey & Trusty, 2007). Attitude was not fixed and therefore development of ethical competency was possible. Since, research indicated that the national trend for individuals living in the South and Midwest to have higher homonegativity might not be reflected in counselors in private practice (Moseley, 2007), one might assume that such change would be possible for Professional School Counselors also. Counselor trainees should be led to assess their attitudes regarding homosexuality and understand how these attitudes affect their self-efficacy and behaviors (Alderson et al., 2009; Flores et al., 1995; Israel & Hackett, 2004). Counselor education programs needed to integrate opportunities into their programs that included engaging LGB members with counselor trainees, examination of privilege and eliminating heterosexism

in the program (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001; Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995; Lowe & Mascher, 2001; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Smith, Foley & Chaney, 2008).

Once Professional School Counselor trainee attitudes are explored and they have been able to reconcile any homonegativity in order to move to a place of being able to offer ethically competent counseling, they will need support and training in order to act effectively. There were relatively few studies specifically examining counselor's engagement in social justice advocacy, no real tested and validated instruments for measuring the various ways that counselors engage in social justice; moreover, the majority of programs that taught social justice actually focused primarily on microlevel skills rather than macrolevel skills (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Ratts, 2006). Research had indicated the motivation for advocating for queer students was (1) a protective attitude toward queer youth and their situations and (2) a personal connection with queer youth and their issues (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Translating attitude to action was complex and required training since a positive attitude alone by counselors did not lead them to social justice action (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Moreover, educators often hesitated to support LGBTQ students out of fear of job loss, losing credibility, and being accused of recruiting (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). There was also the added challenge in that counselor educators who identified as Christian were less likely to focus on heterosexism (Ratts, 2006).

Overview of Study

Statement of Need and Contribution

Professional School Counselors and other educators need to support queer individuals. While attitude alignment with professional competencies was essential (and

especially challenging for those from conservative political/religious or limited exposure backgrounds), many counselors claimed that they could set aside their personal values of homonegativity and still serve queer students. Anecdotal evidence and research indicated that LGBTQ students were not being served in their personal identity development and related career development, or in choosing a college that was supportive of both aspects. In order to serve them better, we must first understand their high school-college experiences. I did a study that examined these experiences. The results of which have implications for advocacy in P-12 and higher education environments, as well as counselor education programs.

Research Purpose and Questions

Students are ships comprised of numerous related compartments, moving from one harbor (high school) to another harbor (college) often finding these seas hostile and oppressive. For LGBTQ students, the compartments may include challenging sexual identity and overall identity development issues, as well as unique career development and college choice concerns. In addition, they receive varied levels of support from their lighthouses, their counselors, as well as their schools. Understanding how all of these relate in LGBTQ students high school-college journeys will provide opportunities for support. The purpose of my research study was to describe the essential experiences of LGBTQ students' high school-college journey and what would make those experiences more liberating. My research questions included:

- How do LGBTQ students describe their high school-college experiences?
- How do various ecological and internal forces and dynamics interact in these LGBTQ students' experiences?

My related goal of this research study was to determine how the high school-college journey might be more self-empowering for LGBTQ students.

Research Tradition and Protocols

I conducted a phenomenological study to describe LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences and what would have made those experiences more liberating. As I wished to understand how LGBTQ students made meaning of their journeys, a qualitative approach was most helpful as it positions one to learn such (Morrow, 2007). I approached this with the motivation that qualitative research is done to see if there is something of interest in the direct experiences and interpretations of participants which may or may not be applicable to other contexts (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

I conducted my research with students from a state flagship university in the southeastern part of the United States, a useful site based on its diverse participant pool. Politically and socially this school presented an interesting cross section. It was located in the conservative south, in a "red state," and represented students and stakeholders with this mindset; the state had also presented several anti-LGBTQ initiatives in the past decades. On the other hand, the university had a relatively progressive history on diversity and LGBTQ issues—conducting LGBTQ climates studies in 2001 and 2010; forming an LGBT center; establishing policies regarding LGBTQ protections; and consisting of open LGBTQ faculty, students, and organizations.

My participant selection and source of data was purposeful (Morrow, 2007). I sought 5-12 traditional age college students (18-25) currently enrolled at the university who attended high school in the state of the university and who currently identified as non-heterosexual or non-gender normative. To gain participants I used the university's LGBT center's communication systems, including the electronic distribution lists, social networking sites, leadership meetings and general group meetings. From this process, nine participants, ages18-21, became a part of the study (Appendix B).

Beginning fall 2011, I conducted individual interviews two per participant adapting Siedman's (2006) phenomenological three interview series for the individual interviews and the focus group. The first interview focused on personal history and experience including life story through high school and life experiences into college. Participants were given a camera and asked to take pictures that represented their experiences. They were also asked to bring artifacts, such as yearbooks, that represented their high school-college journey. The second interview focused on making meaning of experiences described in the first interview and of the artifacts. While the pictures they took and yearbooks they brought with them generated no additional information and findings that did not come from the interviews, the taking of the pictures did promote participant immersion in their experiences and my relationship with the participants. Following the individual interviews, I conducted a focus group of the individual interview participants to share group findings and to elicit further understandings of the meanings and applications of the findings.

The interviews were held at the university LGBT resources center, though participants were given other options for meeting sites. In addition to privacy concerns,

the study attended to other ethical considerations and I considered treating participants ethically of highest importance for the study (Morgan, 2007). Similarly, the study complied with all standards of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). In addition, following my theoretical foundation of feminist and relational-cultural theory, I as the researcher, was both central in the relationship yet worked constantly to attend to issues of power and privilege; the goal was self-empowerment rather than exploitation of environment/diversity (Morrow, 2007). One of my primary concerns was attending to liberation issues—allowing participants to find their voices and then my hearing their stories. To accomplish that end, I used reflexivity and worked with intentionality at not being overpowering as the "expert" (Morrow, 2007).

I recorded the interviews and had them transcribed. I then listened to the interviews for accuracy of transcription. I used open coding looking for themes, understanding that the qualitative researcher was more of an interpreter than a reporter (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). I used constant comparative and reflexivity, allowing for flexibility of research design, research questions and analysis (Morrow, 2007). Both the constructivist and ideological "paradigms demonstrated more subjectivity, interaction with participants, and the voice of the researcher" (Morrow, 2007, p. 214), so I member checked findings with the participants, as well as the making of meaning with them in the second interview. From this I constructed a code book from which to understand both further and already completed interviews. A research team consisted of two third-year doctoral candidates with experience in qualitative research. I solicited the insights of this research team to respond to interviews, coding, and findings.

I should note that in the ideological paradigm from which I operated, the researcher's role was interactive with the participants and proactive in facilitating social change (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). My goal then was to manage my subjectivity through reflexive journals and member checks (Morrow, 2007). I both identified and noted my personal lens and responses to the participant's stories (bracketing) both in an ongoing basis and in the section that ends Chapter Three. I used reflexivity, keeping both a journal as well as field notes (Morrow, 2007). I anticipated one area of personal reflection would be in managing my roles as researcher, counselor, and advocate (Morrow, 2007). These reflections were shared in the Methods chapter with the understanding by revealing my researcher's lens and context within the study, I allow readers more easily to determine the appropriateness of transferability of the findings from one context to another (Morrow, 2007). I presented my findings in the form of themes that I identified as emerging. To aid the reader in understanding how I arrived at these findings, I used thick and rich descriptions (Morrow, 2007).

A Voyage of Discovery

My study was a voyage in itself, searching for multiple destinations. Just as I saw students as ships with various interrelated compartments traveling from harbor to harbor, I was also on a journey with this study. I sought to describe the essential experiences of LGBTQ students' high school-college journey and what would have made that experience more liberating. With that, I was looking for answers to

- How do LGBTQ students describe their high school-college experiences?
- How do various ecological and internal forces and dynamics interact in these LGBTQ students' experiences?

From these two questions I hoped to learn how high school-college experiences could be empowering to LGBTQ students, including what LGBTQ students themselves said would have supported them more in the high school-college journey.

I was also expecting to arrive at a destination that gives a call to action for Professional School Counselors and counselor educators to understand and support LGBTQ students in their high-school experiences. Finally, by contributing to the support that LGBTQ students' high school-college experiences, I was looking for schools and universities to be places that create a more socially just and equitable world.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As I noted in the previous chapter, schools do a disservice when they isolate any one aspect of a student. All students, especially LGBTQ students, are an amalgamation. Their high school-college experiences are ones filled with social and personal forces that shape not only what they experience, but also who they become. The journey through high school and college is one filled with uncertainty and multiple experiences. Before undertaking an exploration of their journey, and how these influences work with and against each other, I reviewed some of the research on these ecological and internal forces. While qualitative research should be approached without strong preconceived beliefs, familiarity with existing literature can be useful in establishing context and focus (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). A survey of pertinent literature informed me on those factors about which I should attend. This chapter reviews the literature on some of those forces (Appendix A). First I examine their education environments, both in high school and in college settings. The hostility of their environments elicits responses and resiliency strategies that shape the other issues that they encounter developmentally. I then discuss various developmental issues beginning with an examination of sexual identity development issues and then the broader perspective of student development. The two are inexorably linked as they are for all students, but unlike other students part of the heterosexual majority, their differentness for LGBTQ students is one to which they must actively attend or avoid. Following that I look at the challenges LGBTQ students

experience regarding career development and the related issue of college choice. I next examine the role of Professional School Counselors, potentially prime resources that students may use in their journeys. I review the literature related to Professional School Counselors and counselor education, most notably the disparity that exists between their training and practice versus the needs and challenges of LGBTQ students. Certainly there are other forces and influences that shape LGBTQ students' journey, as the study that follows reveals, but I anticipated the forces I have mentioned to be recurring and foundational. Finally, I will discuss the theories that shaped my understanding of what was happening in these students' lives.

Oppressive High School Environments

Hostility toward sexual orientation and gender conformity continues to be a major issue in United States schools (Kim, 2009). Rather than being a sporadic occurrence or non-existent as some might claim, counselors have agreed that harassment was an on-going problem for gay and lesbian students (Fontaine, 1998). In this area, students agree with their counselors. Nationally, nearly two-thirds (61.1%) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (39.9%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression (Gay, 2010). A representative survey by GLSEN (2006), the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, of all types of Georgia students revealed more disturbing results. In this survey, 49% of the respondents believed that harassment of all types is a serious issue in their schools. Even so, of those students who said that they had been harassed and assaulted in schools, 54% said they did not report the incidents to anyone in their schools for fear of exacerbating the situation or that the school personnel would do nothing. The schools created a de facto "don't ask,

don't tell" policy. It is little wonder that they held such a view when 82% of Georgia students reported in the survey hearing homophobic comments at school and 18% of them—almost one in five—heard a faculty or staff member make homophobic comments (GLSEN, 2006). Burleson (2010) reflected similar results with over 40% of self-disclosed LGBTQ college students reporting their schools as unsupportive.

As a result, bullied students miss school more and have lower academic achievement (Vavrus, 2009). 29.1% of LGBT students missed a class at least once and 30.0% missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns, compared to only 8.0% and 6.7%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students (Gay, 2010). High school students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression reported a median grade point average of 2.7, almost half a grade lower than the 3.1 median GPA for students who were less often harassed (Gay, 2010).

Beyond academic inequity, LGBTQ students often experience a range of oppression from social ostracizing to serious harm. 46% of LGB youth have reported losing a friend after coming out (self-disclosing) to them (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). LGBTQ students who were rejected by their families were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide and more likely to report depression and illegal drug use (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Even national news outlets took note in the fall of 2010 when they reported that the 5th gay teen in a three week period had committed suicide ("Raymond Chases Commits," 2010). Research shows that LGBTQ youth are up to four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Johnson, 2011).

Their pain, oppression, and final words in suicide notes are alarming and poignant. One 16 year old high school student included the following in his suicide note:

> I am sorry to the people that I love but I cant fucking take it anymore. So I am gay. Why dooes everyone hate me becaus of that (Suicide.org).

Students from all demographics of the queer community experience such harassment, yet often it is those who are marginalized in other ways, such as socioeconomic status, who get the least support from their school environment. Kim (2009) noted that queer youth from rural and poor communities are disadvantaged in getting support; they lack allies, resources, and integration into the school culture. Even so, in schools with high levels of harassment and homophobic victimization, LGBT students reported feeling connected with their schools if they could identify high level of staff support (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). Nevertheless, as a result of systemic oppression, LGBT students may find school "uncomfortable at best and dangerous at worst" (Peterson & Rischar, 2004, p. 232).

Oppressive College Environments

Homophobia and Heterosexism

The environment of oppression, inequity, and even safety concerns extend from high school onto the college campus as LGBTQ students encounter both homophobia and systemic heterosexism. LGBTQ students experienced direct homophobia through high rates of verbal harassment, physical assault, and negative college campus climates (Rankin, 2006). A study by Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld and Frazer (2010) of 5,149 LGBTQ college students, staff, faculty and administrators from 50 states revealed the inequities and harassment that LGBTQ students experience. LGBQ students (23%) were

more likely to experience harassment than heterosexual students (12%); 83% of the LGBQ students attributed the harassment to be based on their sexual identity (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). The pervasiveness of the oppression extended to the structure of the university setting. Like society, colleges created environments that were heterosexist, where all members were treated as if they were heterosexual, and researchers continued to report issues of prejudice, harassment and violence on university campuses (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). In both formal and informal settings, queer students encountered intimidation with LGBQ students reporting the most common occurrences for harassment to occur in a class (42%) or in public/walking across campus (52%) (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010).

Consequences

The oppression may be direct harassment, a result of heterosexism, or a result systemic homophobic stigmatization. Often the factors intertwine. Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi, 18, committed suicide after a video revealing his sexuality was streamed on the internet. Whether the recording and revealing of his personal life was a direct action of hateful homophobia, an inhumane action exacerbated by the social stigma of being gay, or a combination of both, the impact was the same. After the initial video was streamed Clementi wrote on a message board "He … saw me making out with a guy. The school (probably) won't do much of anything" (Pitts, 2010). His final posting on FaceBook included “Jumping off the GW Bridge. Sorry” (Pitts, 2010). Clementi’s feelings reflect the fears of many LGBTQ college students. LGBQ students when compared to heterosexual students feared for their safety (14 % versus 1 %), and avoided disclosure of their sexual identity out fear of negative consequences (43% versus 2%) or

intimidation (41% versus 2%) (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). The result not only creates an environment that leads to damaging mental health and deadly consequences, it also actively undermines the academic purpose of the university. LGBTQ students are at more risk for not getting an education. LGBQ college students (30%) considered leaving their school more often than their heterosexual peers (23%) (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010).

Institutional Responses

Even so, higher education has been slow to act to support LGBTQ students. Not until the late 1980s did colleges begin recognizing LGB activities, faculty and courses (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). While the first LGBT center opened in the early 1970s, they did not become more prominent until the 1990s; in addition, the percentage of colleges in the United States who have them still remains relatively small (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). Moreover, LGBT centers are only necessary, not sufficient, with systemic change requiring more than separate services for LGBTQ students, as supportive as they may be. As college student affairs professionals address the homonegative behaviors, they must first understand the attitudes of heterosexual students (Liang & Alimo, 2005). This requires understanding that harassment may come in many forms. For LGBTQ students, the most common forms of harassment have been derogatory remarks, feeling deliberately ignored, feeling isolated, observing others staring, being singled out as an authority on queer issues, or feeling intimidated (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). Supporting the unique needs and integrating LGBTQ students into the life and culture of the college structure can foster healthy relationships and a positive environment as researchers have shown that students with more contact with LGBTQ

students in college tended to have more positive views after two years (Liang & Alimo, 2005).

The College Environment

Unfortunately, the college environment is not always a model of LGBTQ affirmation, particularly in the conservative south. A 2001 study at the southeastern state flagship university from which I am drawing my participants indicated that 90% of the respondents heard anti-gay language and 75% knew of someone who had received verbal harassment related to being LGBTQ (Hill et al, 2002). Respondents also reported fears concerning self-disclosure, lack in integration of LGBTQ issues in courses, and various levels of harassment and intolerance (Hill et al., 2002).

A follow up 2010 study at the same institution showed some improvements, but a continued perception of harassment by LGBTQ college community members. Though LGBTQ members felt safer, 34.52% reported being shunned and 8.33% reported being threatened with physical violence (Barnett, 2010). Barnett (2010) also reported that though participants found official university responses to homonegativity to be more adequate than in the previous study, 31% still reported seeing antigay graffiti on campus. Students felt that the geographical location and culture in which the school resided contributed to the harassment they perceived. One participant commented that "being in the South there is still a majority of students who are very conservative socially and against homosexuality in general" (Barnett, 2010, unnumbered pages manuscript). Other participants noted that having anti-gay conservative preachers speak in the outdoor commons areas or even having the student government need to debate a LGBTQ anti-discrimination policy indicated that there existed a climate of hostility (Barnett, 2010).

Therefore as a result of direct homophobic acts, as well as heterosexist formal and informal environments, LGBTQ students experienced campus climates more negatively that their heterosexual peers (Rankin, 2006). Since perceptions of college safety affect educational and developmental outcomes and since LGBTQ students perceive campus climate safety differently from heterosexual students, LGBTQ students have received an inequitable experience in college (Rankin, 2006). These hostile environments affected both the identity development and the career development of LGBTQ students.

Sexual Identity Development Issues

While in these hostile educational settings, LGBTQ students are in the process of determining identity on multiple levels. They must develop in the same areas as other high school and college students (cognitively, socially, morally, etc), and they must also integrate sexual identity development uniquely from their heterosexual peers.

Age

Sexual identity was an important topic of conversation, but one rarely had between adolescents and their parents, peers or school counselors (Vavrus, 2009). Nevertheless, issues of sexual orientation and identity were prevalent throughout the LGBTQ student's academic career. Ryan and Futterman (1998) noted studies indicated that in the last generation, the age of first same sex attraction awareness moved in males from age 13 to age 9 and in females from age 15 to age 10. Likewise, the age of self-identification had moved in the last generation from the early 20s to age 16 in males and females (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Peterson and Rischar (2004) reported similar findings with 94% of their participants reporting awareness of non-heterosexual attraction by 10^{th} grade (approximately 15-16). Heterosexual adults described similar

understandings regarding sexual identity. Vavrus (2009) reported that pre-service teachers identified middle school as the most volatile and significant age for determining sexual identity; they also noted that LGBTQ students must struggle against societal values that treat heterosexuality as normative.

Yet, while LGBTQ individuals recounted that as children they felt different from their peers (Ryan & Futterman, 1998), the absence of acknowledgement of sexual identity concerns from the daily curricula within schools left students with no alternative for such discussions except in a few uncomfortable conversations, often in internet chat rooms (Vavrus, 2009). In spite of this lack of systemic support, over time LGBT students still began developing a sense of sexual identity while in high school; it is likely that students entering college have begun or are progressing through the coming-out process (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Development models

Representing the LGBTQ sexual identity development in any one model remains challenging. Lipkin (1999) noted that there are several models used to describe queer sexual identity development. Cass's model, one of the first dealing with the response to oppression that individuals experience, designated the process in stages of Identity Confusion, Comparison, Tolerance, Acceptance, Pride, and Synthesis (Cass, 1979; Lipkin, 1999). Other models use a similar stage theory construct (Savin-Williams, 1990; Troiden, 1979). These traditional models of sexual identity development have reflected the stage model paradigms, primarily considering the *coming out process*, focusing on the awareness of same gender feelings followed by behaviors and emotional engagement with homosexuality (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Even within this narrow perspective of development, clarity and generalizability for adolescents and early adults was illusive. These various models indicated that fluidity within the stages was quite possible (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). These researchers further stated that understanding adolescent identity development was particularly challenging as there was sparse research in this area (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Moreover, behaviors were not always indicative of where individuals were developmentally in the coming out (disclosure) process. Behavior, attraction and identification were separate issues in the coming out process; just as same sex experiences do not necessarily lead one to identify as LGBTQ, students may have identified as LGBTQ but have had other-sex experiences or no same-sex experiences (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). In addition, the sexual identity models have often confused sex desire and identification with the LGBTQ group (Fassinger, 1998).

Besides the intrapersonal dynamics that occur in the development process, the stage model of sexual identity development was not only too linear, but it also failed to include social factors and forces such as racial/ethnicity, religious membership, family structures and supports, and geographic area (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). An alternative to the stage process was the life span model offered by D'Augelli (1994) which presented parallel and simultaneous processes that individuals encounter in sexual identity development. This model represented that sexuality may be fluid or fixed at different times in one's life (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). D'Augelli presented the processes as exiting heterosexuality, development of personal LGB identity, development of social LGB identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing and LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, pp. 28-29; D'Augelli, 1994). In

addition to the fluidity and environmental factors of development, LGBTQ students represented multiple identity development areas (sexual, moral, student), possible intersection of oppression groups (race, gender, ableness), and a wide continuum of sexual orientation and gender identities and expressions.

While the stage model was less representative of multiple identities (such as race) or bisexuality, the life span development model may have offered a better representation for these students as well as the experiences of transgender students (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). The life span model reflected that environment contributed significantly to sexual identity development. In the case of LGBTQ students transitioning into college, the oppressive or supportive environments of high school and college affected their development. Likewise, the change of one environment to another was in itself a contributing factor in their development; LGBTQ students may move to various levels of identification as they change environments (Stevens, 2004). In addition to interpersonal cognitive dissonance and development, LGBTQ students navigated coming out (self-disclosure) from an ecological perspective as they considered the physical, institutional, and social environment in which they exist (Stevens, 2004).

Stigmatization and Coming Out (Self-disclosure)

A blending of internal pressures (a desire to be closer to others, affirming self-worth) and environmental conditions (supportive/unsupportive relationships, affirming/hostile environments) influenced a student's decision to come out (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). All the LGBTQ sexual identity models indicated that social stigma has an impact on the coming-out process (Ryan & Futterman, 1998) and LGBT students must considered environmental factors as a part of their coming-out process (Stevens, 2004).

LGBTQ students struggled against societal values that treat heterosexuality as normative (Vavrus, 2009). Therefore, while students may have experienced relief and affirmation, a hostile environment can lead to social ostracism and even violence (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011).

LGBTQ students navigated multiple factors affecting the decision to come out, including perceived support networks, personal confidence, personal stereotypes (of the LGBT community and social groups such as fraternities or athletic teams), internalized homophobia, and concerns regarding rejection and isolation (Stevens, 2004). These factors affected the timing, outcome and duration of sexual identity development (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). Students of color felt an additional barrier and they may have felt unaccepted in both their racial group as well as not conforming to the stereotypes of the LGBT community (Stevens, 2004).

Relational acceptance, with both their community and family, seemed to be a key contributor in LGBTQ students' sexual identity developments and their coming out processes. Perceived community and social support was a powerful force in their lives. A sense of feeling valued and accepted in the school community was an important factor in identity development and positive mental health (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). A lack of opportunity to interact with other LGBTQ peers increased social isolation and hindered the development process (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). LGBTQ student athletes or Greek organization members may have faced heightened concerns about acceptance within their social circles (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). However, researchers indicated that the majority of LGBTQ *initiated* fraternity and sorority students who choose to self-disclose received positive responses (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). Besides their

community support concerns, the perceived acceptance by their families seemed to be at the core of their sexual identity development concerns. Therefore, first disclosures were rarely to family members. One grounded study researcher found that first disclosure was usually to a member of the LGBTQ community and never to family members for fear of rejection (Stevens, 2004). Parents in particular were one of the last groups with whom students self-disclosed, but whom they felt had the greatest impact on their sense of personal security (Stevens, 2004). As a result, students may have distanced themselves from parents in anticipation of expected rejection or disappointment (Peterson & Rischar, 2004).

For many LGBTQ students acceptance of an LGBTQ identity was preceded by depression and coincided with the time they were leaving home (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). LGBTQ students who lacked support in living integrated lives may have developed maladaptive coping and resiliency behaviors that persist into adulthood leading to substance abuse, depression, and suicide (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Disclosure may have reduced personal stress and increased intimacy and relational connections, but it may have also resulted in rejection, abandonment and harm (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). While students who choose to self-disclose experienced hardships and oppression, LGBTQ students who struggled with sexual identity also experienced both helpful and harmful outcomes even before coming out. LGBTQ students struggling with sexual identity reported increasing the extra-curricular activities or focusing on academic success in order to compensate for perceived inadequacies (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). However, they also report feeling deprived of social and emotional growth opportunities

compared to their heterosexual peers who dated; they also reported high levels of depression and social isolation (Peterson & Rischar, 2004).

Student Development Issues

Sexual identify development took place within the larger context of student development in multiple areas and compounds the challenges for LGBTQ students (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). Developmental approaches such as Chickering's Seven Vectors provided powerful tools for understanding and supporting LGBTQ students when seen through multicultural/social justice constructs. Chickering's vectors were developing competence, managing emotions, emotional independence, developing mature relationships, establishment of identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This model both represented aspects of LGBTQ development, as well as led to challenges for LGBTQ students. These vectors were based on assumptions that show LGBTQ students were at risk (Fassinger, 1998). However, if these developmental vectors (such as developing mature relationships or establishing identity) were considered in isolation to the realities in LGBT students' lives, then the theory was a hindrance, creating an inaccurate model upon which to practice counseling or college student development programming. Actions and behaviors needed to be seen in context. LGBTQ students faced the same stressors as their heterosexual peers that affect development similar to, but had the additional stress of managing social stigma related to sexual identity, often without the support of family and friends (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). Marginalized students employed a variety of strategies that might be misunderstood when taken out of the context and not seen as possible responses to their oppressive environments. Ogbu, for example, in his discussion of ecological-

cultural theory spoke of the survival strategies of involuntary minorities; these included Uncle Tomming (compliance), collective struggle (civil rights actions), and hustling (system manipulation) (Foster, 2004). LGBTQ students may use resiliency strategies that have been developed over a lifetime of oppressive, inequitable interactions. Approaching LGBTQ students with an understanding of the system forces on those students may help conceptualize their responses to their educational and social environments (Foster, 2004). Likewise, it could explain why an LGBTQ student fearful of social stigmatizing might be challenged in developing mature relationships and thus of developing identity (Fassinger, 1998).

Chickering's vector of Development of Identity, for example, cannot be legitimately separated from the society structure in which LGBTQ students live. Chickering and Reisser (1993) describes this vector as including comfort with body, appearance, gender, sexual orientation, as well as self-concept and self-esteem. They noted that identity hinges on concepts of sexuality and gender, as well as family origin and ethnic heritage. The college experience presents an opportunity for identity development in a new and possibly oppressive environment. LGBTQ students need supportive relationships to buffer the oppressive forces from the community and society (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). Waters' (1996) in his discussion on the identity development of black college students reflected that the experiences of marginalized students in many universities were ones of multiple challenges. In addition to the traditional developmental stages students experience as they move into adulthood and separation from their families of birth, non-majority students have the added challenge of dealing with discrimination—both at the individual and institutional levels. For many students

from segregated suburbs, cross cultural experiences (including contact with LGBTQ individuals) may have been limited (Waters, 1996). As students intertwine cross cultural experiences into their identity development, discrimination and oppression can become present in covert and overt ways. Out of fear, LGBTQ students may hide their sexual identity, leading to pervasive feelings of isolation from others and themselves (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007).

One wonders at the developmental challenges of LGBTQ students in relation to systemic forces. As mentioned earlier, in one study at a state university in the South, 90% of the respondents heard anti-gay language and 75% knew of someone who had received verbal harassment related to being LGBTQ (Hill et al., 2002). Any attempt to look at their development using Chickering's vectors separate from the environmental oppressiveness would be faulty at best. Chickering himself saw students as a part of a multicultural, multiethnic society that needed policies and other systemic supports so that "all persons, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, national origin, or religious and spiritual orientation…" were equitable participants (Chickering, 2008). Chickering noted that colleges were the place where students should learn to confront the "great issues of world poverty and hunger, global warming and environmental degradation, alienation and apathy" (Chickering, 2008, p. 90). Educators, however, seemed not to understand the role of systemic oppression in LGBTQ student development. Peterson & Rischar (2004) observed three recurring statements in their qualitative study of LGB students regarding what the students wished educators knew about supporting LGB students:

> "Know there's so much going on in their heads."
>
> "They need role models."

"There is almost no support for coming out of the closet." (p.240)

Career Development Issues

While existing in hostile educational settings and developing their identities, including the sexual identity, LGBTQ students are also in the process of their career development, which for many includes college choice.

Career Development Meets Sexual Identity Development

Career development for LGBTQ students was far from linear as they develop multiple identities simultaneously (Fassinger, 1998). Beyond basic safety concerns, queer students had unique needs in career development, including college choice. LGBTQ students concerned about safety, identity, and acceptance inadvertently ignored career plans and life goals (Fassinger, 1998). One study by Schmidt and Nilsson (2006) looked at the "bottleneck effect" hypothesis that LGB youth in the early stages of development reduce engagement in other areas of their lives. The researchers based the study on research by Super that all facets of a person's self-concept influence each other which would be particularly acute when social stigmatization was also a factor. The results of the study supported the hypothesis—career maturity was predicated by sexual identity development and social support; therefore, LGBTQ students who had difficulty establishing sexual identity had related difficulty with career development (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). Since their participants were LGB youth recruited from organizations that served LGB youth and the study required assent, it would not be surprising if students at earlier stages of sexual identity development may have exhibited even higher levels of career indecision.

As the age range of sexual awareness attraction to full identity development spanned from late childhood/early adolescence and continues to adulthood, students from grades 6-16 needed career development that accommodates queer needs (Fish & Harvey, 2005). Approaches have typically looked at applying traditional theories (usually Holland and Super) to queer needs; queer non-career theories (usually related to identity development) applied to career needs; or queer theories about work environments (worker discrimination, self-disclosure) (Chung, 2003). There was a need to look at a career development approach that is inclusive and supportive of the unique needs of queer youth as there was little research and few scholars who published in the field of adolescent LGBTQ career development consistently (Chung, 2003). However, while there was a need to explore what career theory and developmental models serve queer youth best, there were certain basic attributes that applied to counseling queer students regardless of the theoretical approach. Components included coming out issues, employment discrimination, dual career, counselor bias, internalized homophobia, and identity development (Pope, 1995).

Career Counseling Theories and Queer Identity Formation Needs

It was important to examine these and other factors that caused great challenge in understanding the career development process of LGBTQ students. The first aspect was that sexual identity formation interacted with all other developmental areas. As noted earlier, there were several models used to describe queer sexual identity development and that Cass's stage model, one of the first dealing with the response to oppression that individuals experience, designated the stages as Identity Confusion, Comparison, Tolerance, Acceptance, Pride, and Synthesis (Lipkin, 1999). Likewise noted were the

advantages of D'Augelli's life span developmental model. In either theoretical construct, the identity development phase of a client was critical in career counseling and showed that not all queer clients' career counseling needs were the same (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994). The queer identity formation process presented some challenges for a developmental approach to career counseling. Schmidt and Nilsson (2006) noted that the developmental process in queer youth did not parallel heterosexual students. Developmental timing and rate were different, often as a result of manifestations of societal homophobia and oppression. In addition, Schmidt and Nilsson (2006) had shown that clients have limited psychological resources for working on multiple developmental areas simultaneously (career development versus sexual identity development). This higher cognitive dissonance may have correlated to lower career maturity and development, particularly at early stages of identity development which involved both shame and the resulting lower self-esteem. Schmidt & Nilsson's (2006) research showed that queer youth career development was influenced by sexual identity development, especially those struggling with identity formation. Olive (2010) indicated that college students at the beginning of sexual identity development tended to focus on either professional organizations or LGBT organizations. Career decisions made at this level of identity development may be less congruent once a student reached a higher level of identity formation. As LGBTQ students matured in sexual identity development, they were then more likely to devote their energies to professional growth (Olive, 2010).

Based on this, one might wonder at the effectiveness of the career support LGBTQ students received since career interest inventories are a prominent tool used by counselors. Chung noted that the reliability and validity of such assessments may not

even apply to queer clients (Chung, 2003). Such psychological tests were often misused on queer clients with even the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) being inaccurate if a client was at the early stages of sexual identity development and thus masking a true understanding of self (Pope, 1995). Since Holland's theory, and other trait theories, were based on congruence between the person and environment, the lack of self-knowledge would give inaccurate career and vocational results; thus, a large age range of students were underserved by the trait/person-environment theories alone as there may be an extended period in which students ignore key aspects of self-identity between homosexual attraction, which may start at an early age, and later queer self-identification (Prince, 1995).

College students may be particularly susceptible to being underserved by trait theories. Queer students, especially college students, who suddenly find themselves in a more supportive queer environment (like college) may become immersed in their sexual identity search and career development and academic studies may become subordinate and students appear unmotivated. Rather than seeing students as lacking vocational maturity, counselors and student development personnel could see sexual identity focus as but a disruption in the career development process and help LGBTQ students avoid self-fulfilling failure prophecies (Prince, 1995). Even those who are proponents of trait matching acknowledge that knowing how the client has integrated identity and how the possibly hostile environment will interplay were essential issues (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994). More helpful would be a learning theory approach that incorporated and examined the results of trait assessment since one cannot know all of the environmental

factors that queer students will face or get complete results while a client is in sexual identity formation, (Krumboltz, 2009).

College Choice and Engagement Issues

While it may be difficult for an LGBTQ student to focus on both career and identity development simultaneously, the formation of career goals (post-high school and post-college) can be a primary persistence and resiliency strategy (Olive, 2010). Choosing to attend college and choosing which college to addend were both integral parts of the career development process.

Choosing

There was no one reason students may choose to go to a college or even to go to college at all. A number of factors influenced students' predisposition to attend colleges at all including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, ability, parental education and expectations, peer support and peer college choice (Shaw, Kobrin, Packman & Schmidt, 2009). Once students chose as part of their career development to attend college, there were numerous factors that influenced their decisions at to which college to attend. Traditionally, college choice theories included three perspectives as to the reasons students choose particular colleges; they involved sociological factors (status, race, academic achievement), psychological factors (cost of tuition, room and board, location, curriculum) and economic perspectives (return on an investment) (Bergerson, 2009a). Academic achievement, gender, parent income and education level, location and residence of high school, and extracurricular participation had been some of the strongest factors associated with college choice and application (Shaw, Kobrin, Packman & Schmidt, 2009). In addition to parental influence and financial factors, later studies

indicated that a multiplicity of factors influenced students' college choices including location, course and program offerings, reputation, sense of fit, and social opportunities (Bergerson, 2009b). Academic achievement remained one of the primary indicators of college choice (Bergerson, 2009b).

Nonetheless, access to higher education was not equitable; therefore, the theories used to understand why a student chooses a particular college were only partially useful (Bergerson, 2009a). Later models have used more individual differences such as socioeconomic factors; race; social and cultural capital; polices by states; and perhaps more importantly, the lens or dispositions from which students saw their world and choices (Bergerson, 2009b). There was a lack of understanding on why any student, much less LGBTQ students chose to attend particular colleges. Clearly, there was a need for additional qualitative work to help understand how and why variables affect students' postsecondary decisions (Bergerson, 2009a).

As a part of career development, college choice was also related to the coming-out process of students (Burleson, 2010). Choice of college, especially for at-risk students—including LGBTQ students—could make the difference between a positive experience (persisting and mental health) or a negative outcome (dropping out or even harm) (Burleson, 2010). In their career development process, students chose colleges for a variety of reasons including campus atmosphere, academic issues, and personal preferences (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). Students from groups experiencing systemic oppression had received some attention in recent research literature; however, most of the research in the field focuses on racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups rather than

LGBTQ students (Burleson, 2010). Therefore, little was known about the college search concerns or priorities of LGBTQ students (Burleson, 2010).

LGBTQ students may have chosen to move far from home, particularly if their sexuality is undisclosed or if they have experienced harassing environments in their high schools (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). Studies have indicated that LGBTQ students look for queer communities either on campus or in the nearby community (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). While campus climate might not have been the primary consideration in LGBTQ students' choice of a college, many students made it a consideration in their college choice (Burleson, 2010). Moving from a place of intolerance to a place of more tolerance seemed to be a primary consideration with the participants in Taulke-Johnson' (2010) study.

One wonders then at the advantages of having all schools with LGBTQ safe environments and the benefits this might bring to all students. Richard Florida (2002), in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, pointed out that creating an environment that is safe for gay and lesbians seems to have the added affect of creating a climate of tolerance and support that encourages others. He noted that increase in the non-gay "creative worker" in those areas that support LGBTQ individuals, indicating that diversity and tolerance allows the freedom to be creative. However, the motivations for moving to affirming communities by those perceived as different by society were less known and LGBTQ students' motivations for moving to more supportive environments may vary. Some chose to move to more affirming environments for personal growth; some felt they must move to tolerant environments for emotional and physical safety reasons (Taulke-Johnson, 2010).

Taulke-Johnson (2010) noted also issues of equity and access as sexual orientation and socioeconomic class intersect. Since issues of class and finance affected student choice, LGBTQ students had limitations imposed on them in selecting schools with positive environments (Taulke-Johnson, 2010). Not only were their choices limited due to financial considerations, as well as academic standards and selectivity, they were also limited by those environments that were perceived to be affirming and positive choices for their sexual identities. Taulke-Johnson (2010) indicated that LGBTQ students turned down "better" institutions that lacked an LGBTQ friendly school or community environment.

Retention Considerations

Both LGBTQ and heterosexual graduating seniors have a variety of emotions as they contemplate transitioning beyond high school. One study indicated high school students' ambivalence concerning their perceptions of new freedom, seeing both the anticipated benefits, as well as the additional responsibilities they would encounter (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). Queer students have the compounded opportunities and challenges of sexual identity exploration and expression in their new environment. In addition, college students expressed fears regarding managing money, adjusting to new roommates and living on their own (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). LGBTQ students would be especially cognizant of their reception by the new community at large and their roommates in particular. The transition to college process involves a combination of challenges and strategies. Clark (2005) indicated three themes related to student transitioning to college and responding to their environment: overcoming an obstacle (responding to a negative), seizing an opportunity (initiating a positive), and adapting to

change (positive or negative). In addition to responding to external factors, transitioning college students indicated an additional theme of pursuing a goal based on a self-defined meaning of success (Clark, 2005). This may be related to their anticipation in being able to experiment with new ways of being, possibly redefining their identity in relation to the community in which they were leaving (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). All of these themes have unique implications for queer students in various stages of sexual identity development and disclosure, particularly as they explore and navigate new environments that may be affirming or hostile.

Factors Promoting Positive LGBT Engagement in College Life

Transition into college and retention until graduation are two areas inextricably linked with each other. The manner in which students were received into institutions and the ongoing supports that they received contributed to their success, retention, and graduation. Success in college was related to developing strategies based on persistence and self-confidence in one's ability (Daigneault & Wirtz, 2008). LGBTQ students struggling with an oppressive environment needed supports in developing such strategies. Healthy transition to college life resulted in LGBTQ student empowerment that included elements of comfort on the university campus, pride in identity, self-education, and activism (Stevens, 2004).

Studies have shown that students benefit from support and engagement in their community. Researchers have indicated that students who have participated in supportive communities, where small groups of students take the same classes and live in the same general area of the residence hall (based on interest, majors, or activities), have increased success in their academic and social transition to college as compared to their

counterparts who did not take part in such programs (Kurotsuchi-Indelas, Daver, Vogt, & Brown-Leonard, 2007). Similarly, Daigneault and Wirtz (2008) indicated that students transitioning to college saw peers, relatives, and the community as a strategy for their success. It follows then, that having a supportive community in which one can fully engage would increase the success of LGBTQ students as well. Involvement with LGBTQ groups and individuals can influence one's understanding of one's sexual identity (Evans & Herriott, 2004).

Many LGBTQ students had their first encounter with an LGBTQ community when they arrive at college (Olive, 2010). Interactions with the LGBTQ community, including structured opportunities to meet those who are LGBTQ or allies, have allowed college students important sexual identity development opportunities (Evans & Herriott, 2004). Queer students' persistence in college is increased by involvement with a LGBTQ community on campus (Olive, 2010). In addition, the presence of a supportive club, such as a Gay-Straight Alliance, related to less hostility experienced by LGBT students (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). Conversely, while institutional supports increase a sense of community, victimization at school because of one's sexual orientation has shown to decrease connectiveness, (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). Therefore, in spite of similarities, LGBTQ "students have a markedly different experience of college than other students" as a result of the oppression and harassment on campus (Burleson, 2010, p 13).

Factors Promoting Negative LGBTQ Engagement in College Life

College is more difficult for LGBTQ students with increased stress as they develop their sexual identities (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011). Acts of harassment, including vandalism, "disturbing hate-filled letters in student publications, and antigay

actions at support rallies illustrated…that the university was not wholly a safe environment to be out" (Stevens, 2004, p. 197). One study indicated that being victimized in school because of sexual orientation directly related to lower school connectedness and engagement (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). In addition, LGBTQ students needed more than just the absence of victimization on campus; a construct of heterosexism also contributed to students feeling less a part of their community (Rankin, 2006). Researchers have commented on LGBTQ students feeling it important to hear professors mention queer issues in a supportive manner in their classes (Ranking, 2006; Stevens, 2004).

Healthy engagement and development occurred as students were able to integrate all of their supports into their sexual identity. None seemed to have more impact than that of the family. Olive (2010) identified the importance of family in increasing an LGBTQ student's persistence in continuing in college, not only in communicating high academic expectations, but also in acknowledging and accepting the students' sexual identity. Family rejection, on the other hand, has been associated with poorer health, more attempted suicides, higher depression, and greater use of illegal drugs (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). As a result, determining the relationships and experiences of LGBT students with their families was an important component in determining a student's risk profile (Ryan et al., 2009).

Gaining family acceptance may be beyond the abilities of some queer college students who must then use other strategies. LGBTQ students showed college persistence if they we able to establish other personal resiliency strategies including self-care practices of physical, emotional, and counseling supports (Olive, 2010). Whether it

was family, the LGBTQ community, or institutional supports—queer students' success and self-empowerment in college were related to the relational supports they encountered. "Resiliency has many origins and the ability to deal with life's challenges and society's pressures is a skill learned over time, and for those we are lucky, with the support and guidance of others" (Olive, 2010, p. 210).

Counselor and Counselor Educator Opportunities

Counselors Lack Competency with LGBTQ Students

Studies have shown that counselor active engagement was necessary for queer youth. Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) indicated LGB students with no adult support in the school were more likely to have been threatened and to have made multiple suicide attempts. Nevertheless, Professional School Counselors struggled with having positive attitudes toward LGBTQ students and their attaining equity and social justice (Satcher & Leggett, 2007). Fontaine (1998) focused on the need for school counselors to be engaged in supporting gay and lesbian students. Citing background research that 80% of teachers indicated homonegative attitudes and that many school officials claimed that a significant LGBTQ student population does not exist, the study replicated an earlier Price and Telljohann (year) study using the School Counselor Survey of Sexual Minority Youth Issues (SCSSMY) (Fontaine, 1998). Fontaine indicated that counselors had substantial experience in dealing with sexual identity issues with gay and lesbian students, though limited participant pool may indicate a more invested counselor than the norm (Fontaine, 1998). In this study counselors also reported that queer youth have issues related to self (poor self-esteem, depression, and self-doubt), fears (of disclosure and isolation), and the exposure to threats and harassment.

Nevertheless, the impact of counselors can be significant. Murdock and Bolch's (2005) study indicated that LGBTQ students even in homophobic school environments experienced less personal victimization if they had support from school personnel, family and friends. With this personal support, LGBTQ students' school related adjustments were similar to those LGBTQ students who were in tolerant environments (Murdock and Bolch, 2005).

Counselor self-efficacy with queer students. Giving competent support to all students is the role of the professional school counselor; however, counselor belief in their own competency in counseling LGBTQ students is quite low. Researchers have suggested that self-efficacy (the belief that one has in oneself the ability to perform a task) relates to counselor performance and competence (Dillon & Worthington, 2003). One researcher indicated only 8% of counselors believed they had a high level of competence when counseling sexual minority students (Fontaine, 1998). In addition, researcher showed five interrelated dimensions on a counselor's LGB self-efficacy: applying knowledge or LGB issues, performing advocacy tasks, maintaining awareness of one's attitudes and others' identity development, developing a working relationship with an LGB client, and assessing underlying issues with LGB clients (Dillon & Worthington, 2003). Attitude seems to play a part in greater self-efficacy as future interest in working with sexual minorities positively correlated with successful experiences and knowledge about homosexuality (Flores et al., 1995).

Experience in practice also increased self-efficacy as mental health counselors showed higher levels of self-efficacy than counselor trainees (Dillon & Worthington, 2003). Presumably, those in the field may have had greater opportunities to encounter

queer clients. Flores, O'Brien, and McDermott (1995) examined graduate counseling psychology students' self-efficacy based on their successful experiences with lesbians and gay men and their knowledge and attitudes about homosexuality. They indicated that students who scored higher in self-efficacy were the ones who had successful experiences with lesbians and gay men and had lower homophobic attitudes (Flores et al., 1995). They did note that further study was needed to determine how self-efficacy relates to actual performance, especially since counselors tend to overestimate and underestimate their performance at the beginning of their training (Dillon & Worthington, 2003). Nonetheless, there is a correlation between scoring low on homonegativity (attitude) and greater self-efficacy in counseling queer clients (Flores et al., 1995). Knowledge of homosexuality, on the other hand, did not seem to be a predictor of self-efficacy among students (Flores et al., 1995).

Counselor knowledge of queer students. While knowledge of queer student issues and needs may not be predictor of self-efficacy, it is an essential component in multicultural counseling competency (Alderson et al., 2009). When it comes to ethical competency skills in this area, counselors have a very low knowledge level in which to support queer students. Hollier (1996) found in a study of thirty-two school districts in Rio Grande, Texas, that counselors showed a lack of knowledge in (1) awareness of queer students in their schools, (2) issues facing sexual minority students, and (3) knowledge of LGBTQ counseling issues. Savage, Prout, and Chard (2004) found similar results in their study of school psychologists in which participants indicated only a low to moderate level of knowledge about gay and lesbian issues and a lack of awareness in how these issues present themselves in academic settings. In addition, knowledge and

understanding of one's sexual identity development, and the sexual identity development of others, can decrease the tendency to accept heterosexuality as the norm and default (Dillon et al., 2004).

Counselor knowledge and attitude of queer students. Though counselor attitude toward LGBTQ students is distinct from knowledge level and more resistant to change, the two are interrelated. Alderson, Orzeck, and McEwen's (2009) study of counselors in a conservative region of Canada illustrated the challenge of having LGBTQ ethically competent school counselors in conservative regions. The researchers investigated the connection between knowledge of homosexuality and homonegativity based on the assumptions that high school counselors should be a resource for students and that they should be properly trained to do so. They focused on the multi-cultural competencies of affirming attitudes, attaining knowledge and learning specific skills. The researchers did indicate that high school counselors who knew the most about homosexuality were the least homonegative; those who knew the least were the most homonegative (Alderson et al., 2009). The researchers did not examine the causal or temporal relationship between knowledge and homonegativity, though they did note a possible relationship between homonegativity and cultural/religious views or having LGBTQ acquaintances (Alderson et al., 2009).

Counselor attitude (homonegativity) of queer students. Developing supportive attitudes is critical as research has indicated 24% of counselors had moderate or high homonegativity (Alderson et al., 2009). Queer students often perceive their high school counselors with homonegative attitudes as unsupportive. Rutter and Leech (2006) reported participants feeling judged by school counselors, as well as feeling unsafe at

school. Their participants reported wanting to have no relationships with their counselors and one reported the counselor made "sarcastic remarks" (Rutter & Leech, 2006, p.81). Quantitative researchers report similar results. In a survey of students with LGBT parents, 35% indicated that they would not be comfortable in talking with the school counselor/psychologist about issues related to their family/parents (Kosciw, Diaz, & Gay, 2008).

Studies of counselor trainees indicate that there is a significant strand of homonegativity in counselor trainees. Newman, Dannenfelser, and Benishek (2002) analyzed the attitudes toward lesbians and gay men of two different types of first-year graduate students, social work and counseling students, citing research that indicated a counselor's homonegativity leads to a lower quality of counseling and that an intolerance of lesbians and gay men is evident in the continuation of conversion or reorientation therapy. They found counseling students were more likely to be intolerant than beginning social work students (Newman et al., 2002). Moreover, 18-23% of the counseling student respondents indicated homonegative attitudes in such areas as allowing male couples to adopt, seeing male homosexuality as a "natural expression" and predicting being upset if their son were to be homosexual (Newman et al., 2002, p. 280).

Such counselors, approximately one-fifth of trainees, would not be ethically supportive of queer students. Moreover, there is correlation between homophobic attitudes and a desire not to work with LGB clients (Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995). Carroll and Gilroy noted that, based on their years in counselor education, many students indicated anxiety when considering working with GLBT clients and considered it acceptable and ethical to refer GLBT clients rather than work with them (Carroll &

Gilroy, 2001). Consistent referral as a means of practice rather than seeking competency runs counter to multicultural ethically competent support; in other multicultural areas (racial-ethnic) counselor trainees are encouraged to deal with their biases (through personal therapy, outside reading, personal encounters) (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001).

Yet, counselors are not monolithic, and there are a range of attitudes among counselors. Counselors in private practice seem to have more culturally affirming attitude and are more culturally skilled in working with queer clients (Moseley, 2007). Moseley (2007) studied members of ACA, all of whom were in private practice and found no evidence among these counselors that client sexual behavior or identity affected their evaluations of a client and implied that counselors were becoming more skilled and affirming of gay male clients. It would seem that there may be some relationship with being professionally and ethically involved in the profession and in actual practice.

Counselor attitude (religion/political affirmations) of queer students. With a growing understanding of the powerful effects of attitude on the competency of the counselor, as well as the prevalent homonegativity in counselors, researchers have focused on two primary questions regarding attitude and counselor ethical competency in supporting LGBTQ clients and students. These questions concern first on what are the greatest predictors of homonegativity in counselors and counselor trainees, and then on what are the best interventions for working with such members in order to move them to LGBTQ cultural competency. For the former, the predictor, the highest indicator of homonegativity seems to be religion (religiosity, or religious practice). Belonging to certain religious denominations (more than race or ethnicity) correlated positively with higher levels of homonegativity (Kim, 2009). Another study, by Satcher and

Schumacker (2009), corroborated such results. They examined predictors of homonegativity in professional counselors focusing on age, race, gender, church attendance, not having a relationship with a gay or lesbian, being a member of the Republican Party, and having training in sexual identity counseling. They found that the highest predictors of homonegativity were church attendance, not having a relationship with a gay or lesbian, and being a member of the Republican party, as well as not having participated in sexual identify training in the last 12 months. Gender and race were not predictors (Satcher & Schumacker, 2009). Newman indicated a similar result in beginning counseling students with the biggest predictor of attitude being religion, over other possible predictors of race, sexual orientation, and gender (Newman et al., 2002).

Multiple researchers arrived at similar understanding of predictors of homonegativity through a variety of research studies. Bidell (2003) reported that on the Sexual Orientation Counselor Scale (SOCS), non-religious and liberal responders scored significantly higher than religious conservatives in being aware of LGB issues. Satcher and Schumacker (2009) noted that higher levels of homonegativity of participants who attended church at least three times per month. There is a correlation between conservative religious views and more negative attitudes (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Rainey & Trusty, 2007). Counselors who are non-supportive of queer students have indicated personal and religious beliefs with respondents saying that the gay/lesbian lifestyle was a sin and against the Bible and that the best a counselor could do is essentially *love the sinner and hate the sin* (Fontaine, 1998). Bidell (2003) also noted that there is a strong relationship between religious conservatism and low competency in working with queer clients.

Programs Struggle to Prepare LGBTQ Competent Counselors

The role of counselor educators in social justice and LGBTQ competencies.

One challenge facing counselor educators was relatively little research to guide them in training and assessing social justice competencies in their counselor trainees. As late as 2005, Nilsson and Schmidt found no empirical studies specifically examining counselor's engagement in social justice advocacy and no real tested and validated instruments for measuring the various ways that counselors engage in social justice. In another study, Ratts (2006) examined the question of how well CACREP (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) master's level counseling programs prepare counselors to be engaged in social justice. Ratts suggested that group identity affects which issues of oppression are addressed in a social justice counseling course. Beyond indicating that there is no standard in the field, Ratts also found that most courses focus on microlevel interventions (multicultural competency) and less on macrolevel interventions (social justice advocacy). Ratts concluded that most instructors did not teach social justice theory as a part of their course work.

Curriculum inclusion. As far back as 1989, Newman (1989) noted one way society maintains stereotypes and homonegativity is through the exclusion of LGBTQ issues in social work curriculum and noted that exclusion occurred because such topics were thought of as less than legitimate. In addition, since counselor educators who identify as Christian were less likely to focus on heterosexism, one wonders how well they are helping their counselor trainees to deal with counseling issues and controversies facing the profession (Ratts, 2006). One such controversy is the practice of Reparative Therapy, the religiously based, non-scientific practice that queer clients can change their

orientation, even though counselors have an ethical obligation to provide competent counseling and counseling information to their clients. In reference to Reparative Therapy, Whitman et al noted that "ACA opposes portrayals of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals as mentally ill due to their sexual orientation" and that counselors are only to provide treatment that is scientifically based on a "theoretical framework supported by the profession" (Whitman, Glosoff, Kocet, & Tarvydas, 2006, website).

Researchers have also noted that if social justice (macrolevel intervention) were to be integrated in counseling, there must be some measure of it (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). However, in the specific area of competency with LGBTQ clients, researchers have struggled even to establish assessments of the multicultural level (microlevel) of competency. Only in relatively recent years have instruments been created to assess the awareness, skills, and knowledge of counselors in working with LGB clients (Bidell, 2003). Nonetheless, later researchers have indicated that mental health professionals who do receive any training with LGBTQ issues typically get only a "single, time-limited lecture, in the course of a class discussion, or through professional activities associated with their program" (Savage, Prout, and Chard, 2004, p. 207). With such challenges to social justice advocacy instruction on the broad level, and exclusion of LGBTQ issues from curricula, it is no wonder that counselors are unprepared to be supportive of the counseling and advocacy needs of students.

Knowledge level development. LGBTQ knowledge level may be one of the most readily changeable components of the competency components for counselors. Israel and Hackett (2004) compared the interventions related to information and attitude on counselor trainees' knowledge and attitudes toward LGB clients. They discovered that

those who received interventions related to information had increased knowledge at the end of the interventions. The researchers emphasized that this occurred in a 2.5 hour intervention, thus concluding that counselor educators can have a significant impact on the students' LGB knowledge (Israel & Hackett, 2004). However, those receiving interventions related to attitude indicated increased levels of homonegativity over those who received no attitudinal interventions. Since most counselors do not accurately self-report their attitudes on LGB issues, Israel and Hackett concluded that the short attitudinal intervention only served the purpose of having counselors see their true negative feelings regarding LGB clients and issues (Israel & Hackett, 2004). Their methods description implied that the knowledge plus attitudes intervention might have been rushed including multiple pedagogical approaches in a short time. Nevertheless, they did point out that more research needs to be done on the type of attitudinal interventions that might yield the best results.

Attitudinal development. Counselor educators benefit from understanding the relationship between knowledge of LGBTQ issues and homonegativity as they develop opportunities for counselor trainees to interact directly and vicariously with LGBTQ individuals (Alderson et al., 2009). Rainey and Trusty (2007) looked at the variables that predict client attitude toward gay men and lesbians. Their background research noted that men have been reported to be more homophobic, so gender was a consideration as was place of residence, previous experience with gay men, previous experience with lesbians, political views, religiosity, and experience as a client in counseling. They suggested that the strongest predictors were religiosity, political views, and prior relational experience with lesbians (with a smaller significant predictor being relational

experience with gay men). The researchers suggested that counselor education programs must help counseling students reconcile their personal beliefs with their ethical responsibilities. They also stated there is a benefit in allowing college faculty and students to be open about their sexuality (Rainey & Trusty, 2007).

Counselor attitude (interventions) with queer students. Attitude is not fixed and therefore development of ethical competency is possible. Alderson, Orzeck, and McEwen's study in a conservative area of Canada revealed that most high school counselors were low in homonegativity (Alderson et al., 2009). Even if the results were somewhat skewed by the response rate, the researchers indicated that many professional school counselors have positive attitudes toward queer students. Even when considering the conservative regions in which counselors were located, they often reflected more supportive attitudes than their region. The national trend for individuals living in the South and Midwest to have higher homonegativity may not reflect counselors in private practice (Moseley, 2007). One might assume that such change would be possible for professional school counselors also. Nonetheless, graduate programs in school counseling often included minimal training in working with GLB individuals (Alderson et al., 2009). Those that did include training in attitudinal issues often used brief interventions that were perhaps detrimental. Israel and Hackett (2004) concluded that attitudinal exploration sessions that are short and brief appear to have a negative effect on trainee attitudes. As mentioned, it is possible that short trainings simply challenge the actual feeling of counselors that may have been hidden (Israel & Hackett, 2004). Counselor trainees should assess their attitudes regarding homosexuality and understand how these attitudes affect their self-efficacy (Flores et al., 1995). However, since self-

reported attitudes may be inconsistent with behavior, it is therefore important for trainees to have a safe environment in which to explore biases and their own sexual identity (Dillon et al., 2004; Israel & Hackett, 2004).

Counselor attitude (advocacy) with queer students. Moving from positive feelings toward LGBTQ students to advocacy has presented challenges. Researchers have shown that the motivations for advocating for queer students were (1) a protective attitude toward queer youth and their situations and (2) a personal connection with queer youth and their issues (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). However, translating attitude to action is complex and requires training since a positive attitude alone by counselors did not lead them to social justice action (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005). Age, years in counseling, training, concern for the welfare of others, an optimistic worldview, and effective problem solving skills did not lead to social justice advocacy and action (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005).

In many ways the process of a Professional School Counselor considering advocating and supporting queer students could mirror those school personnel who choose to sponsor GSAs (Gay Straight Alliances). Valenti and Campbell (2009) looked at the attitudes and the decision making processes of advisors of GSAs. Their study revealed the hesitations that advisors had in choosing to sponsor GSAs which included fears of job loss, losing credibility, and being accused of recruiting (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). The study also showed that some felt that being a married, heterosexual was an advantage. One participant noted that if he were a gay man it would have been much more difficult to be an active GSA supporter adding, “I don’t think that’s right, but I

think it's reality…I felt that…I could use being straight" (Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 242).

It is the importance of counselor trainee attitudes that seems to have some agreement among researchers. Researchers indicate that counselor education programs need to integrate opportunities into their programs that engage LGB members (panelist, faculty, and students) with counselor trainees (Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995). Likewise, they note that it is the role of counselor educators to expose counselor trainees to the effects of their attitudes, helping them reconcile those attitudes (Rainey & Trusty, 2007). It is the incorporation of in-class activities that allows counselor trainers to look at queer stereotypes and oppression (Smith, Foley & Chaney, 2008). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that counselor educators need to eliminate heterosexism in programs, by connecting to other disciplines, challenging traditional definitions of gender and sexuality, and reading texts paying attention to power issues (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001). Nevertheless, multiple researchers voice that very little time is spent in counselor training having heterosexuals identify their sexual identity or the maladjustments and centrism that can come from being privileged with researchers asserting that attitudes about homosexuality should be addressed in counselor preparation courses (Flores et al.,1995; Lowe & Mascher, 2001).

Theoretical Constructs

In addition to LGBTQ students' hostile/supportive environments, interrelated developmental areas, and counselor (and other) relationships, there were theoretical constructs to help understand the dynamics of LGBTQ students' journeys. I discuss application of these theories to my study in a more explicit manner in the next chapter,

but the following serves as a brief overview of the theoretical foundations of my study. Without transparently discussing this theoretical basis, one might not understand the motivation, rationale for protocol, nor interpretation of findings for this study.

Ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner argued that understanding of human development required an understanding of the multiple systems in which people operated, which he referred to as the "ecology of human development" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). He referred to these systems as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—each of which interacted with the others and upon the individuals within these systems. He also proposed that future work in human development move away from single systems and structures and concentrate on the interactions of systems on each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). As a counselor and qualitative researcher, infusing such understandings was paramount in embracing multicultural competence and social justice advocacy, and client wellness. Counselor educators have noted that counselors undermine their clients' ability to achieve empowerment when counselors ignore the oppressive environment of their clients' and focus instead on their personal traits and elements (Chang, Crethar, & Ratts). Research has indicated a link between mental health issues and systemic oppression (Greenleaf and Williams, 2009).

Though not using the term "ecological," Prilleltensky proposed an ecological (and advocacy) approach to support clients. Prilleltensky (1997) noted the limitations of traditionally based theories and presented emancipatory communitarianism as a framework for mental health. He emphasized the balance of responsibility and rights, as well as participatory democracy and distributive justice (Prilleltensky, 1997). If I looked at the oppressive situations in which many LGBTQ students operated, then understanding

their wellness and mental health challenges became focused not on what was wrong with them, but what was wrong with society. Mental health manifestations such as depression, anger, and hopelessness were the responses students often use to respond to environmental oppression (Howard & Solberg, 2006). Prilleltensky (1997) also noted that many mental health issues such as learned helplessness, internalized inferiority and self-fulfilling prophecies were not only responses to an oppressive society, but help to maintain the status quo. Later studies indicated that his assertions were correct. Greenleaf and Williams (2009) reflected upon several studies that showed a relationship between disadvantaged and oppressed groups and mental (and physical) health manifestations and consequences. Therefore, rather than blame the victim, Ecological Theory looks at person-in-environment and the relationship between the wellness of the environment and the wellness of the individual (Greenleaf and Williams, 2009).

Brubaker, Puig, Reese, and Young (2010) recognized that choice of theory supports either liberation or oppression of communities and individuals. They found that helping counselor trainees to apply Prilleltensky's concepts of values, assumptions and practices led students to reflect more systemically and to become more aware of how their values and theories were influenced by a community (Brubaker, Puig, Reese, & Young, 2010). However, if counselors focused on the clients in isolation, then the clients were more likely to attribute the problem to themselves (Ivey & Collins, 2003). Researchers and counselors, then in their choice of theory, become either a part of the system of oppression, or participants with the clients in the liberation.

Relational theories. How then could healing occur and work in a multicultural paradigm, considering the worlds in which clients reside and the goal of self-

empowerment and healthy functioning? Mental health occurs in the context of relationship, hearing the voice of the client, and co-creation of the client's own narratives/stories. Counseling, by definition, is built upon relationship. The American Counseling Association has adopted a working definition of counseling. "Counseling is a professional *relationship* that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals" (American Counseling Association (a)). It is this relationship construct, and applying theories that emphasize relationship and client voice that will lead to liberation and mental health. LGBTQ students need counselors to look at non-traditional counseling theories in order to support their moving to a place of liberation and freedom (Carroll & Gilroy, 2001).

Relational Cultural Therapy (RCT) expanded Rogerian concepts of unconditional regard to include concepts of empathy, mutual empathy, and the elimination of oppressive societal forces that create disconnections and marginalize individuals (Comstock et al., 2008). With roots in Feminist Theory, Relational Cultural Therapy (RCT), based upon Jean Baker Miller's work, was founded on the idea that relationship is central in one's life (Comstock et al., 2008). This centrality plays at least two roles in the counseling (and my qualitative researcher) relationship. There is the centrality of the relationships within clients' lives, including when oppressive forces undermine this connection. There is also the centrality of the relationship between the counselor or researcher and the student/participant in the therapeutic or qualitative process. Comstock et al. (2008) noted two key relational tenets are that mature functioning occurs with connection (mutuality) not separation and that mutual empathy and empowerment are central to growth fostering relationships (including relationships in therapy). They also

noted the importance of bringing clients from culturally diverse backgrounds to an awareness that feelings of shame, fear and mistrust may prevent the relational connections that people desire; likewise, they need to be aware that such disconnections are exacerbated by the societal and cultural systems in which they find themselves (Comstock et al., 2008). Helping LGBTQ students (and these participants) see the ecological dynamics that promoted isolation was part of the process for empowerment and healthy functioning.

All clients, particularly those from marginalized groups, have a need for connection and relationship; empathy and acceptance. Empathy was then not an optional technique but an essential condition for positive counselor-client and researcher-participant relationships (Freedberg, 2007). Mutual empathy goes beyond one-sided empathy so that the client feels understood and known. Mutual empathy occurs as the client understands the effect relating to the counselor has on the counselor, and then the client is affected in turn by that understanding (Freedberg, 2007). The multicultural differentness and sameness of the client and counselor provide both challenges and opportunities, but cannot be ignored for true relationship.

As the healthy relational dynamic is both necessary and challenging—particularly considering multicultural implications—counselor programs and practicing counselors need unwavering commitment to its healthy development. As a qualitative researcher, I see this as essential. Comstock et al. (2008) noted that mutual empathy requires the counselor to be vulnerable and authentically present. The disconnections that would then occur between non-multiculturally sensitive counselors and clients with whom they attitudinally opposed would directly violate the “do no harm” precept of all ethical

counseling. Counselors from majority groups who have a framework of privilege might be particularly challenged. Counselors who do not examine their own multicultural identities and the distributions of power in society will be unable to understand their clients' social justice issues and advocacy needs (Ratts, Toporek, & Lewis, 2010). Likewise, counselors who do not look at their own identities—including their racial, gender, sexual orientation, class and ableist identities—could inadvertently use their positions of power to influence clients (Singh & Salazar, 2010). They thereby disrupt the relational construct between them and their clients. Empathetic traits (such as compassion, sensitivity, and emotionality) potentially threaten masculine paradigms and understandings of self (Freedberg, 2007). Moreover, counselors cannot assume that masking their true negative feelings toward multicultural students will allow students to be ethically supported. Authenticity is necessary for growth fostering relationships (including those in therapy); in addition, participating in and contributing to growth fostering relationships (including those in therapy) are what cause healthy development (Comstock et al., 2008).

Whatever the choice of approaches, relational theories should reflect that

(1) One cannot understand oneself separate from the society or the forces of society that act on one (Freedberg, 2007).

(2) Healthy development comes from growth-fostering relationships that are built on mutuality and equality (Freedberg, 2007).

Narrative theories. Once this relationship exists, clients are in a place to give voice to their lives and personal realities, as well as begin reframing their stories. Martin-Baro's wrote of adopting the story of the oppressed as their reality. He spoke of not

trying to change others and forcing them into a form of denial by telling them their experiences were not real (Martin-Baro, 1996). As previously discussed, relationship is at the heart of the therapeutic process and part of that healing process is the providing of a space for giving students voice. The counseling session and the qualitative interview are then relationship forums for creating meaning, a meaning that is not locked within the client (humanism), but one that is co-created with the counselor (Hansen, 2006).

hooks also spoke of the dominant culture being the one who constructs what is reality, what narratives are accepted (hooks, 2003). The counselor and qualitative researcher are no longer presenting "truths" from predetermined preferred traditional theories. In the construct of allowing client/student empowering through relationship and narrative construction "…the counselor no longer has allegiance to the supposed truth of a particular theory. Rather, the process of constructing meaning with the counseling relationship—and the process's pragmatic impact on counseling objectives—becomes the top priority" (Hansen, 2006, p. 295).

Nevertheless, the counselor or researcher is not passive in this model, as in a reflection of humanistic theories in which the client holds already created solutions that simply must be obtained. Instead they work with the student/participant in the narrative process. This may mean reflecting upon those ecologically understood oppressive forces in which students find themselves. Counselors and action oriented researchers must strive for balance between hearing/accepting the stories of clients who have faced oppression/disenfranchisement and expecting their clients to educate them on multicultural issues (Singh & Salazar, 2010). Helping people from marginalized groups see the environmental factors in their lives that restrict their access to societal benefits

allows consciousness raising and provides opportunity for their empowerment (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a). It is then their understanding and interpretation of their lives which assists clients in achieving mental health. Chronister and Davidson (2010) reflected this of use narrative, relationship, and empowerment in response to oppressive systemic forces in their work with survivors of intimate partner violence. They spoke of group strategies that included dialogue and power analysis. While one major component of the group concerned career development strategies, they found critical self-reflection to be particularly powerful as the women examined the social forces of privilege and oppression in their lives. They found it helped a client "recognize the prejudices she has developed, and the unhelpful ways in which she distances herself from other women…" (Chronister, & Davidson, 2010). Here the intersection of personal story reframing, in a context and examination of relationship, was done contextually with the ecological systems in the women's lives in order to allow them to self-empower.

In a Narrative Theoretical approach, constructing and reorganizing personal stories and symbols promotes healing (Hansen, 2006). By choosing either limiting predetermined theories and solutions, or choosing to create structures that allow student clients to self-empower and voice their own stories, counselors and researchers can either reinforce or disrupt the negative messages people have internalized from their environment (Howard & Solberg, 2006).

Empowerment theory. Empowerment theory provides a construct in which to work with the people to achieve liberation and the byproduct of mental wellness. The foundation of empowerment theory is in the work of Paulo Freire (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a). Friere spoke of an educational system built around the dissemination of

unquestioned facts and how this leads to predictable, accepted reality (Friere, 2000). Friere wrote of the dehumanizing effects of those who were oppressed, that part of their humanity was taken from them and that they were considered not fully human (Friere, 2000).

Empowerment is liberation involving the environment and the individual in that environment. Empowerment comes from the actions and efforts of the student client with counselors as important, but secondary, participants in the process (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007b). It should be noted that Prilleltensky (1997) felt that empowerment theories, though good, can become self-seeking and that post-modern theories can offer no solid framework for change, though he may have been looking at the distortion of empowerment and feminist theories. Personal empowerment is action theory moving toward the liberation of the individual (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a).

Oppression and its affects in schools are real and something that Professional School Counselors can no longer ignore (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Hostile environments create structures that prevent student empowerment. Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007a) concluded from their research that children from marginalized groups are immersed and responding to a "legacy of hardship" (p. 327). Unless counselors work with students for their self-empowerment, the lack of academic and mental health will continue. Researchers have indicated a link between mental health issues and systemic oppression (Greenleaf and Williams, 2009). Professional School Counselors have the opportunity to promote change if they understand that LGBTQ and other marginalized students are capable and able to bring about their own empowerment when presented with equitable resources and opportunities. Howard and Solberg (2006) reported on such

an advocacy intervention. They noted that school dropout rates from students from low and diverse backgrounds would continue the cycle of poverty without an intervention that empowered the students. They reported on a specific Professional School Counselor driven program, Achieving Success Identity Pathway (ASIP) that allowed students to voice and reframe their stories and then plan new pathways for their futures. The results indicated improvement in grades, attendance, and credits earned, part of what the researchers noted was necessary to decrease the oppression that affects the development of youth from low-income and diverse backgrounds (Howard & Solberg, 2006). Students have within them the qualities for self-empowerment when presented with equitable resources. Counseling, including that which is done in school settings, rejects the deficit model of counseling (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a).

Empowerment Theory in an Ecological Theory context allows Professional School Counselors to become agents of equity and access. The aspect of Feminist theory in educating clients to become engaged on social action offers a powerful component in counselor social justice advocacy with oppressed groups (Crethar, Rivera, & Nash, 2008). Counselors and action oriented qualitative researchers play a role as a part of that empowerment process helping students' understanding of their choices and power, as well as providing individual and systemic interventions. Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon (2010) described such an intervention in their qualitative study with practicing school counselors. One counselor worked with a gay student who experienced homophobia in his family resulting in severe emotional stress and threats to funding his college education. The counselor provided a forum for validating his oppression and provided access to resources including written materials of those who experienced similar

family stress, practicing self-advocacy skills in representing himself, and access to possible scholarships (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). As a result the student learned skills for self-empowerment even in the middle of hostile systemic forces.

Professional School Counselors situated within Empowerment Theory can help provide disenfranchised students an environment that allows self-empowerment by encouraging oppressed students to participate in the structure of the school—through avenues such as clubs, organizations, and academic rigor (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a). For students, particularly multicultural students, who have been disenfranchised by the system, providing access through equitable interventions allows their ownership of their own involvement and empowerment. For many, years of responding not to being a part of the power structure has led them to responses that will ensure their lack of empowerment. Professional School Counselors can work with students to participate in a creating different dynamics (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Zalaquett & D'Andrea, 2007).

Ecological Theoretical understandings and Empowerment Theoretical initiatives are intertwined with multicultural considerations and strong social justice advocacy. Bailey and Paisley (2004) recognized systemic environmental variables (ecological understandings) as central in their description of Project: Gentlemen on the Move (PGOTM), a program designed to provide empowerment opportunities for African American males. In their review of successful programs for African American males, they not only suggested the need for developmental and research based programs that were comprehensive, but also identified the ecological nature of the comprehensive programs. They saw that forces that influence African American males' success included

teachers, employment obligations, extracurricular activities, community, parents, peers, and systemic racism (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). At the end of 5 years, the PGOTM program showed both quantitative and qualitative success. Professional School Counselors can play significant, essential roles in the identified PGOTM Critical Components of Process (recruitment and referral), Content (including instruction in academic strategies and cultural forces), Support (group and individual counseling) and Activity (special events, college visits, and community service) (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Counselors with a solid theoretical foundation that includes Ecological and Empowerment Theories, combined with multicultural and advocacy competencies, are in strategic positions for social justice work that brings about client mental and academic health.

While Professional School Counselors can help diminish inequity if they embrace empowerment theory, social justice and multicultural school counseling programs (Mitcham-Smith, 2007), putting all of this into widespread practice is not easily done. Counselor education programs will have to develop counselor trainees to become advocates, particularly in schools. hooks noted the struggles in going beyond this empowering phase into advocating for systemic change. She spoke of how change is tolerated by the majority (whites) as an attempt to control the change and maintain a comfort level (hooks, 2003). Counselors' and counselor educators' recognizing and responding to such manifestations of privilege are parts of their professional advocacy for empowering all students. In responses to the state of Arizona's ban on teaching Mexican-American studies in P-12 schools, courses that included such works as Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, members of the Counselors for Social Justice began their

advocacy by informing and reacting in protest on their electronic mailing list. One member concerned about the systemic forces maintaining privilege and erecting barriers to empowerment said

> …laws such as the one in the article come out of a complete lack of awareness around white privilege, in particular. As long as white people are able to make, enforce, and change law without examining what it means to be white and how privilege is perpetuated through such a lack of awareness, we are going to continue to perpetuate racist and dehumanizing systems… those courses are essential for empowering individuals within their culture/identity. When every other course is essentially doing this same thing for whites, it is critical that these courses continue… (Harper, 2011, January 10).

Summary of Theoretical Foundations

The theory for this research study mirrored the theory for my counseling practice. I believe that understanding the systemic dynamics in students' lives (Ecological Theory) and using Empowerment Theory as one of their guides, action oriented researchers and counselors can target their individual and systemic interventions through healthy personal connections (Relational Cultural Therapy) in order to enable students to manage and gain control of their mental and academic well-being. Counselors and qualitative researchers give a place for clients to voice their experiences and understandings, creating the possibility for self-empowerment. Allowing students to know that they have been heard and their difficulties acknowledged creates situations in which they can overcome obstacles (Howard & Solberg, 2006).

Conclusion

As I have noted, the needs of LGBTQ students is complex and intense. The research indicated that LGBTQ students face oppressive environments in high school and college. These environments created both inequities in the educational experience and opportunities, as well as significant mental health and social consequences. LGBTQ students were multifaceted, and as a result of societal oppression in these environments and elsewhere, experienced challenging identity development issues, both as a response to, and in integrating, their sexual identities. Simultaneously, LGBTQ students had unique career development and college choice concerns often in conflict with the energy devoted to their identity development. Nevertheless, while these concerns existed within their schools, Professional School Counselors were positioned to offer direction and opportunities for development but often lacked needed competency in knowledge, skills and attitudes in supporting LGBTQ students. By extension counselor education programs likewise struggled to prepare counselors to support LGBTQ students.

Among its other functions, a review of the literature for a qualitative study should show that there is a need or focus of change out of which the study has it purpose (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). My research study was needed to help understand more the high school-college experiences of LGBTQ students. They were not experiencing separate, isolated forces, but experienced the interrelationship of these ecological/internal forces in their high school and college years. By understanding the experiences of LGBTQ students and the meanings that they give their journeys, Professional School Counselors can inform their practice and counselor educators can enlighten their instruction. Counselors are in pivotal roles to affect social justice, create equity, and

nourish lives. LGBTQ students are in need of such competent and caring counselor advocates.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Students are ships comprised of numerous related compartments, moving from one harbor (high school) to another harbor (college) often finding these seas hostile and oppressive. For LGBTQ students, the compartments may include challenging sexual identity and overall identity development issues, as well as unique career development and college choice concerns (Appendix A). In addition, they receive varied levels of support from their lighthouses, their counselors, as well as their schools. Understanding how all of these relate in LGBTQ students' high school-college experiences will provide opportunities for support. The purpose of my research study was to describe LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences and what would have made those experiences more liberating. My research questions included:

- How do LGBTQ students describe their high school-college experiences?
- How do various ecological and internal forces and dynamics interact in these LGBTQ students' experiences?

My related goal of this research study was to determine how the high school-college journey might be more self-empowering for LGBTQ students.

This chapter describes the study, research design and methodology I used. First I discuss the philosophical rationale for a qualitative study. Studies and research do not take place in a pristine vacuum; researchers bring with them certain paradigms, understandings, and predispositions. I find myself very much in that situation. Research

studies are constructed within understandings of the nature of what is real (ontology) and how we can know that reality (epistemology). These paradigms are the guides for researchers (Morrow, 2007). Within these paradigms are the theories from which one operates, as well as the research traditions from which one embraces research. As displayed in Appendix F, this chapter discusses how the paradigms of reality and the theoretical foundations from which I operated (overviewed in the previous chapter) had application for this study. I operated from constructivist and ideological viewpoints, and embraced ecological, narrative, relational-cultural and empowerment theories.

I then follow with specific protocols I used in this study including member selection, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and transferability, and presentation of the findings. Finally, as the lens of the researcher in qualitative research frames the findings, my personal experience and view were a part of the research process. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of my personal lens which includes my positioning, history and background with the LGBTQ community.

Philosophical Constructs: Where Am I Coming From?

There are three methodologies from which to collect our data—quantitative, qualitative, and a blending of the two, mixed methodologies. Worldview and understanding of reality affect the choice of approaches (Creswell, 2009). It is therefore important to be aware of the concepts of reality I am referencing in order to understand my rationale for qualitative research and a specific qualitative research design (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). What is first out there to know and then how (if) we can know it are two central questions not only for philosophers, but also for researchers, counselors, and educators. The danger for me in this study was the tendency to be

reductionist, reducing the world to a limited set of ideas (Creswell, 2009). As I see reality as open to multiple meanings and understandings (constructivist), qualitative methodologies provided the best constructs for this study.

Qualitative Research Worldview

Qualitative researchers see both truth (ontology) and how one gets to truth (epistemology) as subjective and socially created and constructed (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The difference in understanding life between the paradigms of positivism and constructivism or critical-ideological is as stark as the schools of art of Realist or Impressionist (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Approaches to qualitative research are themselves based on several paradigms or understandings of reality. Qualitative research operates within postpositivism, interpretivism-constructivism, and ideological-critical paradigms for understanding reality (Morrow, 2007). The postpositivist paradigm that there is a social reality that is separate from the observer and can be known (Haverkamp & Young, 2007) seems lacking for the way I see the world. I operated from an understanding that there were as many realities as there were participants and that reality was co-constructed with the reality of the researcher---me. This constructivist view lends itself to phenomenological study (Morrow, 2007). However, as I also saw that there was a reality of oppression and power that intersected participants' individual realities, my research and worldview were also embraced in the critical-ideological paradigm (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Morrow, 2007).

Usefulness of Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research therefore has benefits that lent itself to the study I undertook. The nature of the qualitative data using words and images with the resulting report in the

form of narrative, contextual description and participant direct quotes offered a rich opportunity for understanding the LGBTQ student's experience and how they gave meaning to their situations (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Qualitative research is exploratory, not beginning with a particular premise it seeks to negate or support and was especially helpful since I, the researcher, did not know all of the questions (Creswell, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The nature of the qualitative approach could help identity unanticipated phenomena, which I anticipated in this study, and could be used to explore variables and factors not easily identified (Maxwell, 2005; Morrow, 2007). Understanding that I may have chosen the "wrong" factors (career development, identity development, etc.), qualitative research allowed new factors to arise from insider knowledge of the experience (Morrow, 2007). Likewise, there was benefit in looking at causality that explores asking how *x* plays a role in causing *y* and what were the processes that connect the two (Maxwell, 2005). As I looked the variety of challenges faced by LGBTQ students, understanding situations in new ways using qualitative research provided a resource for innovative solutions (Creswell, 2009; Morrow, 2007).

In addition to allowing unseen constructs to emerge, a qualitative approach also allowed hearing those voices previously unheard. Since LGBTQ students faced stigmatization, their voices remained unheard over the roar of the seas in which they traveled. Qualitative research gave recognition to the insider viewpoint (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Qualitative inquiry also had the potential for advancing multiculturalism and social justice (Morrow, 2007) as the voices and experiences of the disenfranchised and oppressed became a part of the findings and instrumental in creating

solutions to the challenges faced in our system. Qualitative research has at its core understanding the participants' meanings for their experiences and the contexts in which they act (Maxwell, 2005). These meanings are not illusively hidden to be uncovered by a researcher, but occur in a process of understanding between the researcher and the participants (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). However, once LGBTQ students spoke their understanding of their experiences, it remained a challenge for me, just as it will to counselors and counselor educators, to hear what these students were saying. Qualitative research findings lend themselves to creating such a dialogue as they are "understandable and experientially credible, both to the people you are studying and to others" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 24).

Finding Usefulness in Qualitative Research

In addition to understanding the life experiences of LGBTQ students, it was the usefulness of what could be learned and applied in a qualitative study that had particular appeal for me in this study. To be useful, the research finding must first be believed and trusted. Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to both the data collection and data interpretation aspects of the research, particularly considering the subjective nature of the process. Rather than see this as a flaw, qualitative researchers see strong validation in qualitative research based on the extensive time the researcher spends in the field; the detailed and thick descriptions; and the closeness of the researcher to the participants (Creswell, 2006). There should then be no argument over devaluing subjective meaning if one first accepts that there are alternate ways of knowing (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). In fact, objectivity has no purpose in a qualitative study (Morrow, 2007).

In addition to trustworthiness, qualitative research can have applications. By design, it is focused on understanding experiences or phenomena in specific, unique situations. However, while qualitative research is not externally generalizeable in the sense that quantitative research might be, it still has some transferability and usefulness for practice. Qualitative researchers believe there is no reason that the findings cannot be applied more generally; the similarity of dynamics and situations allow for a more transferable application (Maxwell, 2005). In addition, audiences might be more receptive to a narrative approach or presentation (Morrow, 2007); therefore, increasing the likelihood that the findings will be lead to action.

I should make a note about doing qualitative research with a disenfranchised population. The LGBTQ community had experienced stigmatization which no doubt affected perceptions of life; exploring these unique perceptions was the very reason for the study. The results and effects of that oppression were a part of the making of meaning in this qualitative study. Haverkamp and Young (2007) noted that *critical hermeneutics* (the interpretation of "texts" and life texts based on the interpreter's being influenced by cultural factors) was consistent with action oriented or ideological paradigms. Critical hermeneutics is concerned with "how an individual understands his or her situation and with the historical or social forces that are presumed to have distorted that understanding" (Haverkamp & Young, 2007, p. 278). Since my review of the literature indicated that LGBTQ students have numerous factors and forces oppressing or restricting them, my accuracy as a researcher was dependent on understanding how these forces influence the understanding of meaning (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Homonegativity, both internalized and societal, might have impacted the reflections and

self-reports of participants. This impact was both a help and a hindrance in the interpretation of meaning; it was a part of the milieu in which understanding LGBTQ students' experiences was based.

Applications of Theoretical Constructs

As I noted in the previous chapter, the theoretical constructs for my study included emphasizing ecological, relational-cultural, narrative and empowerment theories. They applied to my study in both desired outcomes and in the manner in which I went about conducting the study. Using an ecological approach, I was most interested in those forces that affected students and consciously or unconsciously shaped their experiences. I anticipated that both high school and college environments affected LGBTQ students; I also anticipated that the interplay and juxtaposition between the two might have had a bearing on their perceptions. I was also expecting that closely related microsystem forces, such as family and friends, and more distant meso/macrosystem forces, such as region of the country, religious influences, and general social stigmatization, were factors that alter their experiences.

From a relational-cultural perspective, the relationship connections and disconnections that LGBTQ students had experienced affected their internal forces (identity development, career development, etc.). However, aside from using relational-cultural theory to make meaning of the students' experiences, I wished to follow a relational-cultural model in how I conducted the study. I wished to attend in my study and interviews to the presence of the power differential between researcher/subject. I sought to apply the concept of mutuality allowing the opportunity to co-create the meanings together. Likewise, I saw that attending to strategies of disconnection (with me

or with their experiences) and responding with mutual empathy as fundamental to creating a healthy, ethical process. I expected that much of the subject matter to be sensitive and personal, and to encounter strategies of disconnection in which there would be no emotional responses. Similarly I was prepared that otherwise unexplained anger or depression might be common. However, I anticipated that their sharing their experiences with a person whose purpose was hearing them speak would create a relationally positive experience.

Listening to the narratives that the participants created before my beginning study, including their stories, how they had changed and their ways of making meaning, aligned with the qualitative process that I was using. I saw that I was adding to their narratives, as they reframed and rewrote during the study, offering the act of doing the study as an opportunity for a positive experience in their journeys. I understood that by doing this study, I was adding to their experiences. How they framed our encounter—the positive and negative effects of the experience—were part of the narrative process that we did together in the individual and group interviews.

Finally, the whole purpose of the study was one of empowerment. It was my hope that the findings and the uses of this study will lead to actions by counselors and counselor educators to create environments in which LGBTQ students can self-empower. However, I expected empowerment to occur not only from the results of the study, but from the act of doing the study. By allowing students the opportunity to find their voices and then share their stories with someone else, I expected that I would be creating an opportunity for their growth and self-empowerment. The act of sharing one's experience with another and having that other person understand at least aspects of that experience I

saw as an empowering process. Self-empowerment then was not only the End of this study; it was also the Means. In this case, the Means justified the End.

Research Tradition and Process

I conducted a phenomenological study to explore LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences and what would have made those experiences more liberating. I conducted my research with students from a state flagship university in the Southeastern part of the United States. This site was useful for a variety of reasons. It contained a diverse participant pool as it drew students from all over the state, region and country and was compromised of a diverse, heterogeneous environment. Students at this school met high GPA and standardized testing requirements, so presumably students at this school had some choice over whether to attend this institution or not. Politically and socially this school presented an interesting cross section. The school was located in the conservative south, in a "red state," and drew from and represented students and stakeholders with this mindset; the state had also presented several anti-LGBTQ initiatives in the past decades. On the other hand, the university had a relatively progressive history on diversity and LGBTQ issues having conducted LGBTQ climates studies on 2001 and 2010; established an LGBT Resource Center; formed an officially recognized LGBTQ student organization; employed or admitted open LGBTQ faculty, staff and students; and created policies regarding LGBTQ protections (Barnett, 2010; Hill, et al., 2002).

My participant selection and source of data was purposeful (Morrow, 2007). I sought traditional age college students (18-25) currently enrolled at the university who attended high school in the state in which the university resides, and who were currently

identify as non-heterosexual or non-cisgender (non-gender normative). In addition, these participants had to be comfortable with a level of self-disclosure ("being out") that would enable them to voluntarily participate in a focus group. I sought diversity in sex and race and attempted a representation of stages of identity development and self-disclosure. I was seeking 8-12 participants, but the goal was to gain theoretical or thematic saturation rather than have a specific number of participants (Morrow, 2007).

I gained the participants through a variety of means. I met with the LGBT Resource Center personnel on several occasions prior to beginning the research. They were supportive and offered use their communication systems (email, social networks, meeting/assembly opportunities) for enlisting participants. I then met with the leadership body of the officially recognized LGBTQ student organization to explain my research study and to get their support and advice for enlisting participants. The resource center posted IRB approved flyers at their location as well as an announcement on their social networking (FaceBook) site. During the first week of the school year, I attended an opening welcome meeting of the officially recognized LGBTQ student organization. There were approximately 90 students in attendance and I spoke for a few minutes on the study and the expectations for participants followed by an invitation for the students to talk with me one on one about the study. For those students who expressed an interest, I used a snowball technique and asked if they knew of other students who might be interested in participating. I gave them my email and phone contact information. A few weeks later, I attended another meeting of the LGBTQ student organization, again shared, and asked for students to sign up if they had an interest in participating in the study. Twenty-two students signed up to get information and possibly talk with me more

about the study. All of these students received an IRB informational flyer via email. I then talked with those students who expressed an interest, getting some general demographic information (gender, year in college, attendance in a Georgia high school, race, age, etc.). After this part of the conversation if it seemed they may be an appropriate participant, I gave them an official consent form, and asked that we communicate later to see if they had an interest in the study.

From this process, nine participants, ages18-21, became a part of the study (Appendix B). They self-identified as follows. Regarding sex (biological assignment at birth), 5 were female and 4 were male. Their self-identified gender identity was 4 male, three female, one transgender male, and one gender queer. There were 8 White and 1 Latino/Chicano students. Five students were in their first year of college, two were in their second year, and two were in their third year. Their level of self-disclosure (being "out") and the time period that they had been out varied. All were out in the college community to their friends. Six had come out in the last year (with one of those coming out in the past few months and one coming out in the past few weeks); three had been out for over a year. Eight were out to their parents, with various levels of acceptance; one was not out to parents. As required for the study, all attended high school in Georgia, with 2 being from a suburban area outside a large city, 4 being from small cities, and 3 being from small towns/rural areas.

Research Protocols

Data Collection

The interviews were held at the university in a location that provided privacy and emotional comfort for the participants. All the interviews were held in the LGBT

Resource Center conference room, though participants were offered other locations such as the university's Learning Center or College of Education building should they have wanted a more private location. In addition to privacy concerns, the study attended to other ethical considerations as I considered treating participants ethically of highest importance for the study (Morgan, 2007). Similarly, the study complied with all standards of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I anticipated ethical considerations include confidentiality and treatment of participants. All interviews were recorded with permission, and maintained in my possession on my home computer and backup system. All participants received pseudonyms that they choose that were used for coding purposes so that I alone knew their identities. Transcription was made by two outside transcribers. I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. The participants gave approximately 4 hours of time for the study and were uncompensated.

Member safety was of optimum concern for me in my study. All participants received informed consent in compliance with IRB; all participants had the ability to discontinue their participation in the study. As these participants were part of groups that have faced oppression and marginalization, I considered that issues regarding distress, trauma, and discomfort could arise. I attended to these in a reasonable ethical manner, noting that I was not in the role of counselor in these relationships. All participants were reminded that they had access to follow up care both through referral to the university's counseling services or the university's LGBT Resource Center. Such resources were also listed on the Informed Consent. In addition, as a researcher following my theoretical foundation of feminist and relational-cultural theory, I was both central in the relationship yet constantly attended to issues of power and privilege, seeking participant self-

empowerment rather than exploitation (Morrow, 2007). One of my primary concerns was attending to liberation issues and my allowing participants to find their voices. To accomplish that end, I used reflexivity and worked with intentionality at not being overpowering as the "expert" (Morrow, 2007).

The timeline for the research included member selection in the fall of 2011 when students returned to campus, followed by data collection and data analysis in the fall of 2011. Final data analysis and presentation of findings were in the winter of 2012 (See Appendix D). I conducted individual interviews two per participant adapting Siedman's (2006) phenomenological 3 interview series for the individual interview and the focus group. The first interview focused on personal history and experience including life story through high school and life experiences into college. Appendix C indicates the questions that I used. I felt that committing to unchanging questions or method in the early stages of research design would be unwise; so I refined and revised as part of the qualitative process (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

After the first interview, participants were given a camera and asked to take pictures that represented their experience and share those with me at the next interview. They were also asked to bring artifacts such as yearbooks that represented their high school experience. At the second interview, I asked them share and explain to me their pictorial artifacts. While the pictures they took and yearbooks they brought with them generated no additional information and findings that did not come from the interviews, the taking of the pictures did serve at least two positive purposes. First, they allowed the participants to reflect upon their experiences. As we talked in the second interview about making meaning of their experiences, they seemed truly engaged and present in those

past experiences. In addition, their sharing those pictures, both of their current and past experiences seemed to help form the relationship between them and me. There was something therapeutic and "bonding" in their telling of their experiences and showing me pictures reflective of that time period. It seemed they felt more understood by sharing those artifacts with me.

This second interview focused on confirming themes and topics from the first interview and making meaning of the experiences described in the first interview. The participants discussed their perceptions of the areas of their experiences by completing and sharing "Areas of My Life," a listing of the themes from their first interview (Appendix C, Part B2).

A month later, following the two separate individual interviews, I conducted a focus group of the participants in order to share group findings and to elicit further understandings of the meaning of the findings (Appendix C, Part C).

Data Analysis as an Ongoing Process

As mentioned, I recorded the interviews and had them transcribed. I then listened to the interviews for accuracy of transcription. I began the analysis of the information by reading the transcriptions multiple times until immersed in the data. While in the data collection process, I used constant comparison, analyzing the interviews occurring concurrently for epochs and events that led to modifications in the questions for the remaining interviews. I also used recursivity and summarized concepts as a means of guiding the flexibility of the research design, research questions and analysis (Morrow, 2007).

System for Constructing Meaning

My analysis of the data was structured, but I refrained from using it rigidly, but did use it as a plan from which to deviate as the process of analysis developed. (Appendix E gives a chronology of my data analysis process.) I first bracketed my assumptions and continued this process using systematic benchmarks I built in. Following Creswell's (2006) protocol, I began the analysis of the interviews by using horizontalization to determine significant statements, grouping them into larger meaning units. Using these meaning units, I used open coding looking for themes, understanding that as a qualitative researcher, I was more of an interpreter than a reporter (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). These topics were the ecological and internal forces that were part of the participants' experiences. After the initial interviews, I constructed a code book from which to understand both further and already completed interviews. Concurrent with this process, the research team independently analyzed the beginning interview, determining significant statements, as well as determining codes and themes. This is one method I used for comparing with my analysis and increasing trustworthiness of the process. From this coding, I constructed thematic units and began looking for the relationship between these thematic units—I grouped the related ecological/internal forces and constructed a thematic statement. This entire analysis consisted first of determining textual descriptions (what the participants experienced); then, I determined structural descriptions (the context in which the experience occurred) (Creswell, 2006). From this, as Creswell suggests, I determined with my participants, the essence of the experiences.

In order to facilitate this analysis and manage the data, I used case displays in a several formats. First, I analyzed the transcripts by meaning units writing in the margins. From this, I began seeing the ecological and internal forces that were recurring in the participants' lives. Next, following a format suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), I used a network display for each participant. Beginning with single columns of the ecological/internal force under considerations (identity, sexual identity, etc.) then larger grouping of the columns with the time ordered environments (high school, college), I placed meaning units into a display allowing for my understanding relationships and contexts. Color coding the quotes to match to participants allowed for a visual representation of not only what was being experienced, but which participant was experiencing it. Noting that qualitative data evolves, I expanded and modified these areas as the interviews and analysis progressed, blending these preexisting codes with emergent codes (Creswell, 2006). I merged these topics into one display in order to get a global perspective of their connectiveness and an understanding of the themes I saw emerging.

At this point, I shared my findings with the participants in order to member check, not only content, but the understandings that I saw. During the second interview the participants discussed the interrelationships they saw with the ecological and internal forces in their lives, built upon the "Areas of My Life" exercise and discussion (Appendix C, Part B2). Then I repeated the same process with the color coded chart in order to analyze the interrelationships of the ecological forces in the participants' lives.

I then used a graphic organizer as a context chart (similar to the conceptual display in Appendix A) in order to visually represent the meaning units, their contexts,

and their relationships (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As the data analysis, along with the data collection and even the report writing, were in a concurrent, cyclical fashion (Creswell, 2006), and I evolved additional case displays, before arriving at a concluding visual display that represented the interrelationships of the ecological and internal forces (Appendix G).

Creating Trustworthiness and Transferability: How the Meaning Was Made

While the above protocol describes the steps and organization of the data analysis, it is important to discuss the lens through which this data was analyzed. Three sets of lens influenced the deriving of meaning from the experiences of the participants. My lens, the lens of the research team, and the lens and voices of the participants all interacted to form an understanding of the experiences of the LGBTQ students.

Researcher lens. Since the researcher is a part of the co-constructing of reality in the constructivist paradigm, the lack of an external evaluator in no way decreased the trustworthiness of the research (Morrow, 2007). I should note that in the ideological paradigm from which I operated, my researcher role was interactive with the participants and proactive in facilitating social change (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). My goal then was to understand and engage my subjectivity through reflexive journals and member checks (Morrow, 2007). I identified and noted my personal lens and responses to the participant's stories (bracket) both in an ongoing basis and in the section that ends this chapter.

I used reflexivity, keeping both a journal as well as field notes (Morrow, 2007). To provide myself opportunities for reflectivity, I organized the bracketing of my thoughts and assumptions using three benchmarks. First, I wrote in a reflexive journal at

major events (such as after meeting with the LGBT Resource Center Director, after a session of analyzing data, after meeting with the research team). I also wrote in field notes during and immediately after each of the interviews and the focus group. Finally, as a tool for data analysis and meaning construction on an ongoing process, I reflected regularly on the previous week's analysis. One area of personal reflection was in managing my roles as researcher, counselor, and advocate (Morrow, 2007).

These reflexive journals were used as a means of bracketing my assumptions. Some of these reflections are shared here and in the Findings and Discussion chapters revealing my researcher's lens and context within the study, and allowing readers to determine more easily the appropriateness of transferability of the findings from one context to another (Morrow, 2007). Even before beginning data collection, I had certain assumptions based on my experiences and my review of literature. My assumptions at the onset were that these LGBTQ students would have experienced the high school-college journey in significant ways different from that which I experienced; in many ways, I anticipated that their experiences might have been "better." My assumptions included that there is bigotry in the South, toward many groups including LGBTQ individuals, often reflected in the conservative and religious philosophies of the region. My experiences and research led me to assume that counselors give varying levels of support to LGBTQ students and more often than not, that support is lacking. My assumptions were also that Professional School Counselors were unaware of the multiple developmental areas of LGBTQ students. Finally, I assumed that LGBTQ students were not fixed in their understanding of themselves and meaning but that these understandings were evolving.

Research team. A research team consisted of two third year doctoral candidates with experience in qualitative research. Both identified as female and heterosexual. One identified as Black, the other as White. Both had counseling backgrounds; one currently worked as a Professional School Counselor while the other one worked in a university student affairs setting.

I solicited the insights of this research team to respond to interviews, coding, and findings. At our first meeting we bracketed assumptions together, discussing how these might affect our viewing of the experiences of the participants. I shared my theoretical base for the study, particularly the ecological and empowerment constructs. We then reviewed the protocols and procedures and data analysis processes I would be using in the study. We meet again after Interview #1 after we have each independently began the open coding process. We continued to bracket assumptions. Finally after the focus group, I shared the participant responses, reviewed the findings and considered any negative case examples.

Participants in data analysis. The participants' voices and interpretations were central to the study. Both the constructivist and ideological "paradigms demonstrate more subjectivity, interaction with participants, and the voice of the researcher" (Morrow, 2007, p. 214), so I member checked findings with the participants, as well as the making of meaning with them in the second interview. After the first interview, participants received a copy of the transcription both to check for accuracy, as well as to see if their interview reflected their thoughts on their experiences. In addition, during the second interview, participants were actively engaged with me in looking at the meaning that they saw from their experiences; they were in a sense a part of the research team. Finally, the

participants were a part of the final focus group. During this group interview, I shared findings related to ecological and internal forces that were a part of their experiences and the interrelationship these forces had in those experiences. The participants provided feedback, both confirming and modifying the findings. At this time, we discussed also their wishes for the findings from this study, as well as the impact doing the study had been on them and on me.

Presentation of Findings

I presented my findings in the next chapter in the form of topics and themes (ecological and internal forces and their interrelationships) that I saw emerge. To aid the reader in understanding how I arrived at these findings, I used thick and rich descriptions (Morrow, 2007).

Bracketing: My Story and Lens

My researcher voice matters

The voice of the researcher is essential in constructivist view of research and reality (Morrow, 2007). Therefore rather than bracket "biases," I preferred to illuminate those factors which created the lens from which I viewed life and my research. I expected that revealing my own stances, motivations, assumptions and lenses increased the transparency and contributed to the trustworthiness and rigor of the study (Morrow, 2007).

My LGBTQ High School-College Experience

While now in my journey I identified as a gay male, arriving at that current destination was not without storms and poor navigation. My LGBTQ high school-college experience began with precarious foundations. I came from a conservative,

southern, military family. Moreover, I was raised in conservative churches and was highly involved as a church participant and leader from my early years through college and into adulthood. Religion and spirituality were key components in how I identified myself and my actions. The concept or articulation of being gay, much less acceptance of someone not heterosexual, was not something that was even debated; it simply was not to be. I was also raised at that time to value a traditional masculine gender role; sports has always been a part of my life, and the culture that is associated with athletics was not (and is not) supportive of being gay.

It was on that backdrop that I realized that I was attracted to other males. Some of my earliest recollections occurred more vaguely in my elementary school years, but were much more poignant during 7th grade (age 12-13) when I realized I was interested in other males in ways that my peers were not. Through a series of self-deception and repression techniques, I ignored those very strong feelings through high school, through college, and into my early adult years.

I was a strong academic student in high school which afforded me choices in where I would attend college. Though my parents did not attend college, from my earliest recollections they both encouraged and expected that I would be attending a university once I completed high school. I was accepted to attend the large flagship university in my state, but instead thought that I would be a minister professionally one day, so I attended a liberal arts Baptist university in another state. This was at a period in which the Southern Baptist Convention was undergoing a transformation from within, becoming more fundamentalist and politically activist, and moving I believed from its historical tenets of separation of church and state and the individual's ability to make

religious decisions separate from ministerial leadership dictates. My particular university chose to continue in its path of relative moderation and intellectual openness and did not become as immersed in the political conservatism to which the denomination steered. As a result I did have an intellectually engaging university experience, though I personally was rather rigid and dichotomous in my view of right and wrong. Though I struggled with attraction to males and I cannot recall ever speaking on the subject, had I been asked, I would have said that being gay was wrong.

During my time at my Baptist university, I heavily participated as a leader in religious activities, followed by marring a woman, and continued in self-denial for a number of years. Once I graduated from college, I was confused about my career choice. I began a career in education at that time after deciding that being a minister was not right for me. At that time though I never consciously considered my being gay as a part of the decision making process; I was in a most resolute state of denial about my sexual identity.

I was in my 20s before I first acknowledged that I was gay, and even then spent a number of years determining that I could and would change my sexual orientation. When that proved to be an impossibility and self-damaging, I came out (self-disclosed) to those around me. Up to this point in my life, I was enmeshed in the conservative religious community in my city. After coming out, not only did I go through a divorce, but I was no longer in a relationship with all of my social friends, nor with my family, as they found my "lifestyle" to be incongruent with their beliefs about what was right. They thought I was "going to hell" and maintaining a relationship built upon that premise was not something I found healthy or they found comfortable. I went through a period of

rebuilding my identity, establishing new friends, and re-establishing a relationship with my parents. I also met my partner/husband. At this writing we have been together over 16 years, and I have learned that my earlier socially constructed ideas of what constitutes a family were narrow, inaccurate and self-destructive. It would be an understatement to say that my current harbor is more nourishing, supportive, and life-enhancing than the rocky shores of my previous turbulent harbor.

Treatment of LGBTQ Issues in Schools (Negative)

At times, I have found that being an out gay man in a school setting can have negative consequences. At one school, I had parents complaining to the school administration that I, as a gay man, was their child's teacher. I also had a school board member call parents and the school's principal saying that I should be removed since students were aware that I was gay. At another school, I received a note referring to me as the "faggot dean" and later, according to private conversations with school board members, I was denied a promotion at that school because I was gay. In addition, a "supportive" board member said that neither I, nor anyone else who was gay, should be a school counselor. At another school that was LGBTQ supportive, I wanted to leave that school for other reasons, but felt trapped into remaining as I was uncertain if I would be able to find another school as LGBTQ supportive.

Treatment of LGBTQ Issues in Schools (Positive)

Those hostile actions, which I feel are not uncommon for LGBTQ teachers and counselors in schools in conservative regions of the county, were interwoven with experiences with several school situations and personnel who have responded positively to queer youth and had helped create climates of affirmation. While I have been in

school situations in which I was the recipient of homonegativity, these same school settings provided experiences that had been supportive and affirming. In even the most hostile school setting, I had at least one other faculty member who gave support. At several other schools, I have been encouraged to teach diversity courses, do trainings for staff and students, present at conferences, lead school climate improvement efforts, and even provide counseling groups for LGBTQ high school students. In every school I have worked, I have had the opportunity to work with LGBTQ students in the process of coming out, relating to their parents and friends, and planning their futures. My perception in doing this study was that the homonegative hostility I have experienced has been challenging, and at times traumatic and severe, but the homopositive experiences have had more impact on me and my work in schools.

My History with LGBTQ Student Communities

My perspective was tied to my level of experience within the LGBTQ community under study (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). I was first drawn to this study as I observed the number of young LGBTQ wait staff at a restaurant in the queer-friendly area where I lived. Informal conversations with them revealed that many came from less tolerant areas surrounding the city in which I live, or that they had lived in the area but had received little support in engaging their sexual identities, total identity, career development and the hostile environment in which they lived. In some ways they appeared to be the "lost boys" and "lost girls." They had passion, interest, and intelligence, but were now only beginning to consider how all of these areas worked in their lives. I wondered if anyone had been supporting them in their journeys. Likewise, I have had numerous individual and group counseling sessions with queer youth who

expressed a lack of support from their schools, and who related various resulting situations including depression, isolation, suicidal ideation, and violence, both direct and indirect.

My work as a counselor, workshop presenter and member of a coalition that promoted safe schools had provided opportunities for me to talk with high school students, parents, and counselors, as well as college students at LGBT centers and organizations. Students reported and adults confirmed that LGBTQ support was intermittent at best and precariously lacking on most situations. Counselors reported that they did not know what to do, or that there was little need for LGBTQ support in their schools. Students reported that they received little help and often did not know their counselors or a supportive adult in their schools.

Expected Effects of My Lens

Therefore, my researcher lens included personal experiences with school counselors both as a student, and later as colleagues, in which I experienced their lack of competency in working with queer students. My review of the literature also led me to expect that LGBTQ students have had experiences with lack of support and attitudes of homonegativity from school counselors. My primary lens in this area was mixed as I have encountered both positive and negative attitudes toward queer students. My personal experience included encounters with counselors and other school personnel who had displayed both hostility and lack of understanding in supporting queer youth. My lens was also one in which I saw the dangers of self-denial of one's full identity. I saw how it affected my college choices, my career pathways, and much more importantly my relationship choices and mental healthiness.

Though I used a critical hermeneutic approach (as mentioned earlier), I engaged other approaches. I felt that more than just reflexivity and noting what the researcher brings to the understanding, the researcher in a *philosophical hermeneutic* approach had a fusion with the view and stance of the participant (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). So the questions were not would my lens be a detriment or how could I isolate my lens in some kind of pseudo-objectivity. My background was as a gay man who had a high school-college experience and was a gay counselor working with LGBTQ students living their high school-college experiences. The question I kept before me was how I could use that perspective to authentically fuse my understandings with the understandings of the participants. This fusion with my participants allowed for my lens to enhance rather than deter the study.

Conclusion

It was with the value of this lens that I undertook a study to describe LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences and what would have made those experiences more liberating. I believed that students were ships comprised of numerous related compartments, and that they were moving from one harbor (high school) to another harbor (college) often finding these seas hostile and oppressive. I believed that though there could be additional factors, for LGBTQ students, the compartments might include challenging sexual identity and overall identity development issues, as well as unique career development and college choice concerns.

We needed a call to action for LGBTQ students as they have received varied levels of support from their counselors, as well as their schools; the people and places that should have been their lighthouses. Understanding how these ecological and internal

forces related in LGBTQ students' high school-college journeys can provide opportunities for future support of LGBTQ students. Counselor and counselor educators will then be in a position to help make those experiences more liberating, allowing LGBTQ students choice in how and where to make their voyages.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of my research study was to describe LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences and what would have made those experiences more liberating. In this chapter, I present the findings for the two research questions:

- How do LGBTQ students describe their high school-college experiences?
- How do various ecological and internal forces and dynamics interact in these LGBTQ students' experiences?

The next chapter discusses implications for practice and research reflective of the goal of this study on how the high school-college experiences might be more self-empowering for LGBTQ students.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section presents my findings on the ecological and internal forces and dynamics acting in the participants' experiences. I have grouped the various forces and dynamics into four broad themes with topics (and sub-topics) contained in each. They are Educational Systems (LGBTQ School Climate, LGBTQ Support Systems); Relational Systems (Family, Peers/Friends, Religion); Identity Development Areas (Sexual Identity/Self-disclosure, Identity/Sense of Self) and Self-Empowerment Dynamics (Self-Direction/Mental Health, College Choice/Career Direction).

In the chapter's second section, I look at the interrelationship of the ecological and internal forces focusing on the Organic Nature of Ecological/Internal Forces, the

Responses to Negativity, and the Dynamics of Positive Development (Perceived Safety, Sexual Identity Pressures). While the first section concentrates on what the forces and dynamics were, the second section presents my findings on how these forces interact with each other in the experiences of the participants. Both sections incorporate thick and rich descriptions using the participants' words in order to convey aspects of their experiences.

Theme: Educational Systems

LGBTQ School Climate

LGBTQ students described the environmental systems within their educational institutions as having a profound influence on their experiences. The school culture toward LGBTQ issues shaped much of their journey. LGBTQ students experienced a contrast between the conservative and heterosexist environments of high school—in which they felt hidden—and the more open, relatively accepting environment of college—in which they felt more affirmed.

High School: conservative/homophobic. LGBTQ students characterized their high school environments as conservative and homophobic resulting in both their and their peers "covering," hiding or being unrecognized. They noted that the overall culture, both within the school and in the communities in which their schools existed was quite homonegative. One reported it was "definitely a homophobic atmosphere. Like, strong." It seemed a common occurrence:

> Every day like from freshman year to junior year I did not go a day without hearing the phrase that's so gay. Then they say, you know playingly, call each other "fags"-- and if they think something stupid…And then when we had topics

> about LGBT things in class, we read about it in literature a lot. You know they would just be gagging.

They keenly felt hostility toward anything related to LGBTQ support.

> I didn't have any, like any, GSA or queer alliance on campus. But [one began after] I graduated, uh, someone in a grade below me who actually now goes to UGA now started it. And it looked fantastic, it's like, I don't know, if you're in it there's a little whisper. It is a very conservative place, rich girl, white school, unfortunately. So, I wish I didn't have that, but I wish people could have that kind of club… I wish [high school] had been more inclusive but like more celebrating difference than, um, than you know like pushing it off. I guess, but that's anywhere.

However, they did seek small islands of refuge or support in a few places, notably often stereotypical arts organizations. One participant reported that

> I took [drama] … it was like a safe space I guess you could say in that...we did have a lot of kids who identified as gay or queer or whatever. So it was a safe place in that. However, the drama teacher was very apparently a conservative Christian... So, we knew that to talk to her about any of that would be very taboo. But within our peer group it was a safe space.

Yet even belonging to these organizations brought a stigma.

I was in band so I was pretty much like a loser [laughing]… people in the band were

> really … considered weird or just unpopular, I guess you could say. Um, and plus I was gay so it didn't make things any easier cause down south and in Georgia, people aren't very accepting.

They found that most of their peers presented themselves as less that supportive of LGBTQ students. One gay male commented that "… friends--- tend to be...not terribly accepting of homosexuality or any other sort of LGBTQ person." One lesbian gave an example of a conversation that she had with a classmate.

One girl…who was a senior to my sophomore I think… she played soccer team and I always made sure cause I would always bring cookies or marshmallows…then one day when we had AP physiology together and I sat right behind her and I remember we were talking about homosexuality in class and I remember her saying like "god I would kill myself if I was gay" and I was like "okay," and then it just clicked right there like...."damn" kind of thing … It's like you're not the person I thought you were, kind of cause I always thought she was much more open…

They saw this homophobia as a reflection of the culture in which they and their peers and teachers found themselves. One gay male determined that while he might have trusted some of his friends, their parents gave him pause.

A lot of the reasons why I didn't come out at all in high school is because I was afraid that it would change the dynamic--- because where I live tends to be really… conservative and a lot of the times--- not necessarily my friends, but parents of friends and… uh, people that I know.

Another participant echoed this sentiment in what he saw in a culture of intolerance in his school community.

The [high school] atmosphere was really conservative. I mean it was a really small school and there were rich families. …many people were coming from

> conservative families. It was really the boys, a lot more than the girls…The boys were a lot more homophobic way more than the girls.

As a result of pervasive climates of perceived intolerance, they seemed rarely to know how an adult in their school might react.

> [It] would have been really helpful and to know--- like I feel like a lot of time you could never judge if a teacher would be, ah, okay with [my being queer] or not.

High school: covering. As a result of the homophobic atmosphere within the school, LGBTQ students found an absence of the existence LGBTQ people and issues, either by others' assumed heterosexual bias within the school, or direct avoidance by the students and others. They attributed their inability to be authentic to the school culture. One noted that even though he enjoyed and excelled in many aspects of his school, he found a barrier there. "[My high school] was fine but I feel like I would have just excelled somewhere else where I was myself." He noted that this feeling began quite early.

> Fifth grade was especially bad for me... I got called, like they would tell me I was gay. And it's weird because I knew. But at the same time I was like, it was upsetting because I didn't understand why it was such a big deal.

Many of the LGBTQ students decided, therefore, to actively present themselves as heterosexual (cover) in order to be accepted and achieve some success.

> [School] was good because I was a good student. I was like I was very much like a good student. Um, almost it was like I was frequently teacher's pets sort of deal...but the whole high school didn't know I was out and yeah I would not have liked that.

Others choose a more passive approach and decided that they avoided social contact with others.

> I would just sort of shelter myself away from social interaction and I would deal with that by meeting people on the internet who were, who would not judge me for things I had done in the past, and who [were] a little more open.

In reflecting back on their high school experiences, these students felt that they were not alone in covering and avoiding disclosure to others. One remembered that "there wasn't anyone really out in high school at all—really no one until senior year, when I came out." Another felt that there must have been some hidden LGBTQ culture or need.

> The gays were like underground and…they might know about each other, but no one else knew it if you identify, as that it was hard to find each other. It was very much hidden. To know other people that were going through the same things as me would have been helpful.

This covering came at personal cost and distress. Several commented on the pain they felt at that time in their lives. "I never felt like I could open up to anyone…Absolutely not…And [sigh]... It wasn't a matter of, you know like... it was awful." Another agreed and said,

> I just sort of got sick of [hiding being gay] to be honest. I really I've been in a lot of [those] situations…And so I decided … I have good friend and I know he won't judge me and I'm going to just sit down and talk to him about it. It turns out he was fine with it and so was everyone else. It's just got to the point where I couldn't handle not being who I was anymore.

At they reflected on their high school experience they felt it was atmosphere of silence and heterosexism. One participant reflected that "in high school there were no gay people… Which is silly now, but still, but there were no openly gay people in my high school that I knew about." However upon more reflection, she decided that the school contributed to this lack of awareness, even in places she felt would have been most genuine and authentic.

> Even for a Sex Ed class you know, in high school we didn't, you know homosexuality wasn't brought up at all. It was how not to get STDs or how not to get pregnant, but what about lesbians how do they not get STDs? I had no idea about anything until after I came to college.

Another participant also noted that the obvious absence of any discussion of LGBTQ issues was not due to the lack of LGBTQ students; rather these students were hidden until after they left the high school. She joked that her "…high school has this reputation…of people coming out at graduation, just as soon as they're out, just coming out like. So in addition to sensing hostility, they often noted the ignoring of existence of other LGBTQ students.

> [In high school] homosexuality wasn't prevalent at all. It wasn't like it was negatively portrayed, except for those few instances that I talked about, but it was for the most part swept under the rug. You know you didn't hear about it. You didn't see it…I learned about homosexuality through the TV.

College: mitigated acceptance. While not all inclusive or always homo-positive, the level of tolerance in college felt like a stark contrast to the high school environments. Even in challenges, the students felt levels of support from the college as a whole. One

student was "outted" (unwilling disclosure of her identity) by her roommate to the rest of the residence hall. She was pleasantly surprised at the response of her neighbors.

> [After being outted to my dorm], my dorm hall friends we were just, you know, really good acquaintances; they didn't really care. You know half of them had gay friends of their own. It really didn't change how they acted around me at all.

Other students noted the surprise they felt upon arriving at college. "[The LGBT atmosphere is] a lot better than I thought it would be." Several felt that the integration of openly LGBTQ students into the life of the school contributed to this feeling. One participant was deciding whether she could safely join a service fraternity. She reasoned that since "probably 30 percent of the males in that [service] fraternity were gay… [joining] this is probably ok." This climate of acceptance juxtaposed with incidents of intolerance and concern for safety. One described living with a roommate with whom she felt hostility (and therefore had not directly self-disclosed to her).

> We get along but other people on my hall have told me that she's made comments about basically being anti-gay. Like I don't think she would ever try and tell me that what I'm doing is wrong. But I think she would be uncomfortable.

A male participant described a traumatic incident in which he felt support from the university, but not from the town community surrounding the university.

> [After an off campus sexual assault], I went straight to the police because I called my friend and my friend was freaked out and was like…"oh, we have to tell your RA," and so we told my RA and then my RA called the police so…It was really… to me it felt really impersonal because the university cops are nice, but

> because it happened off campus it was out of their jurisdiction, so the county police had to be called and they were really insensitive and… impersonal and…very um like… accusatory.

College: cautiously open. In spite of the areas of LGBTQ hostility, the relative acceptance of college compared to high school allowed the students a cautious openness. As a result, they often decided to be more out (self-disclosed) with those around them. After describing the suppression she felt in high school, one participant stated that

> Then you get to college and college it tends to be the savior to those people who suffered in high school. You finally get to college and you can break free of all the hateful people and you can finally get some real friends.

She and others could make inroads into open acceptance with friends. Several noted that roommates could present a challenge and found themselves compelled to self-disclose.

> My roommate is totally cool with it. Like I told him [I was gay]... he wanted to move in with me and ... when we were talking about it, I said, "I feel like I should tell you that I'm gay before you move in just out of respect"...I—I don't want to live with someone who's not going to like it of course—cause that's just a bad situation. He was just like "no dude, that's totally fine."

One found that the lack of use of derogatory LGBTQ references a contrast to what he commonly experienced in high school, commenting that "I can't tell you the last time I heard [faggot]." Another participant agreed on the positive nature of the college

environment. “I feel good about it, I think it’s at least, for the coming out part, it’s been a positive one. It’s definitely um… I’m not denying myself anymore. I am who I am.”

LGBTQ Support Systems

The overall culture of their educational environments in both high school and college was reflected in the presence or absence of LGBTQ affirmative supports that they experienced. LGBTQ students described high school as lacking visible supports or LGBTQ awareness (Gay Straight Alliances [GSAs], counselors, adults), resulting in their hiding their identity.

High School: counselors. While a few LGBTQ participants did have positive experiences with their school counselors, almost all expressed a lack of trust in the counselors and devoid of experiences of relating personal/social issues to their school counselors. For many, my question of “tell me about your experiences with your school counselor” elicited puzzlement. For most, the person and work of a school counselor were absent from their experiences. One student who talked about a number of challenges faced in high school commented that

> I never really talked to my counselors in high school. Um… at my high school the only people who really talked to the counselors, were people who were in trouble…I’m not really sure. I’m not completely sure what a counselor does, because of that.

Others found their relationships with their counselors as less that beneficial.

> I was also made to go to school counselors which I was very pissed off about that, cause if you take me out of class, [students would ask] “what’d you do?”…“What’s wrong, did someone die?”…; it estranged me from them because

> they'd be like what's wrong with her. Because I would come back and I'd be red faced and so everyone be like "what happened?" Cause…I'd be crying cause I was just pissed off and angry and confused.

Most felt that the role or person of the school counselor did not relate to what they were experiencing in high school. One noted the lack of relationship saying "[My counselor] was a little rough; she was really nice but also she seemed a little rough around the edges. I just never really formed a relationship with her. I never really worked with them before." Another did not see the connection between the family, identity, and school problems she was facing and the role of the counselor. "I don't think [my school counselors] could have done anything better or worse just because where I was at I felt like I didn't need help and I wanted to handle all my problems on my own."

Besides being absent from their experiences with the hostile high school environments they had described, the participants did not equate school counselors as a resource to provide assistance with personal/social issues. Many of the participants had no idea that their school counselors worked in the domain of personal/social issues. One female participant summarized her thoughts of her school counselors.

> Counselors weren't really counselors. Um, I take that back, I take that back whole heartedly, but mostly their permanent job was to be like… "Oh, here are the classes you can take"…cause they were like prepping us for college sort of… I went to see my counselor a couple times like while we were like fixing things or doing something, like you know this is related or school related or what not. I would talk to them about, you know, things that were going on like my relationship between me and [my girlfriend].

Other comments consistent with this came from other participants, even when they spoke of wishing they had someone to talk to. One male found a teacher who offered some support.

> I had this one teacher and I'm still extremely close to, to him and his wife. Um, they were the only people at that school and I actually came out to them [after graduation]... I never really came out them while I was still in high school, but at the same time, they were, they were great people to be around, just because I knew [they would be supportive]…It made me comfortable in a sense I guess…

Yet, he noted that he never felt this way with his counselor. Others agreed seeing more of the clerical work of school counselors than the emotional support they might give.

> I felt in high school [my school counselor's] only job was to deal with like school paper work and what not… I would wish …I had known that they were there for me to talk to. Cause it wasn't really talked about. And no one really talked about the counselors "by the way, if you need to [talk]" or things like that …

A few participants related positive experiences with their school counselors. One female was the notable exception saying that her school counselor was "… someone's parent, so [the] school counselor was [a supportive friend's] mom... I really went into see her for counseling just as, like, uh you know, as a supporter. She was real great." Another found that in other areas the counselor was a help. One male remembers that "my ninth and tenth grade counselor was like a second mother to me… whenever I ever needed anything…she'd like just talk to me … I had, what's it called, a 504 plan. She helped me set that up with my parents and everything." He noted, though, that in spite of this relationship he did not come out to her "but I think she kind of knew." The

agreement of most was echoed in one female participant's observation that "senior year [in high school], where stuff started getting rocky … I wish I would have known that they were there as a counselor—as a counselor because you know we have [counselor support] here at [college]."

High school: LGBTQ supportive organizations. School counselors were not the only missed resource. The participants also experienced a desire and need for official LGBTQ affirming organizations, such as Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), but found them either non-existent or unsupported in their schools. As the students reflected back, this was a consistent thread of their conversations. They found that creating a GSA was difficult, particularly in finding a sponsor.

> [A girl I met and I talked about starting a GSA], but for every student organization you need a teacher-sponsor and what teacher would sponsor that was a big problem—because from what we knew like none of the teachers were out to their students...I highly doubt they were out to each other. So, to know who was safe, to know who to go…would have been a problem.

Many struggling with questions about their identity wanted to attend a GSA but were unready to start a GSA at this point in their development. One said, "I wish [a GSA] had existed and it didn't need to be started." Another felt completely alone in his struggles believing that there was "nothing for LGBT people… I would really wish there'd been like … LGBT club or alliance or group or something that that could have helped… at school. Because I really didn't have any support in high school." Even students who considered trying to start one, found obstacles.

> I brought it up to my parents one day asking, "What would you think if I started a GSA?"... They're like "whatever" ... They kind of blow me off a little bit... My dad, it was mainly... "it could come with ridicule and you know what you're putting yourself [out there]...you know there are a lot of adversities that come to those who identify like that so I just want to make sure that you're aware of that."

Some of the schools may have had GSAs officially, but the participants found them segregated from what a functioning school club might be.

> Like, in my high school we had a, um, gay/straight alliance, but it was extremely small. They met once a week for maybe an hour at most in a small classroom. They never posted fliers, never had events.

So without counselors or supportive, functioning GSAs, the students felt unsupported as they encountered new experiences and hostile environments. Once female participant wistfully expressed a familiar sentiment:

> I just wish that in our society that people were more educated and more open because it really shouldn't matter who you have feelings for so much as you understand them. Because I feel like with me a lot of the issues I had I didn't understand what was going on. And like the big answers of my life, puberty, I didn't understand why I didn't feel comfortable. ...when my friend "Emma" confessed to me that she had feelings for me, I didn't understand. It's just I was just so uneducated about everything that I felt like it really hindered getting to be who I was…people did not explain to me like what was going on.

College: LGBTQ infused resources. By contrast, they found college unexpectedly offered LGBTQ support and resources, allowing for their visibility and a

level of affirmation that felt markedly more positive than their previous experiences. Prior to arriving, they were mostly unaware of LGBT institutional resources (possibly reflective of their high school experiences), but on arriving found them positively infused in campus life and information. Some found supportive LGBT messages in naturally integrated places on the campus.

> Every time I entered a like tutoring facility or even like [a student organization] on campus and saw a safe space sticker, a little like smile would come across my face—like it was awesome that we have this. Those stickers like provided so much hope. Like you could let your hair down and just breathe for a second.

Others found that LGBTQ persons were integrated into areas of student life that provided community. More than one commented on an example of the school's rugby team.

> My RA's friend who's also a RA played rugby and we met through an event she was hosting. She like "oh, you should come out to rugby." And you know she was really cute so I was like sure. Um, and so I came out to rugby and just like the first day people were just so cool…you could tell they were just comfortable in their own skin.

Another student echoed this experience

> It's funny a lot, the ratio of gay to straight on the [women's] rugby team is phenomenally; I'd say about 80% of the girls on rugby team are gay and some way shape or form…They're all very close…these girls, who I know I haven't known each other for more than four years, are just like glue… I think it's a matter of me letting myself become a part of that. It's just my personality I try to keep people at a distance. But I mean I've already passed out at practice and

> they've already told me that I'm part of the team. I'm, I'm stuck with them. That's what I've been told. [smiles].

This natural integration into various organizations and seeing representations within key areas of the school (classrooms) provided encouragement for the students. Often this combined with their determination upon arriving at college to have a different experience from high school. "This is a new phase of my life. I'm tired of lying. I want to be myself with people who are ok with it...So that's been the greatest thing is just to be away from the people in my life who don't like it."

College: LGBTQ supportive organizations. While they experienced indicators of a general positive LGBT university climate (students, faculty, other organizations), they attributed additional support from the university's LGBT resource center and the official LGBT student organization recognized by their university's student affairs office. Several saw a relationship between how they felt about themselves and being able to identify with an LGBT community.

> Now that I've come to college and been a part of [the LGBT student organization] and seen sort of what gay culture is...in the context of [college], I've gotten a lot more comfortable with it. I've been able to talk more openly about it, and…a lot more friends, of my friends know, and it's been easier to actually like… talk about what I'm feeling instead of beating around the bush and hiding it, for what I guess I feel is their sake.

The participants found that the LGBT student organization settled some of the fears they had about being identified as an LGBTQ student. One commented that seeing the LGBT student organization advertised at orientation "was really exciting and really just… really

relieving because …I could finally find somewhere where I wasn't alone or where I wasn't or where I could get help if I ever needed it."

Even though they found the LGBT student organization to be a central part of their lives, most observed that they had been unaware that such an organization existed before arriving at college. One explained that he had done research in the school's LGBT atmosphere and supports, but had still been unaware how supportive he would find the university.

> I knew it was a lot more liberal…like I knew there was gonna be a club and I did research about the [college LGBT student organization] prior to coming here but I just didn't know the scene exactly. I knew it was there; I—I just didn't know a lot about it.

Most of the participants, even those who did some prior research, were dependent on freshmen orientation events and other means of official publicizing in order to become aware of the university's LGBTQ support opportunities.

> ... I always just sort of assume that there would always be some sort of [LGBT] community... The day of orientation, when I showed up, and sort of shot off to the [LGBT student organization] table and signed up for that—and since then I've been pleasantly surprised that it's pretty active to the point... there's advertisements for events in the dining halls and then the residents halls and then they painted the road and that they pretty openly invite anyone and everyone to participate.

Other LGBTQ participants were equally surprised and pleased to find out that they were not alone.

> I didn't know there were this many people, LGBT people [at this college]…until the first meeting [of the LGBT student group] when I saw about 100… in the room. … I had no idea, I didn't really know, I didn't think there was really any gay scene at all. I didn't know there were drag shows… You know [an LGBT student organization] or anything like that.

Nevertheless, some students were unaware of the school's LGBT student organization until well into their college experience. One student found out she only heard of the organization by word of mouth noting that "I wasn't aware that we had an LGBT resource center or a [LGBT student organization] or anything like that until my junior year of college. That's because one of my teammates told me about it."

While the participants had unique experiences in their educational settings, all of the participants felt that the acceptance or hostility toward LGBTQ students created atmospheres in their high schools and college that were a significant part of their experiences.

Theme: Relational Systems

In addition to the environmental systems, relational constructs (family, friends and religious institutions) deeply affected the experiences of the LGBTQ students.

Family

LGBTQ students expressed that significant fear of rejection or hostility from parents was a primary determinant in their coming out process. This fear led to continue avoidance of disclosure to parents, or overcoming this fear and disclosing, resulting in both parental hostility and parental acceptance.

Avoidance of disclosure. Fearing parental reaction, some chose not to come out resulting in feeling less connected with parents and attempting actions to avoid being perceived as LGBTQ. Though they indicated that they would prefer to be open with their parents, they felt that they could not. Sometimes they hesitated because of not knowing how to bring up a personal, intimate part of their lives with their parents. One stated he was "not [out to] family, yet, but...I have for the past year or so sort of been contemplating, 'oh… when should, when should I do this, what's the right time, situation?'" Others hesitated out of fear and more pragmatic reasons with one student commenting that "I kind of feel like I can't [come out to my parents] because I'm really worried…not until I am financially secure." All those who had not self-disclosed to their parents had considered doing so, but made deliberate decisions not to do so. Participants looked for indicators of their parents' level of acceptance toward LGBTQ individuals. One male explained that

> We got into a discussion about how my aunt is a lesbian. And my mother was talking about how she thought it was wrong and her views on that…In our conversations, one of [my mother's] favorite things to say is "it's a lifestyle of destruction."

Such conversations and experiences were not uncommon. While the students did not know if the homonegative comments were always directly intended for them, they did see them an indicative of what they could expect if they came out to their parents. One male who had recently began to self-disclose to those around him recalled that

> … just sort of in the past couple of years when I was sort of coming to terms with my homosexuality [my parents] would make certain off handed comments about

> gay people…and a lot of it wasn't blatantly offensive but just the way they would phrase things. And I was sort of sitting in the back and I was like I can't believe they're this clueless—and they would make comments about girlfriends and I would just sit there and twiddle my thumbs and I was like I just don't understand how you just don't get this [my being gay].

A female participant remembered well a similar experience.

> My step mom was like "no, honey, girls can't get married." I was like, "hm, ok," didn't say anything but I was like "alright." Um, and then like the second comment she was talking about. She got pulled over by a female cop and she said that "apparently I just wasn't her type" and I looked at her. "Oh you could tell; you could tell." That you know that cop was gay. I was like "okay."

One participant who identified as gender queer/trans male noted the overall indicators of possible hostility, not only from his parents but other family members.

> [My father's] just a very unchanging, and like, unaccepting individual. He's made many comments about like… using fag in a very derogatory way and he's just—he's not opened-minded with that kind of stuff, but I just generally do not talk to him at all. Uh, my brother also he does not understand gay people.

This participant felt that his parent had made direct attempts to make him heterosexual and cisgender (gender normative). Reflecting on numerous experiences he recalled that

> When I was 12 or 13 my dad took me to a psychiatrist and they made me take one of those long, long test and it actually came back with GID [Gender Identity Disorder] that was one of the things that they said… One other, I don't know if it's true, Oppositional Defiance Disorder. I don't know if that's really or my dad

> made it up, but one thing that stuck was the GID and my dad used that fairly often to throw in my face.

Sometimes the students made direct attempts to find out their parents' level of acceptance toward LGBTQ people. One student who was living as an out lesbian on campus remembered an unsettling experience that still brought tears to her when she recalled it.

> I actually I had a rainbow patch that I had gotten and sewed it onto one of my jackets, and I wore it. I went home for Thanksgiving break. And I had it on the morning we were going to go back to school, and I didn't think about it. And my mom saw it and just went completely hysterical. Like, and it was very um… uncharacteristic of her, and she kept being like… "Are you gay? What is, what are you trying to tell me? Are you trying to tell me something?" ...I was like, "I will take it off when I get back, I promise," and she was like "no… I would feel better if you gave it to me." So I took it off.

She, like many others who have not self-disclosed to their parents, attempted to manage the fear that her parents would find out.

> I tell [friends at college who I know from back home] that [my being a lesbian] can't get back to my family… when I talk to people that I knew in high school that I don't really talk to in college, I typically don't tell then unless they directly ask. Instead of saying "oh… my girlfriend," [I say]… "Oh, my friends"…Instead of saying "oh, I was at [the college LGBT student group]," I'd be like "Oh, I was in a meeting."

For her she felt she was living in constant fear and she lacked privacy from her parents. At the time she noted that

> [My father] has my [college] email password, and so I feel like he's seeing the emails that I get, like about [the college LGBT student group], and about like this meeting, and… I've tried to filter it, but it's not working.

Negative repercussions. While some feared negative repercussions if they did come out, some who did choose to come out found their fears realized as they experienced negative parent responses. One who had recently come out to his parents shared troubling news he had recently received.

> And my parents ended up giving me a phone call during the week and they just said, "We can't support you anymore." Because of… they said, "If you are going to choose this lifestyle, we can't support you." And of course my response was, "Well, it's not a choice. So, I guess I am on my own." It was tough because I love them. They love me.

Others expressed a similar disconnection from their parents. One summed up that her relationship with her parents as a result of coming out and changing religions was

> Strained uh, strained is a good word... the changing of religion thing was ... a big thing for my parents, mainly for my dad to swallow... That was a hump we had to get over and now I feel like we're in recovery from that.

Several felt that their parents were exerting pressure to have them become more heteronormative in their identity. One found this in indirect comments from her father saying he "is still in that 'you know if you find the right person' sort of deal and 'you'll end up marring a guy no matter what.'" Another believed that his parents wanted him to return home for a more direct approach. "I got the impression that they wanted to bring me back to [my hometown] and bring me to school there so they could kind of have their

hands on me, like control." I should note that my later communication with him could not occur by phone or email as he felt his parents were monitoring all of his communications. He and the other students felt both the pull to be close to their parents with the dissonance of the direction they felt their lives going. Another participant summarized the feelings of several.

> ... I wish I had that close relationship with my dad, but I don't... I started going one way and he's still on his path, so I feel like that more I move like toward doing what I wanna do, the farther away I'm pulling myself from him ...what I deem as important in life and like what path I'm headed--- I'm kind of like veering in relation to his path.

Unexpected acceptance. Even though all of the students reflected fear in their parents finding out the LGBTQ identity, some students came out and found a positive, if unexpected response, from their parents. Fear was a common thread for them. One bisexual female remembered her experience.

> After I discovered that I do have an attraction for both men and women, I decided that you know my parents should probably know this. So, one day I was like "Mom, Dad, we need to have a talk," so you know they were across from me at the dining room table. And there was a lot of like oh this is aw…hand like hand crunching and like being all-nervous.

Even those with positive experience took precautions in case there were negative consequences. "Before I had come out to my parents [I told two school friends]. I was I guess preparing a safety net in case of emergency." Some told only select family members. One participant told his mother but had not come out to the rest of his family.

"[I have not come out to] my dad and my brother and sister. My brother probably wouldn't be ok with it. My dad would probably be ok with it, but it's kind of awkward." It was not uncommon for those who found the courage and made the decision to come out to find that their parents were not fully surprised by the self-disclosure. One smiled as he recalled his experience.

> I can't remember what the situation was, but I decided to come out to [my mom] and, uh, she was fine with it. And she just said, she reacted, "You're gay?" And then after that she was like "It's not like I didn't really know."

One participant did not plan on coming out to her mother, but found surprising acceptance once she did.

> Coming out to my mom was on accident. [My girlfriend, "Cara"] and I had gotten into a big fight, and I had pulled up in the driveway, super upset. Stormed up stairs and flopped on my bed. I totally bypassed mom. She followed me up the stairs. She sat on the bed and I was like I can't tell you, you wouldn't understand…She was…"ok, I gotta know, this is ridiculous." I had never really cried in front of her. I was like "Mom…you know, 'Cara.' Well--- we're kinda dating. … That's it; I'm gay [and] we're dating, she's my girlfriend."' She said, "well, oh, honey I've known that"...She's totally cool. I have a very happy coming out story luckily.

Another female tried an indicator to find out if it was safe to come out to her mother, again with positive results.

> … I came out to my mother when we were driving back to [college]. I had just taken over the wheel and she had just about fallen asleep because it was really late

> at night and I said. "You know would you hate me if I was gay." She was like "why would I hate you?" I was like "I don't know—I don't know where you stand on it." She's like "No, of course I don't hate you" and then we had this little conversation about you know.

This same student then came out to her father in a less conventional manner, but with equally positive, if not surprising, results.

> I only came out to my dad couple weeks ago... we're in a [LGBT student] meeting …and then I was in weird mood I don't know the impulse came over me so I sent him a text like "btw I'm gay. [laughing]. Just so just let you know you know I could never find the right time to tell you." Or something along those lines. And he sent a back a text. "I already knew, still love you." I'm like "aw, yeah?" He, "yeah." It felt really anticlimactic [to come out to my father] to be honest. I felt disappointed, if anything… I was expecting … confusion…I love my dad to death…he is the chilliest like most calm person you'll ever meet, but he's, you know, a red neck from the good ole south and like we never really talked about it, so I had no idea where he stood because he's not religious but again Southern.

Peers/Friends

Parents were not the only relational construct that participants indicated were a significant part of their experience. Peer, both friends and acquaintances, affected them in several ways. Being closeted coincided with a lack of social comfort, development and

authenticity, while being out to peers led to positive risk taking and a deeper sense of intimacy.

Restricted social development. LGBTQ students who were not out experienced barriers to their social development, including a lack of friends or a discomfort with others. Several felt that the social skills that others possessed eluded them. One said, "It's been a bit of a problem connecting and identifying and being able to predict other people." Another found long conversations (which might lead to self-disclosure) a challenge.

> I couldn't do what I wanted to do... what I say because might be taken the wrong was or…you know, just say odd things or something…I do remember like just not talking a lot in high school… Every now and then I'd have like a short one liner and something and people would laugh, but other that—I would listen to other people.

Some remembered that they were fully aware of their social challenges while in high school, but seemed unable to understand how to alter their situation and gain close friends.

> That idea of trying to force [friendships] or trying to force me to become…less socially inept… I had a conversation with my friend "Kevin" and I said I didn't really have many friends…He said [you should] try to change your personality and then I tried to do that, but it just didn't work out trying to force it…don't really know if it was—if it really was something that I [could] change.

This was one of the most common themes among the participants. Participants stated this feeling of social disconnection in different ways, but they all felt that something was not

as it should be. One male noted "I didn't have what I would call many friends, I guess. I was sorta isolated, I guess…" Another commented that "I just didn't know how I wanted to dress, I didn't know how I wanted to act, or who I wanted to be friends with, um… I wasn't really happy in the circle of friends." One participant, who currently describes herself as a very social female reflected, "I was always on the edge of everything and I felt like a lot of people didn't want to include me." One was quite open about his disconnection stating "I honestly didn't like high school at all because I didn't really have a lot of friends." Several were self-reflective as to the reasons for their social discomfort. One revealed "I don't tend to express [emotions] that very much because I'm afraid that something will happen and I'll be crushed by it and ... I still would like to avoid any possible pain that would be associated with that." An additional participant summarized what was the best most could remember in that "High school was a place I went to get knowledge. It wasn't like--- my social experience was kind of like--- I guess I would say blah."

Since most of the participants currently see themselves as socially competent and connected to a community, the contrast was stark for them. They described a seclusion from social life.

> [One friend] was the only person outside of the internet who actually knew about my sexuality and…the more I thought about it, the more frustrated I got with not being honest with my friends… Not only high school, but middle school I was really secluded. I would quite literally not talk to anyone after…the bell at 3:30. I would go home and would have pretty much no social interaction with anyone from school until the following morning… I didn't go to a party until the middle

> of my senior year … I really didn't ever have any experiences until very late in high school.

One attributed this social disconnection from his fear. "I kept to myself sometime…other times when I try to talk to other people, I do this thing sometimes when I want to be friends with someone new—I end up screwing it up by being social awkward." Another explained her not being a part of a social network by saying "I didn't really fit in …I had the typical lesbian pony tail, low on the head, always wore t-shirts baggy things… there were people who did not like me for no specific reason and I never understood that."

Limited authenticity and intimacy. The participants often felt that they were on the peripheral of social acceptance and community. This reality often created unsatisfying experiences for them.

> I mean I definitely had some very frustrating moments in high school. One that sticks out to me the most because I felt most betrayed. The junior- senior year we they were all going to go on a spring break trip … and there were no other spots available for me… and so everyone else was going but me—just because they didn't have enough room… And so that was just like a whole, I really felt like, the in-group/ out-group type of thing

Quite often they attributed this to their sexual/gender identity and feelings. "My high school was a very close knit...almost like family. Um, that was my favorite thing about my school.... But I didn't think that I would be if I came out." Some who did come out found this to be true. Another student reported that

> My best friend…actually in 10th grade her parents got divorced and her mom came out as a lesbian. And it was very shocking to her and her family…because

> there very Baptist. They're very religious and they are the ones that, she'd always tried to … like tell me to turn to god…When I came out to her … she didn't talk to me for months afterwards.

A participant captured the feelings of several when he said that "[Being accepted was dependent] on image, I guess. And just being good enough."

Later sense of authenticity and emotional intimacy. While some did expect or experience social challenges from being out, all of the participants expressed on some level that their being out, combined with an accepting community or peers had created a positive experience for them. Once they were out, all of the LGBTQ students felt they experienced growth in their social development, as well as a greater sense of authenticity and emotional intimacy with others. Several participants began this experience while still in high school as a part of their own self-identification. One female recalled that

> Senior year I had a really great group of friends that I really liked to spend time with… I'm sure that over the years I came more into myself, obviously because eventually I came to this realization, senior year that I was gay, so I must have been doing some kind of self-discovery.

Another student remembered beginning the process of greater social connection beginning at the end of high school. "I really didn't do anything outside of school until 12th grade, at the beginning of 12th grade [after coming out]. I started hanging out with people outside school. You know it felt a lot better to me." He noted that coming out to a close friend allowed the development of their relationship. "I think after I finally came out to her, that's when we started to become really close friends actually, senior year, actually started hanging out and through that I actually got a really good friendship."

However, it was on arriving at college that most found their sense of authenticity led to greater emotional intimacy.

> [My freshmen dorm] was really cohesive ... whole bunch of people chilled there and between classes that's where I spent my time last year. I would just hang out in the lobby. I came to know everyone in the buildings...If they walked through the lobby I knew their name. And that like there was a great sense of community and I love that.

Another participant noted the contrast she felt from her high school social relationships.

> For the most part…I'm a very open, friendly, loving person… very, very expressive with how I feel. And I, you know, look for or I like a lot [of] intense contact with people. It's just like an emotional contact. You know some people can have a lot of me [alone] time. [Unlike high school] I don't like a lot of "me" time. I like being around other people.

It was common for students to express this connection in terms of freedom or a release from a burden.

> I suppose the best word is "liberating," because I've never really been able to talk with friends and, uh, one on one context or even as just a social context about it... I always sort of thought of this as a distant idea. That I'm not going to be able to really say something about [being attracted to a] guy to a friend in person...I mean it's not that I have done that, but the ability to do that, the ability to talk about it is almost comforting, I suppose.

Likewise, several students commented on how this emotional connection in general also manifested itself in dating intimacy. One male participant still somewhat surprised at his capacity for emotional intimacy commented

> [I have] my first boyfriend that's been ... I've always been the person that hates on relationships because I, just I've been bitter to a certain extent about, you know, everyone else gets to have them and be with someone else, and I just never thought I would have that opportunity. And it kind of just happened. And...I've loved understanding why you love the person.

A female participant agreed with his experience in spite of the family challenges she had mentioned previously.

> [My yearlong current girlfriend] was actually just the first girl I ever dated…I thought I would have to ya know go through all these different people…but there was just this one girl and it turned out that it was, everything I needed and everything I wanted so… part of me is, kind of wishes I could have gone out there and been rejected,…but then part of me doesn't ya know…I am very happy.

Several of the participants directly noted a connection between their being out and moving toward deeper relationships with those around them. One felt that the best thing about colleges was the moment "if you could find it, of just being yourself. And having a group of friends who accept you completely for who you are and who are like family." In comparing her past lack of connection with others and her growing sense of intimacy with friends, she noted she had

> …sort of got to the point where a lot of it was sort of a fantasy [about] having strong friendships… [Having] any sort of strong relationship with someone of my

> age has always been sort of a distant idea—and now I'm getting closer and closer to it—it's a little frightening, what I thought was pretty much fictionally has become pretty much real.

The combination of being out, in a supportive environment, and a growing sense of self and self-confidence often led to positive social risk taking. Several commented that the positive LGBTQ college environment was a factor in this process. One began this conversation with noting that "Since I've been here, I haven't encountered anyone who's had an issue with my sexual orientation." He went on to say that "even though it's a huge school you can really find…people to hang out and you can find people to become friends with. It's not really that hard if you just actually venture out. But I mean take some risks." Several students echoed this belief. One commented that in planning on going to college she was "really worried about it, I was like what if I don't make, ya know any friends… I actually just um… it wasn't very hard to make." To her surprise she found that she "made so many friends. Like… like I can't believe how many friends I've made. It's like ridiculous…I've just gone out and introduced myself to people and they introduce themselves and then we start hanging out." Another participant reflected the same experience as she commented that

> it's a lot easier number one for me [to interact with new friends]—to just physically meet them somewhere and be a little more engaged socially or just to happen upon …I suppose its partially just because of the sort of risk taking of actually intending of being a little more social...

Interestingly she mentioned this in the context of learning how social interaction was a growth process for her.

> [I wanted to] put myself out there as much and so forcing myself into a larger group does, it… I mean it helps socially. It's been a bit of a difficult experience because I don't feel that I do fantastically in large, large social groups where I don't know like anyone.

Other students also commented that though they were gaining new social skills and a growing sense of community, it was a challenge to them. It was almost as if they were trying to catch up to their peers' development.

> Now that I am coming to that point it's been a bit of a struggle and I don't really know [how] to think about it. I've never really had any sort of intimate relationship with anyone… it's been a little difficult to actually confront intimate relationship on just a simply emotionally level at this point.

One more participant expressed the frustration that she was feeling in her social community, not growing as quickly as she might like. After describing having difficulty finding a close group of friends this year, she commented

> I'm on my third attempt at finding a close friend group, in that um, I'm now an initiate in...a national coed honors service fraternity… This is my second like, this is my third attempt, so I'm really struggling to find that close knit group of friends.

As the participants reflected as a group on the phenomena of their (emerging) social development and connectiveness, they related it to their sexual identity and the impact it had. They commented that in the past they had felt "different" and that before they had been "writing with the wrong hand." Now they were learning to write in a way that was

natural for them, but the process, though liberating and nourishing, was often slow as they relearned a way of being and communicating.

Religion

In addition to family and friends, several participants mentioned a third relational construct of religion and religious institutions. Over half of them experienced conflict between their sexual/gender identity and their religious identity resulting in personal dissonance before finding means of reconciling or managing the ambiguity and perceived stigma.

Struggles. They experienced deep struggles between their religious views and sense of sexual attraction. One participant believed that her religious conflict would also lead to a rift in her family relationship saying she believed that "anything that would like tear me from the church also would tear me away from my family eternally." She went on to comment that during this period of struggle she continued in her faith practice, but not without great distress. "Every time I go through this ritual of taking [my church's] sacrament, it was like a little more hell for me." Besides the internal philosophical dissonance, it was not unusual for participants to connect their religious struggles to the support relationships that they had in their lives up to that point.

> I had been at [my church] my whole life, and everyone there has been so great to me. And um, I just figured they were right, you know? Cause when people have that kind of influence in your life, when they are good to you and when you don't know... when everything about them is positive, you think that whatever they say is right. I guess it's cause you look up to them... That had an influence on me in trying to change myself, along with just my own religious views.

As a result, most of the participants experiencing this religious struggle had made attempts to change their sexual attractions. One male commented that his religious struggle "was the biggest deal with me trying to change, I think." He went on to describe his thought process.

> I've always known I like guys. There was a time, because of my religious view and what I thought was better for my life, I just decided that I would marry a woman and live that kind of life. You know, people do. It happens and I figured I could do it. I am the type of person I can tell myself something. Oh, it's going to be fine. You're going to marry a woman.

Managing the ambiguity. This participant and others went on to describe how they reconciled this internal struggle. He and the other out, self-identified LGBT students experienced various levels of managing the ambiguity between their religious upbringing and their sense of sexual/gender identity, including modifying their beliefs or living with continual tension between the two. The students expressed how they had begun to change their religious beliefs. One student who had made several unsuccessful attempts to change his sexual orientation stated that "for a lot of reasons, I had [been] progressively losing my religion just because of the struggle that coincides with being a homosexual with Christianity, you know." Another student related the same noting the time when she began to consider more directly her sexual identity saying that "at sixteen I um, was starting to like question um the religious beliefs and I decided I didn't want to attend church anymore with my family." Several were incorporating a religious identity into their overall identity. One commented on getting support from others around her expressing that "[some adults I came out to] have, they call it, open and affirming

views… they're Christian. They choose love over rejection, for lack of a better term I guess. So, um, that was really cool." Another student's comment represented what many expressed at this current place in their lives.

> [After coming out] it was a relief because I had been struggling with the denial and the pressures of my religion, but then I realized that…I believed that god like created people—and who, who those people choose to love is their choice, so I finally came to that realization; that helped a lot.

However, the participants did note that the reconciling of the conflict was a continuous one, often connected to the relationships around them. One student brought some of her worlds together when she said. "I still struggle with my own religious views, but [my mom]… she asked me what I thought like God thought about me being gay, and I said, "I don't"… This was all screaming."

Theme: Identity Development

Sexual Identity/Self-disclosure

Along with educational systems and relational constructs affecting their high school-college experiences, LGBTQ students encountered periods of sexual/gender identity self-awareness, stigma management, and limited self-disclosure in high school before moving to deliberate strategies for relatively widespread self-disclosure.

Awakenings. The participants experienced various epiphanies and early awakenings before identifying as LGBTQ. For some it was an event involving a specific attraction. One female remembered that at 15 she met "a girl at church camp [laughing]. Um, and then I realize that I began to have feelings for her… it was then that I realized if my first kiss was a girl that might mean something [laughing]." For others in was not a

specific person but a realization of attraction. "As weird as it sounds, I can't pin an age on it cause I just don't know, but when I was very young, I would have dreams about being with other guys." In some cases they realized around middle school the possibility that they may not be heterosexual. A few had comments from others that helped them start processing.

> My first thought, the first time I can clearly remember considering my sexuality was in middle school, probably seventh grade. My mom and I were watching "Charmed" I think on TV perhaps or "Zena" perhaps, or some other femme strong TV show. My mother was talking about her coworker and something along about her, my mother, being a strong independent women and she turns to me, joking like, "me being an independent women hasn't turned you gay has it?"

Others came to independent realizations and began trying to determine what their sexual attraction might mean.

> [I finally realized what it meant at] age 13 …I just sort of happened to find this boy who I, ya know, puppy love sort of thing. And…I thought about it and I thought about it and I'm like "why, what would make me feel this," and it sort of clicked, "Oh…I suppose I'm gay," and so I ended up spending like that whole night just in tears really trying to grapple with this and so the next morning I sort of woke up and realized "ok, I guess I'm just gonna have to deal with this" and from then on I started sort of figuring out what exactly it was to identify as homosexual.

Many of the participants noted media and cyber resources (websites, YouTube, etc.) as resources for understanding. One female participant remembered very specifically the events leading up to her personal epiphany.

> I would look up like female actresses on Google image search, and I would feel really guilty and strange… [In high school, I had] not been that excited about dating, and, or anything like that and, like my friends will be like "look at, let's look at pictures of like all of these hot male actors," and I'd be like "oh, ok, this is—I'm bored. Can we do something else, like" and so for a while I thought I was asexual. Um… which was depressing, and it's just like wasn't very optimistic about romantic futures.

Finally during her senior year, she used media to help her come to some personal conclusions.

> I just started watching all those gay and lesbian TV shows and movies, and it all just kind of made sense… Actually Martin Luther King weekend of high school, my senior year of high school…I stayed up all day and all night for the entire weekend, just watching [LGBT] things and thinking and—I like emerged from this cocoon…

While some had epiphany moments, others marked their understanding as a process.

> My coming out was so, so very, very gradual. It was so much of a spectrum for me because it went from only wanting to have girls as friends, cause boys were "ookie," to like having the few girl that had an admiration had for, to like realizing it might be a slight crush, to coming out as bisexual, to finally being gay, to finally being very, very gay. You know [was] just a very, very slow process.

> And I can't even remember the exact moment when I was like "oh yeah, this is what I am."

Stigma management. Between this period of early self-awareness and coming out, they experienced struggles in managing their sense of sexual identity. One male commented on how he felt stigma from the beginning.

> [In middle school], I would hear people talking about me or someone would tell me that people were, you know I would be like, "peeshh, I'm not gay." Like um, I don't know, knowing that I was. But I would throw it off, I guess as a defense mechanism.

All of them felt some kind of shame, sense of being wrong or defective, or fear in self-acceptance. One transgender male connected this to the self-destructive behaviors he exhibited.

> [Being labeled with Gender Identity Disorder] made me feel like I had done something wrong. Like, there was something that I'd done in my life that was making everyone tell me that you're wrong you need to fix yourself. And I think that kind of lead to the cutting because it's like if I'm doing something wrong, then I need to be punished. And it I just do this, it'll make me better. I don't know…I can't really explain it.

Some were concerned about how others might react; one male said "High school was when I started to realize there was nothing I could do about it. And it was the way it was. And I guess I was afraid that for the rest of my life, I was going to have to hide or be persecuted." Fear of the reactions of others led more than one to establish strong, normative identities within their schools.

> I was, uh, captain of the volleyball and basketball teams. I was the like president of the thespian society… I had such like, uh, authoritative position I don't think they would ask me about [being gay.]

This female went on to comment that

> [In high school] I was very much the like trying to look your best and straighten my hair and put on my makeup. I didn't go a day without make up, up until senior year.

Just as several of the participants used the internet for initial self-exploration, some of them used it to create a support network for themselves.

> I sort of build my identity as a homosexual on the internet more so than in real life… for 5 or so years I sort of explored what that meant…it really helps to have sort of that time to be internal…and develop what I think about my sexuality before actually making the jump and coming out.

Understanding attraction, identity, and self-labeling were troubling for many of the participants. One female reflected the continuing journey of many of them.

> When someone asked me like "oh, you know, what are you? You gay, straight?" and I'm like "oh, I'm bi." You know I went through a bi phase. She was like an "ok." It was later that year, like spring ...someone mentioned something about being bisexual…and I was like "oh, I'm gay." And they were like "oh, you're gay now" and I was like "yeah, yeah, I'm gay." [laughing].

Most agreed that their internal processing including identification (and labeling) and managing stigma was a part of the process for being able to share with others.

> My freshmen year of high school…I was closeted, like I was accepted myself but I didn't want other people to know…then my junior or senior year of high school I finally had the confidence to accept that I was gay and that it was not my choice and…so I came out.

Initial self-disclosure. After this processing, as they then had a sense of wanting to move forward in their lives, they began self-disclosing to others. Most made a deliberate first self-disclosure that they remembered quite clearly. They noted the difference between self-acknowledgement and disclosure (coming out) to others. One male noted the timeline he set for himself saying. "I don't know; I just decided that [I was gay]... around February or March. Telling people was a different story." Some made their first disclosure (coming out) in high school. One male remembered he told someone he thought would be safe.

> I came out to my friend "Sandra" first, and I was a sophomore. I was like fifteen; that was a really hard year for me. [She] was one of my good friends…I came out to her over the phone one day after just a hard day. I came out to her over the phone, and she was completely fine with it. She's the girl in the theater so she sees many LGBT people.

One male described how he carefully planned his first self-disclosure.

> So after graduation I had, I had not really told anyone, but after graduation I sent a text to one of my friends and said "hey, I need to talk to you. Can we go and just like have lunch and talk, and talk about uh something?" [Deep breath] and so we go to like our favorite restaurant and we, uh, sit down and after all the small talk, he's like "ok… what do you need to talk to me about?" And so I tell him I'm gay

> and he says, "well, we always sort of… knew that"… and I'm like… "Really?" I had no idea that they had any sort of inkling or anything about me being gay, and so I sort of tell him, "well this is, this is the situation." He's like, "yeah, that's fine. No one really cares."

He was not alone in waiting until he had left high school in order to tell others. Some felt this was the best course of action for them considering their circumstances. "I felt that by coming out now [in college] there would be some…I don't know if credibility is the right word. But just, I didn't want it to seem like it was frivolous, I guess. Not a whim." Others felt they wanted to use the cyber world in a deliberate manner for coming out.

> My senior year, it was like the week before school started. I put it on Facebook that I was interested in men and then after, I actually started telling all my close friends. A lot of them didn't pay attention to the Facebook thing, and some of them were surprised; some of them weren't. Um, I didn't have any bad reactions; I didn't go up and tell people who I knew would have a bad reaction.

Most sought some kind of control on the timing of who knew. "What I decided was that my deadline, or what I had to do was be myself to people, [was] when I got [to college]." However, at least one felt that he only had limited control of who knew once he told one person. He remembers that "I told some of my friends and of course they told their friends and before I knew it everybody knew it." Even so, within the negative responses, the participants found some positive responses to which they attributed great importance.

> [Coming out] totally changed my life. In a good way, a great way...A burden lifted, I suppose. And to realize that people don't care as much as you think they do is probably the most fantastic thing about it. I thought that I would lose my

> best friend ... because he's straight. And I just always thought that was a big deal for every straight guy, you know? It wasn't. He didn't care.

Passive self-disclosure. Once they had begun the process of coming out, they used various means for further self-disclosure. Some choose passive action, doing something publically knowing that there was a high probability that others would find out. One female describes using a gay pride event and social networking with a mixture of concern and excitement.

> I went to [another town's gay] pride [parade], the first one. I marched in it; I have a picture of me [on FaceBook] in like a rainbow arch, so if anyone wanted to know I'm gay they could find out really easily. I liked that picture and I was proud of it and I wanted my gay friends to think that was cute…[but with] my conservative straight friends …I wanted them to not look. But they could; obviously, that's the whole point of Facebook.

Others decided to present indicators or commit themselves to a full self-disclosure if directly asked. One male noted that in college he had been "slowly…telling more and more people as it goes along…not as much outright but…dropping hints, being perfectly honest with them and if, if they ask. I've sort of adopted the policy if they ask, I'll tell them." Another participant reported a similar strategy with his family.

> [My father] asked me something about going to [attend a meeting] with queers. It was an event that happened on campus...And he asked me about it. He said, "Are you gay?" And I said, "Well, yeah." Cause I had already made the decision not to lie to anyone else if they ever asked me again.

Active self-disclosure at college. Beyond passive or indirect disclosure, once in college many of the participants choose to be deliberate in initiating wide self-disclosure, even while possibly overtly limiting such knowledge with some (family, past friends, perceived homophobic peers). Some made it a point of information in early conversations with new people (potential friends). One said it was a resolution on arriving at college after having come out initially over the summer. "I just came here, probably in the first day I met anyone I just mentioned that I'm gay." Many felt they wanted to or need to tell their roommates, sometimes with mixed results. One female noted her

> Freshman roommate… she was just extremely conservative. We didn't get along at all. It was often just a very awkward environment. I don't know, random selection is great, but they need to put a screen or something in the dorm [roommate] selection, but I don't know how we can change that...cause mine wasn't safe… I didn't at all feel comfortable.

Another female reported a similar outcome. "I told [my college roommate] that I was bi… and she freaked out about it. We had actually been having like problems anyway, but she freaked out about it and proceeded to tell everyone in my dorm hall." Even with potential and existing hostility, these participants determined that on campus they were going to fully self-disclose. A typical comment was shared by one students saying, "[I am out to all of my friends]; there's not one friend that I'm [not]. I've [got] fourteen people who I regularly hang out with during the week and not one of them doesn't know I'm gay." However, even with this level of freedom to self-express, several of the participants separated their college disclosure and their family disclosure. "I'm

completely out at college. To my friends, to acquaintances, anyone who asks basically, but at home I am not at all."

Identity/Sense of Self

The participants' sense of sexual identity affected to their overall sense of identity. Before the LGBT students identified and self-disclosed, they struggled with a sense of overall identity, in contrast to the sense of completeness and wholeness they felt once coming out to self and others.

Adrift and uncertain. In high school the LGBT students, who were not out, felt adrift and uncertain in many areas of life. One reported that "a lot of high school...revolved around… being sort of secluded and sort of figuring out who I am myself." Another agreed that in high school he had "kind of, a hard time just kind of, going through a transitional period, as corny as this sounds, just trying to find myself." This often resulted in an overall lack of confidence. "And I … developed insecurities that … have lead me [to be] unwilling to share … emotion and so I think it sort of factored into a slightly slower development… not only [of] myself … but my sort of social interactions." Many participants described how this lack of identity showed in their interactions with other. One female remembered how this lack of clarity showed itself in some of her dating interactions.

> [Someone I came out to] was talking to "Brian," this boy we both know in high school. The thing about Brian, in high school is I had gotten drunk one night and we had made out. So when Brian found out, he was like "Wait. What?" and then [she] was like "Wait. What?" and so there was that whole big confusion.

Self-assured and solidified. By contrast, once LGBT students had self-identified and had self-disclosed, they felt more self-assured and solidified in their sense of self. In the middle of both hostility and acceptance in various areas of her life, one participant noted "I'm just really proud of like where I am morally and with my integrity and that I feel like I make the right decisions...I'm really proud that I can ... be strong in who I am." These participants described themselves as being at ease with themselves much more than in their non-disclosed (closeted) high school periods of their lives. One male said that since coming to college and being out

> I think I've become more comfortable with myself, for one thing, like a lot more comfortable. I really didn't have much self-esteem... I had really bad self-esteem issues back in high school. But for the most part they are almost dissolved completely. You know I feel good about myself and that lets me share parts of myself with other people that, um, they may like, like my personality.

This comfort seemed to extend in how some described their sexual and gender identities.

> I'm really appreciating that I've loosened my grip on like gay labels and that just you're a person, [not] just a gay person. I'm reminding myself … not [to be] necessarily quieter but just more natural. [Before] I wore my rainbow stuff everyday… [Since then] I joined a service fraternity on campus to try to branch out a little bit—to meet people, initially because I wanted to have a lot of diversity.

They seemed more confident in not having answers to all questions about themselves; comfortable in living with ambiguity. When asked to describe himself, one student said, "The first thing that comes to my mind [when describing myself] is complicated. I don't

love to think of myself like that but apparently that's what apparently the most consistent description of myself from other people." With that comfort with ambiguity regarding identity, came a confidence in following their own moral centers.

> I think my mom used to say ... "doing what is right isn't always easy but it's always right." To me it's more important to do what I feel what's right and to be alone in that decision than to go along and be with people.

Theme: Self-Empowerment Dynamics

Self-Direction/Mental Health

The experiences of their educational and relational systems, along with their identity development, interacted with their sense of life direction, self-empowerment and mental health. The students experienced a relationship between being closeted and feeling that control was outside of them versus being out and having a sense of control over their own lives.

Lack of control. LGBTQ students who felt that they must conform to heteronormative constructs felt dejected and a lack of control over themselves (an external locus of control). One male recalled that "there were times when I would do the down in the dumps. I don't want to say I hated myself. Cause I never did, but I just struggled a lot." They often attributed such feelings to the pressure to conform to societal (and school cultural) expectations. One who used a resiliency strategy of "covering" (complying with expectations) commented that she was "so like cookie cutter. I liked high school, but I do recognize...that I did look... a lot like everyone else. I wish it wasn't so abnormal to not…do what everyone else is looking and doing." Several commented on how trying to change their sexual or gender identity to the majority expectation left them

feeling powerless. One male after telling his father that he was gay was presented by the father with the option of seeing a counselor. He responded that he was willing if the purpose was to open up communication in the family, but then asked the father

> "Do you want me to go to a counselor under the impression that I am going to try and change myself?" And you know that's what he meant. And I just said, "You know, Dad," I tried to explain to him, "I really am trying to be as humble as I can about this. And when I tell you I can't change, it's not because I am not willing to try. It's just that I can't. It means that I already have tried. And it's not going to happen."

Sense of control. Nevertheless, even this participant felt a sense of hope after self-disclosing. In addition, once coming out, they felt they were developing a sense of control, an internal locus of control, over those with whom they interacted, the barriers placed before them, and the choices that they made. The student who had rejected the offer to see a counselor in order to change his sexual orientation said he was

> Optimistic…I've been very positive about things lately--you know even though my parents—even if they choose to not support me...I could go on about this for hours. I could just talk about it and talk. I just realize that like everything's gonna be ok.

Others had a similar response even while managing limitations placed on them by their parents.

> ...my parents decided that I was going to [give up my Housing Assignment. Since] they made my financial decisions, I am now living off campus. Um, so

> yeah [my freshmen community was] taken away from that but I feel like it's kind of to my benefit in that I'm having to find a better set of friends now so.

This participant went on to explain the results of going against her family's wishes. "This decision now...I want to change my major to religion has ... financial consequences in that starting second semester, I'll be financially independent of [my parents] and very, very broke." They seemed keenly aware that they felt different about themselves than they did in high school, but that their families still held on to the old paradigms of interaction.

> I've been home twice within the past month and it's sort of felt like nothing really changed…it was actually sort of conflicting for me because I come home and I feel like I still have a tie to how it was in high school.

In addition to growing independence in the family relationships, they found increased control over their social environment in contrast to their high school experiences.

> Here if I don't want to see this person again I can just never see that person again, you know. And you're just in such control of your environment and I've made mine just such a relaxed one. It's just a very authentic group as opposed to in high school.

For some, the change was not without challenge. Becoming accustomed to emotional and social independence was a growing experience. One felt that he had been holding back from others so as not to get hurt "for quite a while. I can't really pinpoint exactly when I started to identify that but um, I think…I'm trying to, I'm very slowly breaking that barrier." Another participant reflected on his challenges noting "it hasn't been an easy

transition from high school to college I guess because of living in a different place, having to learn new things," but that the LGBT student organization had "been really fulfilling, and I met people." Several participants agreed that the power they had to find communal support was an integral part of their world. "Luckily college is like one big [supportive] club. Everyone you surround yourself with you can choose, and you know it's very much in your power where you go or the things you do." Even one who experienced trauma made note of his ability to choose relational supports and community assistance, something he had found lacking before.

> [The off campus sexual assault] could have been a lot worse, I could have been robbed, I could have been shot…it could have been a whole lot worse, than it actually was. [I've learned] that I'm always going to need to take someone with me if I go somewhere [off campus late at night], like I'm going to go in a group or go... just keeping in groups, wander in groups.

This student reflected the challenge that the students faced as they learned to live with their new sense of identity and freedom. Difficult decisions and circumstances still existed in their lives, but they felt they had the ability in themselves—along with supportive friends around them—to manage and thrive in these situations. Another student captured the feelings of this student and the group when he said that in spite of family rejection and pending financial barriers that, "I love the change [that is going on in my life]. [laughing]. I'm sorry that's a simple answer. The change is making me a better person. That's what's important." He and most, if not all of the participants, describe their current emotional state as much more content than in high school

> I really draw… pleasure out of actually meeting new people and getting this kind of high with meeting someone and finding things in common with them. I mean I get a lot of happiness out of other people…I think to some extent that's why I was so down in my younger years because I didn't have anyone to actually uh draw energy and happiness off of.

College Choice/Career Direction

The participants' experiences of control in their life extended to career (college, major) choices as they explored the direction they wanted their lives to take. The students felt there was not just one reason they attended their college, though key were the pragmatics of economics and the opportunity for choice. They now see themselves as being in a place to actively explore career directions, often considering careers that will allow them engagement for the benefit of others.

College choice-economics. While they experienced not just one clear discernable reason for attending their college, important factors included economics combined with the potential that the college would let them continue their development (or start new). Several noted that finances placed a limitation on their choices for college. Most considered both factors in their decision.

> I had to stay in, in state for [state scholarship] reasons so like I was going to go to an in-state school...I also knew that like it was a big university so if ever I changed my major that would that would be ok because I wouldn't have to go to a different school.

Another reflected the same sentiment in that he "knew this is where I wanted to go because of the [state] scholarship, and I knew it was one of the better schools in the

state… I guess this was just my target school." The limitations of finances along with the opportunities of the large institution made choosing their college a likely decision for the participants. One explained that his father "said that he'd only pay for a college that was in state because the [state] scholarship, so [this college] was the most attractive college to me that's in state."

College choice-continued opportunity and development. The feeling that the college offered them opportunities to continue their identity exploration (or begin new paths) was a dominant theme with the participants. Coming to this school was not their only choice, as one noted he had been accepted to other colleges but said, "I just felt like [this] was the right place for me. And so far that has been, I mean definitely the right decision. I love it. It's been great." Another saw the fusion of economics and opportunity for career development and said, that "the vet school [is the reason I came here] and the in-state tuition and I just I know [this] is a good university."

The opportunity for being in a diverse and accepting community was a consideration for several of the participants. One female remembered that

> In deciding to pick [this college], I had like googled student orgs...I just wanted to make sure... to see if there was one [LGBT organization]… there was and that was good enough for me--- the fact that one even existed… I didn't care how involved it was as long as it existed.

Another student explained how she too considered the LGBT atmosphere as part of her decision making process but was unaware that her current college (which she now describes as having a supportive LGBTQ community) was going be accepting of her.

> I didn't get into [another college]… I had gone there, and I had seen the LGBT things…and I had my heart set on that, and I didn't get in …It's very rare to get in out of state. [I didn't] really want to go anywhere else and that sounded the most interesting. [My current college] had a very sorority girl stereotype, in my mind, and I'm not like a football fan.

Students often equated the large size of the college with the potential for finding a diverse, tolerant community.

> I decided the big university is probably a good idea because I want to be sort of out in the world a little more and I think that small universities can be really confining so finding a bigger university that caters to my needs was sort of a priority and [this college] fit that pretty well.

Career exploration. While the out LGBTQ students feel they have experienced significant growth in their identity development, they were more equivocating about their career development. (I noted that much of their experiences seemed reflective of the Bottleneck theory (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). The energy used in sexual identity development struggle may stall career development or that career decision closure may be premature when one is not considering one's [sexual] identity.)

As most felt that they were continuing their career development, they did have a sense of permission to explore career opportunities and often saw themselves choosing careers/majors in which they will be able to contribute to others. Some felt comfortable in the progression they had made in their career formation.

> I'm really happy about the decision that I've made... after this whole [college leadership course] experience I went through finding out what I want to do with

> my life, it really gave me the freedom and the permission to follow my passions in life.

Several, though, noted they were experiencing more uncertainty than they might have expected. It seemed as if they were beginning to consider their career direction with a new perspective, but were somewhat unsure as to what that might mean. "I have had pretty significant aspirations since a young age. At the moment though it seems that when I finally come…what I want to do for the rest of my life; I have no idea." Another who had been somewhat sure, seemed more hesitant as she considered her new freedom, sense of identity, and relationships to those around her.

> I'm having trouble [choosing a career] right now, because graphic design major, right now, but it's a very strict type field, and a lot of graphic design majors kind of walk around really lonely and sad all the time… I need to look up [this new major I heard about] and see if they can actually help me… because I'm just worried about finding a career.

Career meaning. Though all but one of the participants had not reached career decision closure, they all were considering careers with a common theme. Most of the participants felt that their careers and life direction would be one that contributed to others. Some were considering careers in order to bring about systemic change.

> I'm health promotion major in international affairs, and I have a friend that did the exact same major. He does disaster relief; he'll go to a site, assess the problem and send, you know, people who need to go to Japan, north Georgia or wherever.

Another felt his earlier passion blended well with his newer perspective on life and himself.

> I'm really interested in politics. I could be a political analyst or a commentator or something. I really don't know...it's been gradually increasing, really. I started having the interest probably in eighth grade when I was thirteen, and it just started more and more.

Several participants reflected that there were considering entering therapeutic related fields and noted that their past struggles were a part of their motivation.

> Right now my major is psych and...I'm probably going into counseling cause I ... feel like I'm good at talking to people and helping them sort out their problems. I guess it, it helps to have the experience of knowing what it feels like to go through bad times, which everybody does at some point... I'm not saying that my experience attributes to that among others but...I just I want to help people.

Some of these participants related experiences at college that were helping them in their decision making process. "I'm thinking about social work because... it's just a tentative plan and I'm also I'm volunteering … as a crisis counselor so working … has kind of given me a better idea of what I want to do." Another considering a field in which she could support others reflected on both her past experiences and her desire that others not have the same barriers that she felt.

> I'd like to go to grad school for student affairs at this moment…I developed my life vision ... I want to ... create and sustain safe spaces for self-discovery—self-discovery not only in a sexuality aspect but in every aspect of your being like religiously like gender expression anything that you can self-identify as I want

> people to feel comfortable discovering that within themselves…whenever I tell people about [my future career] and we get into it—I want to create for kids what I wish I had… Like I wish that I could of felt comfortable analyzing these different aspects.

Another participant explained that her motivation for how she invested her life and time were reflected in her decision to be a part of this research study. She said that in doing the interviews "I'm assuming your gathering this information to try and help someone else, so if something I can do can help other people… I'm totally ok with that."

Interrelationships of Ecological and Internal Forces

Organic Nature of Ecological/Internal Forces

The ecological and internal forces within the educational systems, relational systems, identity development areas, and self-empowerment dynamics each contributed to the experiences of the participants. While I have discussed the ecological/internal forces separately for the purpose of representing some of their depth, they are in actuality a synergism within the experiences of the participants. The ecological/internal forces produced an experience greater than any individual area. They were interrelated, organically connected to the other areas (See Appendix G). Ecological and internal forces—sexual identity, hostile or supportive educational environments and people, family, religion, self-confidence, social confidence and friends, college/career choice, and a sense of purpose and direction—all affected the other areas. These areas affected choice of coming out.

One rather confident participant told how she was a different person in high school and gave some hints as to the reason.

> Maybe and…and everyone else was I wanted more than anything to be cool. And you know, at the end of the day, I wanted to be the person who would be invited places and like would be considered popular and…and I was not like a bad person. I just really cared that I was cool.

As one student remembered having friends and coming out occurred together in a mutually positive spiral. The students were not always sure which occurred first. Sometimes they believed the friends and support came first.

> In high school [there was] not really a support system…there really weren't any groups…that were supportive. But then 11th grade, I got more friends and…more support and then 12th grade when I came out, I got a lot more and then in college lots and lots more.

At other times, they believed that coming out brought about better relationships and affected other areas of their lives.

> I realized that once I came out like, [pause] I [pause] was able to get more and more friends that accepted me for who I was, and I was able to build a better relationship with my family, and they were able to understand me. And then I felt at the same time more in control because I was able to accept myself; and therefore, I didn't have that denial in my way. And then my support systems got bigger because I've branched out more and went to, here at college where there's just a lot of support.

However it came about in their lives, the participants felt their decisions to come out affected most of the other areas of their experiences. One male saw how it affected his sense of self, saying once he realized he was gay and decided to tell someone, "I

started getting more of a sense of who I was and everything during that time and I guess that could have correlated." Another saw how coming out affected his choice of college saying that "coming out affected my choice of where I was gonna go to college so going to school in a safe supportive environment." Another found how coming out to her parents affected numerous other areas of her life noting that "my relationship and openness with my family definitely coincides with like the control of my life, like the changing of my major."

Several of the participants found that even cyber relational supports helped them find the resiliency they needed for other areas of their lives.

> The only real support group I had for, through especially in middle school and through the sort of the first half or first three parts of high school was mostly through friends I met over the Internet and I built…pretty solid relationships with them. And I, I mean they were the people I went to for advice in with certain things especially one's that I couldn't talk to my parents about.

All of the participants felt that family affected their decision and timing to come out, even if they had not yet come out to their parents. Those who had come out found that their decision to come out then affected their relationships (positively or negatively) with their parents. In a similar way, many felt that their relationships with religion were also mutually affected. One participant felt both areas in her life.

> Family … [and] religion…affects everything else. So I feel like those are the two biggest [parts] of my life. … Had I [still] believed what I was taught growing up, my life would be like completely different than it is now. Had any of those things changed…I feel like it would affect everything else.

Responses to Negativity

Since it appeared all of these forces or areas were organically connected, damage (developmental impairment, lack of a sense of wholeness, life dissatisfaction) in one area affected the other areas' growth and health. While overall health or thriving was related to the totality of the forces, resiliency occurred (in spite of) hostile forces.

Participants repeatedly noted that social forces, their community of peers and desire for friend, affected the other areas of their lives. Many felt that coming out would mean the loss of their friends and community. One male who described having limited friendships spoke of the fear of losing even those.

> I just felt…in high school if I came out it would really change…my friendships and my social situations and honestly I…I never really had a lot of it in middle school. I never really had a lot of it in elementary school and I didn't have a lot of it in the beginning of high school and so when I got [friendships], I really wanted to hold on to it and I was afraid of losing it.

In the same way, a female participant, who described herself as popular in high school with a number of peripheral friends, spoke some of her decision making that was based on the fear of losing friends.

> "Cara"…and I had been together for months, like happy and monogamous and then I really wanted to go to prom with the basketball captain of the boys team just cause I … it would just look just so cool for like the two captains to go together, and so she and I broke up for a night and she let me go with the captain of the football or the basketball team and cause it just looked, it felt cool and looked cool to go with the "James Henderson," with the big guy on campus.

In a following interview, this participant spoke of how retelling this event in the interview affected her and that she was embarrassed by how she had treated "Cara." She and "Cara" were still friends, so she called her up to apologize for that event that happened years earlier. Some participants discussed how this fear of losing what community they had affected how they felt about themselves.

> I hit sophomore and junior year of high school…that's the time where you know I was having to start to watch myself with my friends and be careful about what I'd say—so I was definitely getting a very inverted sense of self as opposed to what I can't do.

Participants also shared how they felt the hostile environment around them affected them. In some cases it was the school and community.

> The thing about my high school and my hometown is that it was a very, very [pause] smothering sort of place and not so much like the people or just there wasn't a negativity per say there was nothing to do in my hometown… I think in high school…there was a narrow view of the world at least from my perspective.

They also expressed how their relationships with their families were impaired by not feeling they could be open with them. One student concluded that "when I was younger I was pretty close with my family because I wasn't really hiding stuff from them. But as I got older it got, not very close." For those students who had the combination of family, religion and an oppressive school environment, the effects on other areas of their experiences were significant. One male remembers that in high school he felt he did not he had any control in his life, "It was off those cards. [This was] before [pause] this period my senior year that spiritually I was… questioning or my reevaluation of who I

was. And I thought that conforming to [pause]—just conforming was the only option." Another student felt as he considered the forces on him that "in high school I hated myself, like I just because I was I believed what I was…was wrong…I had a lot of denial."

This participant and others, however, found resiliency strategies that brought about change. For him it was a reasoned decision. "And then once I realized that I was [pause] made that way and I couldn't change it, I began to feel better about myself and eventually loved myself for who I was."

Dynamics of Positive Sexual Identity Development

The participants reflected on how they felt they moved to a positive place in their lives. Just as a hindrance in any ecological/internal area organically affected the entire experience, a positive change or growth could likewise affect the student's entire experience. As the ecological/internal forces interacted organically with each other, several dynamics were in play; however, there was not one particular factor that was always changed first, thereby affecting all the other areas.

Regardless of which ecological/internal force changed to more positivity first, sexual identity development affected other areas, and the other dynamics affected sexual identity development. The participants felt their decisions to come out affected most of the other areas of their experiences. Specifically, positive sexual identity development reciprocally affected and was affected by the other dynamics. While sexual identity struggles were central in all the participants' experiences, it might not be the first evident growth area in their development. There was a trend in that perceptions of safety or increased freedom —from moving to college, a homo-positive environment, change in

friend system, freedom increase in high school, discomfort with religious ideas—could lead to sexual identity development.

Perceived safety. Many of the participants attributed their perceptions of safety and control over their lives to be one of the catalytic factors in their sexual and gender identity development. They often remembered the antithesis of safety when they felt less safe and in control. One noted he tried "to be the person that my small world society would love, cause I went to a small school." He found this a clear contrast to what he felt now. "That's what I wanted to live up to prior to this reevaluation point, and now after coming out, I strive to be the person that I love, I guess." A strong recurring theme was the effect they felt from living in a safe, open environment that allowed them some control over their sexual identity exploration. One female explained the relationship as she said, "In coming to college I felt a freedom of being me, I guess… I guess would be like a catalyst. I don't know, I felt like this is college that you come to college to be yourself." Another female, still struggling with her relationship with her parents, confidently shared, "I felt pretty in control when I came to college, um, cause I was adjusting really well. Write that in there." Some of the participants noted that the effects of an environment of safety and self-determination were unexpected. One gender queer student commented how the experiences of high school had left them unprepared for the benefits they would find saying "it just never like crossed my mind for like the benefits [a safe college environment] would bring cause you know high school was what it was. I never even thought about it."

All of the participants mentioned how college and the LGBTQ resources were a central part of their sexual and gender identity development. "College is great, like I feel

so safe…there's so…many resources. There's the LGBT resource center, there's [the LGBT student organization], there's all these people that accept me for who I am. And I'm just really happy." Reflecting on how the college environment and LGBTQ resources had provided safety and opportunities for identity development led many of the participants to comment on the contrast with high school.

> I would have created the gay-straight alliance. A guy did that after me, after I had graduated... I was like super envious when I was gone…and he's just an ally…He felt like this was something we needed on campus even though he was the student president but…it made him a little unpopular. It made [people say] you know he …must be gay…He put himself out, vulnerable in that situation—just cause he knew enough people needed it on campus—and… and I like didn't even come out to my best friend until later cause…I didn't want our relationship to change.

In addition to attributing their sexual/gender identity development to a supportive environment that allowed opportunities for self-empowerment, many students spoke of working to reconcile their inner conflicts regarding the "rightness" of being LGBTQ. Distinct from the effects of religious institutions and people in those institutions, this related more to their personal moral gauge. They began working out the earlier struggles that "something must be wrong with me." One spoke of the wrestling with the conflict he felt between sexual identity and religious beliefs explaining,

> The feelings that I had with Christianity. I…I, of course, I pretended like it didn't exist when it came down to questioning, my spirituality. [pause]. I think that is the only way I can, I can put it. I…I just pretended like it wasn't there.

They found ways of reconciling their conflicts and finding avenues of peace for themselves. One student who saw her formative years as immersed in religious structures explained how she continued to hold on to central precepts of her belief system explaining how they were significant in who she was.

> I want to acknowledge all of the positive that has occurred in my life because I was raised [in my religion]. Because I feel like every value that I held [goes] back on that. …It was huge in like how I defined morality and like what's right and wrong and it was huge in developing like my value system… I don't want to discredit that because I don't believe, I don't hold [my old religious] beliefs. You know, so I try to acknowledge that yet although I don't believe it… it was it was a huge factor in shaping who I am.

Others spoke of how they used fundamental concepts of their religious principles to forge new understandings of themselves.

> This point of re-evaluation, it consists…it just consists of so many things. I…I wonder why it…it changes my relationship with God, when it doesn't even change my relat—like it didn't change my relationship with my closest friends. I, who, [pause] most of them have relationships with God of their own.

Another even explained a culminating step in his sexual identity development to his religious journey.

> I think it was really attributed [my coming out] to God, actually, cause…he basically told me that it was okay because I prayed to be straight and he didn't make me straight; so therefore, I was [pause] like God indirectly told me that it was okay. That's what I believe.

As a result of this journey reconciling their religious beliefs and sexual/gender identity, many of the participants choose to separate from their current faith based institutions. One participant who considers himself to be a Christian noted, "I got a scholarship to [a conservative Christian college]… I liked [this college] before I came out to myself, [but afterward]… I was like sh-- that's not happening. Bad idea."

The confidence of this participant was reflected in other participants. The organic relationship of the areas in the students' lives affected their overall experiences. In this case, the change in their sexual/gender identity development in the supportive LGBTQ environment with their perceptions of control and safety coincided with increased self-confidence. One student noted this in himself.

> I would definitely say [my self-confidence] increased it in some sense. I do feel more confident. I don't know about generally, I can't say I've had enough experience generally to make any sweeping statements about that, but definitely dealing with my sexuality.

Many felt that this confidence then reflected positively on their relationships and social development. This same student went on to explain,

> I feel I haven't been so hesitant to if [being gay] comes up in a conversation or if just if it comes up organically… I haven't been hesitant to shy away from it; I'll just be like, "yeah, I'm gay" or whatever, and then it—and it generally hasn't been a bad thing so I'd I would say it has definitely made me more confident.

His conclusions resonated with the experiences of many others. Another student commented on the interconnection all of these areas had in his life.

> I became I guess more sure of myself and less self-conscious around the same time when I started getting friends, so probably that definitely had an effect—and then getting more friends caused the chain reaction to think better about myself which caused more chain reaction to be getting more friends and all that stuff.

This student, like others, traced part of this positive spiral to his sexual identity development.

> I think coming out helped me know more who I am, and then, um, that gives me more confidence and that lets me, I don't know…it lets people see more than just the surface of who I am after a while [pause]and get to know the real me.

Dynamics of sexual identity pressures. The participants felt that the internal sexual identity pressures rose to a level leading to a change in their perception and disclosure of their sexual/gender identity. Sexual identity pressure (and development) changed the external and other internal forces. It did not occur in isolation and was both a causal and responsive dynamic in their experiences. They noted that this occurred both with and against the forces acting on them. One participant described her experience as being a "marshmallow in the microwave." Many felt that there were only slight external changes, but still they choose to come out which in turn affected the other areas. One female stated simply that "it's not fun hiding who you are. [pause]." Another remembering how he felt in high school said, "Being in the closet is, it's nothing but oppression and I can't… I can't imagine why anyone would want to go from freedom to oppression; no matter what their circumstance is." It was not uncommon for the participants to feel that managing the conflict between their appearances of

heterosexuality in their relationships along with their internal sexual identity struggles was too stressful to maintain.

> It hit junior year. I was getting to the point where I was sort of being sick of…of not being able to express who I was, I suppose. Because that was when [I had] more reliable face to face social interactions really …and the more situations I was in with my friends, the more awkward it felt for me and the more uncomfortable…it became. So at some point it just got to the point where I was getting frustrated.

Some felt that resolving this pressure felt explosive and dynamic.

> My high school college journey it started off in high school very…very uneventful. And it wasn't until junior-senior year of high school that things started kind of building up…what's that word "broke away," if it breaks, I don't know. It kind of just caved ahead and in high school [and] college. And it was this giant tsunami and everything was going on.

Others felt a consistent frustration that built to a specific moment that they could pinpoint.

> 12th grade is where I started to…to… to realize that [being gay] wasn't going away, so we had spiritual emphasis week at our school, which was like a kind of a revival thing—and I was just real frustrated by it. I was tired of lying about things…to myself so I came out to myself. I said, "This is the real deal, it's a real thing, it's not going away" and I accepted it...There's no other way to describe that. I don't know how it happened or why, but it did.

Another student reflected the pressure and struggle he felt in managing his sexual and religious identities

> I was raised Christian and Baptist so I was raised to believe that homosexuality was wrong but I began questioning that and questioning it more and more and then I realized that the Bible was written by man and not by God and I've—I've believed that God loves me no matter who I chose to love and I can't control that I like [pause] guys, I mean—and I've tried to [pause] like I…I would pray that like, "God make me straight," but he didn't, so I guess that you know there's a reason that I am gay.

In addition to identifying the untenable internal pressure in them leading to a moment of release and resolution, the participants also spoke of another common experience. They remembered that they tested their current support system for weaker areas of homonegativity (often a person they expected to be supportive) which in turn gave the courage for further self-disclosure. Most could identify the first person they carefully choose. One spoke of coming out to this best friend as "kind of like my experiment to see what the rest—like I was testing the water to see how everybody else would react. And after that I was just kind of like, this is great." He noted that it was a combination of this positive friend experience and the event of coming to college—which he saw as allowing him greater freedom and independence—that prompted him to come out to this mother.

> Then probably about a month later [after coming out to my best friend], I came out, not even a month it was probably about three weeks, I came out to my mom on the way to [Freshmen] orientation and which was August 1st and 2nd—and

> then Labor Day weekend my dad confronted me about it and I came out to him. So yes, and now I'm completely open about who I am to everyone to every new person I meet. Never lie.

Like him, others reflected that it was in college they found supportive friends to allow their coming out process to others. One gender queer student who had come out to a parent concluded that "I think along with coming out to my mom, I wouldn't have been able to do that unless I was comfortable with who I was. I couldn't be comfortable in with who I was until I found people who let me be who I was, who I am." Several noted the impact of a supportive LGBTQ college community and resources in their coming out process, or as one commented her "safety net." One participant saw the relationship between being in such an environment, an increase in social comfort, and merging the worlds of high school and college.

> There wasn't a huge amount of shift until I really started college and when I was sort of exploring, what it means to be gay and social situations because I had always sort of avoided either talking about it in social situations or just…or just the situations in general. And so, I never really had, was, I never was really forced to look for support groups outside of the internet …Now that I've sort of put the internet off to the side and looking into like interpersonal relationships in real life, I've sort of been forced to reevaluate that… I'm starting to build another support group with the friends that I've made not only in college but from high school as well.

Conclusion

This student reflected the other participants in that the high school-college experience was an ongoing merging and interaction of the ecological and internal forces in their lives. One purpose of my research study was to describe LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences. I see that these forces each individually shaped the experiences of the students. Separately, they were powerful and included their educational environment, LGBTQ support systems, family, religious beliefs and institutions, peers, identity development, career development, sense of self-direction, mental health, and sexual identity.

However, it was the interrelationship of these forces with and upon sexual identity development that permitted a deeper understanding of their experiences. The ecological and internal forces all affected the other areas. These areas affected choice of coming out. Since it appeared all of these forces or areas were organically connected, damage (developmental impairment, lack of a sense of wholeness, life dissatisfaction) in one area affected the other areas' growth and health. While overall health or thriving was related to the totality of the forces, resiliency occurred (in spite of) hostile forces. On the other hand, just as a hindrance in any area organically affected the entire experience, a positive change or growth likewise could have affected the student's entire experience.

While sexual identity struggles were central in all the participants' experiences, it might not have been the first evident growth area in their development. Even so there was a sense of a compelling force moving them forward. The participants felt that the internal sexual identity pressures rose to a level leading to a change in their perception and disclosure of their sexual/gender identity. Sexual identity pressure (and development)

changed the external and other internal forces. It did not occur in isolation and was both a causal and responsive dynamic in their experiences. Sexual identity development affected other areas, and the other dynamics affected sexual identity development. The participants felt their decisions to come out affected most of the other areas of their experiences.

The most consistent feeling that the participants had was that they were surrounded by various levels of hostility, homonegativity, and stigma while likewise having limited, but growing resources to support them. These LGBTQ students gained resiliency strategies to help them manage sexual identity pressure, relationship barriers, religious turmoil, and other forces, which in turn was helping them gain greater social ease, as well as a sense of direction and independence. The next chapter will include a discussion of the second purpose of this study with was to learn what would have made the high school-college experience more liberating.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The purpose of my research study was to describe LGBTQ students' essential high school-college experiences and what would have made those experiences more liberating. In the last chapter, I presented the findings for the first two research questions:

- How do LGBTQ students describe their high school-college experiences?
- How do various ecological and internal forces and dynamics interact in these LGBTQ students' experiences?

These findings regarding the interrelationships of the forces in the students' lives which shaped their experiences included:

- Ecological and internal forces—sexual identity, hostile or supportive educational environments and people, family, religion, self-confidence, social confidence and friends, college/career choice, and a sense of purpose and direction—all affected the other areas. These areas affected choice of coming out.
- Since all of these forces or areas appeared to be organically connected, damage (developmental impairment, lack of a sense of wholeness, life dissatisfaction) in one area affected the other areas' growth and health. While overall health or thriving was related to the totality of the forces, resiliency occurred (in spite of) hostile forces.

- Just as a hindrance in any area organically affected the entire experience, a positive change or growth could likewise affect the student's entire experiences.
- While sexual identity struggles were central in all the participants' experiences, it might not be the first evident growth area in their development.
- Sexual identity development affected other areas, and the other dynamics affected sexual identity development. The participants felt their decisions to come out affected most of the other areas of their experiences.
- The participants felt that the internal sexual identity pressures rose to a level leading to a change in their perception and disclosure of their sexual/gender identity. Sexual identity pressure (and development) changed the external and other internal forces. It did not occur in isolation and was both a causal and responsive dynamic in their experiences.

This chapter will discuss implications for practice and research reflective of the goal of this study on how the high school-college experience could be empowering to LGBTQ students. The following recommendations and suggested implications for practice are based on this study's findings, as well as prior research, but they are not mine alone. As I will note in several areas, they are also often the thoughts and suggestions of those who are the most knowledgeable about their LGBTQ high school-college experiences—the participants themselves. I organized this chapter to first discuss how this study situates within theoretical constructs and prior research. I will then look at implications for practice within high schools and colleges in general, and then more specifically for the practice of counselors and counselor educators. Finally, I will look at factors affecting transferability of these findings to other settings and the related

suggestions for future research. Following this chapter is an Epilogue discussing how the research study itself affected both the participants and me.

Research/Literature Connections

Theory

Much like the approach and methodology, the findings were situated within the theoretical frameworks I established for this study. The most striking was the ecological nature of the findings. I understand the forces acting on and in the participants in an ecological construct. The forces (including hostile environments, LGBTQ supports, family, peers, religion, identity, sexual identity, career identity, self-confidence, social development, and mental health) all interrelated which is in keeping with the ecological model (Cawthon & Guthrie, 2011; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Stevens, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). The LGBTQ students' experiences were the interplay and juxtaposition of the ecological forces.

In much the same way, the students' experiences, and our reflection of those experiences, occurred within the Relational Cultural Theory and Narrative Theory models. Relational acceptance, with both their community and family, seemed to be a key contributor in these LGBTQ students' sexual identity developments and their coming out processes (Peterson & Rischar, 2004; Stevens, 2004; Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). Disclosure reduced personal stress and increased intimacy and relational connections; however, it also resulted in rejection and abandonment in micro or macro levels (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). The participants also reflected the Relational Cultural Theory concept that feelings of shame, fear and mistrust may prevent the relational connections that people desire; likewise, these participants were in the process of becoming aware that

such disconnections were exacerbated by the societal and cultural systems in which they found themselves (Comstock et al., 2008). In addition, as will be expanded in the Epilogue, helping these LGBTQ students see the ecological dynamics that promoted isolation was part of the process for empowerment and healthy functioning (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a). Similarly, the data gathering process following the Narrative Theoretical approach and occurred over time consisting of interview, reflection, interview and co-construction, reflection, and final group reflection and co-construction. This constructing and reorganizing of personal stories and symbols promoted healing opportunities for the participants (Hansen, 2006).

Finally, this study was situated within the Empowerment Theory construct. For these students, oppression and its affects in schools were real and something that Professional School Counselors (PSCs) appeared to ignore (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Hostile environments created structures that hindered student empowerment. These students' experiences indicated a link between mental health issues and systemic oppression (Greenleaf and Williams, 2009). Conversely, this study was conducted under the intentions of student self-empowerment and that goal was the basis for this chapter's recommendations. Schools' providing LGBTQ students equitable interventions would allow students ownership of their own empowerment (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Years of responding not to being a part of the power structure had led them to responses that ensured their lack of empowerment (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a). This chapter will look at how educators can work with students to participate in a creating different dynamics (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Zalaquett & D'Andrea, 2007). As noted, empowerment is liberation involving the

environment and the individual in that environment; therefore, self-empowerment comes from the actions and efforts primarily of the student but with the counselors as important, secondary, participants in the process (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007b).

Prior Research

Before discussing recommendations and implications for practice it is important to note that the findings of this study reflected findings of prior research. The environments of LGBTQ high students were largely hostile or unsupportive of the development and stigma issues that they faced (Gay, 2010; GLSEN, 2006; Kim, 2009). Similarly LGBTQ students reported feeling disconnected from school, often due to LGBTQ stigma and hostility (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Gay, 2010; Peterson & Rischar, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). These LGBTQ students reflected the findings of prior research which indicated that students struggling with sexual identity reported increasing their extra-curricular activities or focusing on academic success in order to compensate for perceived inadequacies (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). They also reported feeling deprived of social and emotional growth opportunities compared to their heterosexual peers who dated; they also reported high levels of depression and social isolation (Peterson & Rischar, 2004). As a result, the experiences of LGBTQ high school students were ones of challenge, affecting their development, mental health, and identity (Johnson, 2011; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009.

My findings in this study agree that counselors did not present a high level of knowledge and skills for providing support for LGBTQ students, nor was there an indication of homopositive attitudes from counselors, at least as reflected in interventions for LGBTQ students (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Dillon & Worthington,

2003; Dillon et al., 2004; Fontaine, 1998; Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995; Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer, 2006; Hollier, 1996; Satcher & Leggett, 2007; Savage, Prout, & Chard, 2004). This lack of competency from LGBTQ counselors might be reflective of the lack of training, exposure, and development they received from counselor educators in their programs (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Carroll & Gilroy, 2001; Dillon et al., 2004; Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995; Rainey & Trusty, 2007).

Family relationships and responses (both anticipated and actual) to their emerging LGBTQ identities were often negative or unsupportive leading to anxiety, self-doubt, depression and other mental health issue (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Similarly as reflected in the literature, religious systems that embraced conservatism, other areas of conservatism and those people who follow and represent them, were often hostile to LGBTQ students and created barriers for healthy development, self-confidence, and relational support (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Bidell, 2003; Kim, 2009; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Satcher and Schumacker, 2009).

While the findings of this study regarding LGBTQ student experiences at the university level did not overtly reflect the hostility faced on many campuses by LGBTQ students (Rankin, 2006; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld and Frazer, 2010), they were quite compatible with prior research. The participants in this study often characterized their college situation as LGBTQ positive and friendly, but they usually did this in comparison with their high school journeys as a point of reference; college may have felt positive because high school was so negative. An interesting observation was that the LGBTQ

positive factors within the college situation helped them manage, navigate and overcome the negative experiences and situation at the university (such as a LGBTQ hostile roommate). Similarly, the positive factors within the college environment gave them perceived support and motivation for activism regarding the areas of college and society that they felt were LGBTQ negative.

Implications for Practice: Creating a Better High School Experience

High schools can help create more positive experiences for LGBTQ students by visibly integrating them into student life, explicitly supporting LGBTQ student organizations and being a resource as the students face uniquely conflicts with hostile ecological forces.

School Culture

Integrated/safe zone. The experiences of these students reflected that LGBTQ issues were not integrated and recognized in school life and very rarely mentioned. In spite of a pervasive homonegative environment, their comments reflected that "We [only] talked about homosexuality in health class, involving AIDS…Like that was about it." Another said perhaps only in "like a gay poem of homoerotic literature in lit class. That one lesbian poem by Sappho, that's it." Another student agreed that reference that the mention of LGBTQ students occurred only in discussions of literature "like the homoerotic subtext of Hemingway." Students' feeling free to come out and express their sexual identity affected multiple areas of their entire development and positive experiences in high schools. As one participant reflected on what would have made his high school experience more positive, he concluded that "I was never at the point where it was totally open and I felt completely 100% okay where I could mention [being gay]

causally and it wouldn't be a bad thing." Their (probably accurate) perceptions that their high school environments were unsafe were one of the primary contributing factors that diminished their high school experiences. One student reflected this in his experience with the connection between his coming out, the perceptions of hostility, and the effects it had on his growth and development.

> I suppose the obvious answer [to what would have made high school better] is just me coming out… a little earlier. I think I probably would have felt better about the whole situation. I think I would have viewed it a little more positively because if I were a little more open, I would be more inclined to be more social, etc…etc… But at the same time, I think that it sort of works both ways—not only me making the jump, but other people being more openly supportive. It's not necessarily that they weren't supportive; they just weren't forward about it, which again, is understandable. It's not, this isn't something you can easily discuss over coffee, but at the same time, I don't know, it's just, I think, if I were a little bit more open about it in general just in more situations, I would've been a little more confident with it.

It was this lack of being open about support of LGBTQ students that might be one of the most important means for improving the high school culture. Explicit support in the form of Safe Space stickers and training were strong recommendations of the participants.

> I feel high schools need to have a form of safe space training [for] teachers because I feel like a lot of teachers are very ignorant as to anything, and need to be at least informed. It'd be nice if [displaying the safe space] sticker came with it, but I feel like educating educators on LGBT issues would be is important.

So important in their perspectives that one student decided this would be part of her personal mission upon college graduation.

> I'm gonna have a folder with an explanation of what safe space means. And maybe a picture of a door with a picture on there, and it's going to have a million stickers in a bag. [I am going to spend time] delivering that on behalf of the LGBT community to the high schools around because I think it's absolutely pivotal that every high school… is a safe space [and] a teacher must have a sticker.

While some educators may see such a display as token and ineffective, displaying such a sticker, along with the training and support it represents, can have a profound influence on the school environment. It is not just the direct homophobia and homonegativity that had such a profound impact on the experiences of LGBTQ students. It was the oppressive silence that surrounded them and negated their existence.

> Had we attached a little rainbow sticker to all their door desks—that's all it takes…a little sticker. That's why the sticker thing in college was so huge. It was silence and doesn't do anything but it meant so much… I feel like so many other students don't… don't recognize that little safe space sticker at all, like it's just a really small decal but for those kids who are like who are looking for that safe space it, it's like, it's a billboard to those kids. So that was, that's huge.

It was not only that the high school environments were oppressive; it was, in the eyes of these LGBTQ students, that the existence of the oppression was ignored. Use of derogatory comments regarding LGBTQ students was so common place that the oppression was accepted as the norm in the school culture.

> [High school students] don't know…they're homophobic yet they don't know anything about what it's like, what being gay is… I would make the word "gay" like be off limits because it's used so out of context so much; it's used as "stupid." Like…when people say "that's so gay," they're really meaning "that's so stupid," but it's not. That offends me. I would definitely make that like a no-no word or whatever. And [pause] just try to get more education like more [pause] yeah, just educate the population of the school more about [pause] the LGBT movement.

They believed that educating the schools and students could make a difference saying that "Maybe if people were exposed to more um, just like different ways of life and different ways of thinking then they were be more open to new ideas to different life styles." Changing this sense of their feeling alone in their struggles might be one of the most direct and effective ways schools can positively change the experiences of LGBTQ students. They noted that high schools would have been better with "definite... support systems, which I say that I really never had in high school." It was the consensus that "There aren't really any support systems that I was comfortable with at all simply because like I literally came from years of being told something was wrong with me like I was."

GSAs. In addition to recognizing the existence of LGBTQ students through displaying safe zone stickers (and the accompanying educator training), one of the best means of recognizing and supporting LGBTQ students is through the use of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs). Not only does this reflect prior research (Gay, 2010), it was a dominant theme and recommendation from the participants in this study. Many gave this

as their first recommendation. One male commented that "Well, first of all, I would've [create] like a GSA or a [LGBT student organization] or something to reach out to kids who weren't straight." Another agreed speaking of the creation of a GSA at her school once she left it.

> I would have created the gay-straight alliance. A guy did that after me, after I had graduated... I was like super envious when I was gone and I was like was like "geez" and…and he's just an ally… He felt like this was something we needed on campus even though he was the student president, and it made him a little unpopular. [People said,] "You know he …he must be gay." You know and he put himself out vulnerable in that situation just cause he knew enough people needed it on campus and… and I like didn't even come out to my best friend until later…I didn't want our relationship to change.

Her comments reflected the challenge that many starting GSAs face. Lack of acceptance, overt or covert refusal, and the inability to navigate the schools' bureaucratic system reflected the sense that students need assistance if they are going to self-empower in this area.

> I did come out to my English teacher and maybe if she had been like "you should [start a GSA] you know" and help encouraged me, maybe I would have been more prone to… I needed someone to assure me that it would be a success. I didn't want to like go up there and announce this new club and have no one show up on the first meeting.

Other school organizations seemed to have school support that was lacking for supportive LGBTQ organizations. "And you know maybe having a Gay Straight Alliance in high

school would have been great or something other than football, and softball and tennis just something outside of the norm would have been great." As research has suggested (Gay, 2010), participating in the GSA was not necessary for contributing to the positive experiences of LGBTQ students; the simple existence of one within the school could improve their experiences. One participant agreed reflecting her situation.

> Even though being gay isn't, you know, the biggest thing in my life…[it] could have really helped me if they had some kind of you know gay rights group there. I don't know how many people would have joined since there was only I, me and one other person who were the only out people in the school so, at the same time. But who knows?

Even students who noted that they would probably still not have come out due to the outside forces in their lives, believed that a GSA would have created a better experience and given them a better sense of well-being

> [Even if high school had been LGBT positive,] I don't know if I would've come out in high school just because of my parent's situation. [pause]…But I suppose if I had had more like LGBT support in my high school I might have become aware of it sooner which would've made me probably happier…if I'd known [that I was a lesbian] earlier because I was much happier when I knew even though I wasn't out.

Instead, many felt alone and dependent on their own avenues for resiliency and support. "I guess if I could just indicate that like the only thing I had going in high school is like my art." One speculated that the reason her school did not have a GSA was out of fear of parent retaliation saying that her school did not have a LGBTQ supportive "clubs and

organizations…[because] if a parent called up and wanted to know something, they could figure it out because they didn't want disgruntled parents."

External Forces (religion, family)

Since the outside forces of family and religion affect the LGBTQ student's experience, schools need to look to how they can be part of the education and support for students and their families, rather than shun the responsibility to help educate the whole student. Among other things, the findings indicated that all areas impact a student's experience and if schools want to help with student growth and development in such areas as career, identity, well-being, mental health—and the related academic improvements such can bring—then schools must consider their role in working with all areas of a students' experience, including the family and religion.

Avoiding sexual identity and the dynamics/forces in students' lives does not allow for support in their development. Neither the school's ignoring sexual identity issues, nor the hostile forces around the students, prevented them from eventually identifying as LGBTQ. Students noted that even when sexual identity was ignored in the conversations and expectations around them, they felt an internal pressure to act against the hostile forces. One felt that she began to "push on the external walls... I came to a self-realization of my self-identity…and that caused me to push out on these other [forces]. I feel like…the person pushing out on these other forces, [rather] than like the other forces pushing in on the person." A school that ignores that a developmental struggle is occurring misses seeing one of the primary sources of either psychological support or struggle in its LGBTQ students. "Whether [the reaction of my parents to my being gay

would be] good, bad—it was of the biggest fears and concerns—what folks, the family's, gonna think about this. It was at the highest or is at the highest levels of concern."

An equally volatile area in which schools must learn how to support its students is in the area of religious tolerance—not in either affirming or discouraging any particular religion, but understanding the ways students struggle in their development. How schools navigate the challenges of separation of church and state with the trauma that many LGBTQ students experience with religion is certainly delicate and sensitive. Schools can certainly refrain from supporting harassment by religion in their midst. Education and knowledge might be the school's logical avenue for support. "I would wish that they would educate you more on LGBT kind of stuff and also religion." In addition, schools, sometimes unknowingly, support a particular religion in the eyes of students. One participant noted that

> The only religion that was like represented at our school was Christian—like [there] were the two Christian organizations. That, like, although it may not have meant to be explicit, it definitely was like "here's what's accepted. Pick one of the two Christian clubs"… It was Prayer Club and it was Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It was obvious that like that those were you know what was accepted.

By contrast, one student remembered an event he heard of his senior year in high school when a GSA had a LGBTQ positive religious leader come to speak to its student organization. "I've seen these churches before. I didn't know we actually had one in [my town]. It didn't actually appeal to me because I'm not religious, but it was nice to know that there was there was a church like that around here." Allowing students to see LGBTQ positive opportunities might be a support for the students, helping to counter the

homonegative messages that they hear from society at large. Such worldviews and ways of understanding themselves as people who are accepted might be a new experience for many LGBTQ students. "The idea of like religion coexisting with like non-normative sexuality, like just never happened in my mind, not in my wildest imagination until I got to college." Reflecting on his self-described torment resulting from the dissonance of religion and being gay, one student noted that "If I had [just] known that it would it was okay to be gay… but like [pause] just accepting myself even though my religion told me that being gay was wrong." Such education remains a challenge. One student who explained he knew only of a conservative, anti-gay religion expressed the depth of the challenge. "Christians' ideas…have to change and those are more deeply rooted." Nevertheless, he spoke of some hope as he did have a conservative Christian adult who expressed some affirmation and was "able to see past [pause] something like sexual preference [pause] to what's on the inside of [a] person."

Implications for Practice: Creating a Better College Experience

While high schools wrestle with unique challenges on what they can do to support LGBTQ students with the ecological and internal forces that affect them, colleges and universities have opportunities for expanded support. Prior research indicates that university environments have varied levels of LGBTQ support (Barnett, 2010; Hill et al, 2002; Rankin, 2006). Enumerated policies, cross cultural education, student affairs support and faculty resources have all been indicators of more pro-LGBTQ university environments (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). My study supports the finding that colleges with active LGBTQ offices, resource centers, and student

organizations provide avenues for LGBTQ students to develop and self-empower. One challenge is in informing students of these resources.

School Culture Integration

Having visible signs LGBTQ students' existence and LGBTQ supportive indicators create an environment that is more supportive and affirming. Coming from hostile high school educational environments, LGBTQ students may be surprised at a higher level of tolerance and acceptance than their previous experiences. "It wasn't just that we had resources; [in college] it was like even in places you didn't expect it. You'd see the little safe place sticker and know it was a safe space… like for me like was just a level of affirmation that I didn't expect." Students may have vague awareness that the college environment can be different from their high school level of acceptance. One participant noted that "before [Freshmen] Orientation I did [go to the college website]. I think I typed in "lesbian [plus my college name, and our college's LGBTQ student organization] came up… I went to its page. I mean I think that the resources are very available for those looking." However, based on the hostility of many in their high school experiences, one wonders if potential college students even know to look—that LGBTQ resources do exist anywhere in educational environments.

Informing of Resources and Self-empowerment

Increasing the awareness of the LGBTQ positive climate and resources that do exist at the university is an area to which college student affairs personnel can attend. Even students who felt very positive and affirming about LGBTQ life on campus seemed a bit surprised. One said that college had been a "safe and supportive environment… I never really felt that I had one until I got to college and that's probably [because] I didn't

realize that a space could be safe and supportive; up to that point." Integrating LGBTQ information into more overt and direct orientation information may provide non-disclosed LGBTQ students an opportunity to hear of resources.

> For [Freshmen] Orientation…instead of spending like half an hour on the meal plan and then telling us we can go to…every dining hall like twice in one day… they could throw in an LGBT slide… They had [the college counseling center information], but I feel like LGBT stuff isn't [mentioned]. You can't put that in the same category as like activities and clubs or whatever exactly.

In spite of the multiple areas of informing students (such as registration tables at activities events), many students felts that they were not as informed as might have been helpful—perhaps less for becoming involved and more for setting a tone of university culture. Perhaps providing LGBTQ informational materials and marketing to students after admission, but prior to arrival to the university, might be a resource. "I actually didn't know about [college LGBTQ student organization] when I came here. My roommate's boyfriend actually one day at the first… meeting he was like 'you wanna come' and I thought it was like some kind of fraternity…"

I wonder since these LGBTQ students were unaware of the LGBTQ resources that would be available to them and who, by their own accounts, were highly motivated to engage their sexual identity development, how might those students who had not yet self-disclosed been even more unaware. In addition, one also wonders at the effects of heterosexual students' lack of awareness of university LGBTQ resources and supports, as presumably many of them know LGBTQ students, have LGBTQ family members and

friends, and are in positions to affect the lives of LGBTQ students in positive or negative ways.

Support with Family and Religion

In addition to the forces of the educational environment, college LGBTQ supports, and peers that affect the LGBTQ students' college experience, the outside forces of family and religion continue to be hostile dynamics with which many LGBTQ students must interact. Though, as college students, they have a greater level of freedom than in high school and are developmentally moving to adult relationships with their parents and religious identities, they are at the same time being constrained by financial, relational and emotional issues. College student affairs can provide support in managing both the privacy issues and relational supports as students learn avenues of self-empowerment. Relationally these LGBTQ adults can use support in both exploring independence and interdependence, while challenging and embracing aspects of the forces around them.

LGBTQ students may need college student affairs support in managing privacy issues. As one student mentioned, she did not know how to prevent access to her college email password by her father since he had needed permissions to look at her financial aid account. One noted a similar concern related to becoming aware of the university's LGBTQ resources.

> [At Freshmen Orientation], the [LGBTQ college student organization] resource center table [was there]. I felt like if my parents saw me go over to that table I was outing myself. So like when they went downstairs. I was like "wait I forgot

> something," ran back, signed up for a list serve, ran back before like my parents could see.

As students in this study indicated, first time roommate selection can be a challenge. Possible opportunities for identification in housing applications could improve this situation as open housing presented challenges and left some LGBTQ students feeling unsafe. However, there was also the concern on how this or other access to resources might be done without direct involvement of parents. Many LGBTQ students can use training on their rights as college student adults, as well as resources for navigating the parent relational and religious institutional challenges that they face. Even those students who have self-disclosed to their parents—and in many cases are living financially independent—may find the emotional pressures continue.

> [Coming out to my parents was] a relief for me because the response [was] positive but like ever since coming out to them…it feels a lot of times…just like say things to like to remind---like just like ease it in to a conversation. Like a few weeks ago I mentioned to my parents we were talking about how a friend of mine is a drag queen and…my dad had made the comment, "be mindful of who you're hanging out with. You'll never end up marrying someone"—wha, wha... [laughing] so it's like mentioning things and like keeping it on their radar so…it's not like it fell away sort of thing.

Implications for Practice: Counselors and Counselor Educators

In addition to general high school supports and the unique work that college student affairs professionals can provide, Professional School Counselors, and therefore counselor educators, are uniquely positioned to have strong influence upon the

experiences of LGBTQ students. To do so, two things must occur. First, they must increase the effectiveness of their work in general. Proficient counseling and comprehensive counseling programs, as well as excellent counselor preparation serve all students, including LGBTQ students. These LGBTQ students seemed to have missed part or all of these constructs. Secondly, both counselors and counselor educators need training and support in authentically integrating LGBTQ proficiencies and interventions into their practices.

Comprehensive Counseling Programs

In high schools, these students felt alone in their struggles to manage their identities, relationships, and hostile environments. One spoke of how the adults in high school "weren't caring enough, like cause there were days when it was really obvious that there were things that were bothering me and…and that the like they wouldn't really ever say anything." In colleges, students found that they had more opportunity for support with their personal and social challenges; the same was not true for their high school experiences.

> [In college I] definitely having a good support system. I really like having that feeling to where if things get bad, I have other people to fall back on instead of having it bottled up. [In high school] I was…having it just bottled up and not being able to tell anyone about it. I really like that feeling.

It was apparent to me from the conversations with the students that they did not come from high school with comprehensive counseling programs designed to serve all students. Instead, many described counseling situations in which the counselors served a small

minority of the students who presented the most obvious of requests. One male noted that

> All the popular drama queen girls always monopolized [the counselor's] time. It would always be something like you know "oh, she stole my boyfriend" or something like that. And every time I tried to talked to her it they would be these girls like these all set of ten girls just talking to her the whole time, but, so that's I—I—I could never talk.

Another female student described her perception of the counselor in a similar manner saying that "If you see these popular cheerleader girls chatting with the counselor I would feel like if I were going for sexual identity needing you know guidance or something I would feel like maybe she wouldn't understand because she obviously is tight knit with the cheerleaders." Such comments indicated that these students did not have the benefit of Professional School Counselors working in schools with comprehensive counseling programs. To create situations that allow more empowerment, all students, including LGBTQ students, would benefit from being in schools with comprehensive counseling programs—such as the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA's) National Model—as well as in schools with counselor to student ratios (1:250) that allow them to implement such programs (American School Counseling Association (a); American School Counseling Association (b); Paisley & McMahon, 2001). While there might be benefits to having either recommended ratios or comprehensive programs, the combination of both can allow counselors the opportunity to serve all students, as well as provide the equitable interventions that some students need in order to self-empower and

flourish. Counselors played little or no roles in these LGBTQ students' lives—conceivably this might be true for other students as well.

The role of counselor educators. It is in these areas of counselors' playing little or no part of students' experiences and having little effect on the whole school culture, that counselor educators can have an effect through the preparation that they give. The umbrella professional organizations for Professional School Counselors (PSCs) provide framework resources that seem vital for counselor educators to instill into all of their training with future counselors. While the scope of this discussion does not allow for a full explication of each of these, research has supported the need for understanding and implementing of each. It is the responsibility of counselor educators to see that these foundations become integrated into the training and practices of their counseling students. First, the ASCA National Model—with its emphasis in multiple domains, delivery systems, and data support—provides a basis for teaching PSCs to support all students (American School Counseling Association (a)). Secondly, the ACA's (American Counseling Association's) Advocacy Competencies provide a paradigm for understanding the need for school, community, and societal interventions by PSCs (Ratts, M. J., DeKruyf, L., & Chen-Hayes, S. F.,2007; Ratts, M., Toporek, R., & Lewis, J., 2010). School counselors should understand their role in changing whole school climate and community culture. Authentic integration of these frameworks (comprehensive counseling programs and ACA Advocacy Competencies) into multiple courses might provide opportunities for trainees to develop practices that are supportive of LGBTQ students.

Counselor Role Clarification and Awareness: External and Internal

While my personal experiences and review of literature gave me the expectation that students might have hostile experiences with, or negative views of, their counselors, I was a bit surprised by what I found. These students— who were bright, college bound, and engaged in their school lives—had little or no awareness of their counselors or the role of their counselors. To them, counselors were not just unsupportive, they were non-existent. Some had an understanding that the counselors might be a help for career development, but not in helping with personal/social development issues. One felt that "counselors at my school served purely as career consultants… They weren't for like the average kid who had like a problem. You had to be like severely needing of like emotional help or you didn't know how to fill out a college application or what college I like." Professional School Counselors, who do have comprehensive counseling programs, must first find ways of informing students of the counselor's existence, as well as their services and roles in students' lives; counselor cannot assume that students will know and thus seek them out.

> I never remember a counselor coming in and just kind of announcing their presence… until it was time to like search for classes or something… I didn't even know who my counselor was. They just didn't really inform us as well. It's like one of the one of those things that you assume or like you just inherently know but they just don't advertise it.

While Professional School Counselors are not in positions to provide long term, one-on-one counseling, they are responsible for attending to the personal/social needs of their students. Students seemed unaware that PSCs were available for even brief

therapeutic contacts, support for outside resources, or short-term, brief interventions on personal/social issues. They were not aware that school counselors were, as one student said, "counselors." One commented that "You know it never crossed my mind to go [to a counselor for] personal reasons." The lack of understanding that a school counselor is a resource was ironic in that these students were seeking support with their experiences. "It's like your school has to have, in certain cases, has to have someone that a student can confide in… I feel like a lot students don't choose to go to a counselor. Even for something that's not LGBT related." Students would benefit from Professional School Counselors, who are striving to develop comprehensive programs and LGBT affirming practices, advertising or marketing their presence.

> It's [not only] whether or not the students choose to go, but also if they are aware that like a counselor is available for that… All high schools, regardless of size, have an assembly at some point where everyone [is] in the same room… and listen to whatever… That's absolutely when a counselor should take the mic. Say like, "This is my name. This is where my office is and this is what I'm here to help you with." It's very easy to talk, like that's when that needs to happen.

The role of counselor educators. This lack of understanding of what a school counselor does presents opportunities for counselor educators. Counselor educators need to find ways to help their future school counselors prepare for some of these crucial issues they will face in their practices. Professional School Counselors need training not only in developing comprehensive programs, but in effectively expanding those programs in the consciousness of students and the community. Likewise, as mentioned in the previous section, advocacy (the ACA Advocacy Competencies) should be a part of a

comprehensive program. School counselors need to be trained in how to implement social justice in their schools through actions such as relationship and capacity building, voicing oppression and equity issues, and other change development theory strategies. In other words, advocacy should be seen by others, especially LGBTQ students, so that they know of who might provide support for them.

In addition, counselor educators play an important role in the debate in the profession regarding the role of school counselors. Are Professional School Counselors educators or counselors? It seems that the needs of students and the construct of working in an educational setting indicate that PSCs are both. The setting, especially with time and caseload limitations, does not allow school counselors to engage in long term, one-on-one counseling with multiple individual students. Nevertheless, PSCs might be the only mental health professional to which a student, especially an LGBTQ student, may have access. Likewise if the role of a PSC is to help students develop in academic, career, and personal/social areas, PSCs need to find ways to balance their dual roles of counselor and educator. For this task, they need the creative and thoughtful guidance of counselor educators.

LGBTQ awareness, training and integration

In addition to comprehensive counseling programs that incorporate advocacy, and external and internal understanding of the role of a school counselor, Professional School Counselors need proficiency in working with LGBTQ students. The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) competencies for Counseling Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Clients, and the ethical/position statements of both ACA and ASCA, provide guides essential for

supporting LGBTQ students in schools (American Counseling Association (b); *ASCA Position Statement: Student Rights: LGBTQ Youth*; Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Issues in Counseling)**.** One wonders if school counselors have been presented these frameworks, much less had them presented as more that brief, cursory lessons, so that they are instilled within their practices. Once PSCs understand their ethical role for working with LGBTQ students, and have begun developing their own competencies for practice, they will be in a position to support LGBTQ students in numerous ways. Certainly, they can be instrumental in changing their school cultures through consultation, role modeling, and education. As one participant expressed, all teachers need Safe Space training, and the PSC can be in a position to provide such professional development. In addition, as students and families approach school counselors for help and direction, school counselors can provide information for community support. One participant noted that providing "advice [on relating sexual orientation to families and religion] would be great—maybe if they had external resources that they were aware of they could pass." Another responded to this statement with a simple "which they should," seeing this as part of the natural role of a LGBTQ supportive school counselor. Counselors work with families in understanding a variety of academic, career, and personal/social development situations by facilitating conversations and providing information and support. Likewise, school counselors do have a role in providing support for LGBTQ students dealing with the variety of ecological forces that they encounter in their high school experiences, including families. One participant wished that his counselor would have helped explain "to my parents, you know…that's not just a choice—it's not a phase or anything. [School counselors think

they]… were not supposed to be getting involved in that, even though it's complete BS because the school gets involved in so many other things involving family."

The role of counselor educators. The suggestion that school counselors get involved in the ecological forces in a student's life (family, religion) raises the issue of how much risk taking counselors are willing to do on behalf of their students. It also presents the issue regarding attitude and what a counselor thinks about LGBTQ students. I wonder if counselors can be a part of the healing if (1) they believe that LGBTQ students are "bad and wrong" or if (2) they want to be supportive but do not take actions with their good intentions. These two concerns of counselor homonegativity or inaction present further opportunities for counselor educators. The first concerns the role of counselor educators in both gatekeeping and development of LGBTQ affirming school counselors. Court cases have upheld the right and responsibility for counselor educators to ensure that future counselors follow the LGBTQ affirming practices of professional counseling organizations (American Counseling Association (c)). Counselor educators have the responsibility to infuse this standard into their program advertisement, recruitment and admission, courses, training and development, supervision, and final approval for practice within their programs. Research indicates that attitude toward LGBTQ clients affects competency and that the attitude of the counselor affects the trust level of the student (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Kosciw, Diaz, & Gay, 2008; Rutter and Leech, 2006).). It is, therefore, the responsibility of counselor educators to apply those findings and best practices into their training situations. While much research needs to occur on how best to facilitate counselor trainees' positive LGBTQ development, prior studies indicate that exposure, reflection, extended time, and authentic

integration into training lead to more positive results (Dillon et al., 2004; Israel & Hackett, 2004; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Savage, Prout, and Chard, 2004). Likewise, studies have indicated that attitudes related to conservatism and lack of exposure to LGBTQ individuals lead to higher levels of homonegativity (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Bidell, 2003; Kim, 2009; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Satcher and Schumacker, 2009). The application of the findings of these prior studies, as well as the finding of my study, mean that counselor educators need to be much more thoughtful in the breadth and deliberate inclusion of LGBTQ training within their courses and total program

Transferability

Counselors who are consumers of qualitative research make determinations regarding how the findings of a study have applications for practice in other settings. On one hand, qualitative research enables a deep, rich look into the experiences of others allowing for some understanding of the "why" and "how." Such knowledge helps counselors to resonate with the realities of others in order to provide more effective support and interventions; certainly it adds the potential for greater empathy. On the other hand, no two experiences or phenomena are exactly that same, so direct application from one experience to another, or from the findings of one qualitative study to practice in another setting, require caution and deliberate consideration. In the following, I offer some considerations for applying these findings—some considerations regarding transferability.

Useful areas of transferability

The most obvious application would be for those situations that are the most similar. These students were from a large, public state research institution in the southeastern United States. Due to a variety of factors, the admission requirements for this university are selective, requiring that students have strong GPAs and significant academic preparation. I should note that their strong academic records gave them opportunities and privilege to attend this university that other LGBTQ students might not have.

These students were also from a region that is predominantly socially conservative—politically, culturally, and religiously. This might have several implications. Students in other, more LGBTQ supportive, areas might have more affirming experiences, though I would suspect that the ecological forces these students discussed would be similar forces for students in other areas; the interrelationships, however, might be different. One possible positive use for application of these findings based on this study's geographical positioning is that one might project that interventions that work in this hostile setting, might also have effectiveness in more tolerant situations. More specifically, if a support or intervention (like an LGBTQ affirming counselor) works *even* in a hostile setting, how much more effective might this intervention be in a tolerant or affirming setting?

Less useful areas of transferability

There are several areas that might require special consideration before applying these findings in other areas—all of which would indicate needed areas for future research.

LGBTQ identification and awareness. This study was conducted with students who identified as LGBTQ. Students who have same sex attractions, but do not identify as LGBTQ, or students who are in the process of identifying as LGBTQ might experience college life in different manner than these participants. Likewise, students who have self-identified as LGBTQ, but who are not "out" for fear of hostility might have completely different college experiences, particularly regarding social development, self-confidence, and mental health. As one participant noted he had an

> overall positive experience, but for people who [are not out] a lot of this [college positive experience] is kind of eroded… I just imagine a much more stifled person... As opposed to coming out—in spite of all these bad things—like a deep containing of this negative energy and it festering.

In addition, this study was done with LGBTQ identified college students who were aware of the university's LGBTQ resources and support. Presumably, in a university of tens of thousands of undergraduates, some students remain unaware of university LGBTQ resources, or for whatever reasons (time, preference of personalities) do not directly use these resources.

Intersections of identity. In addition, applying these findings to students with multiple marginalized identities (race, ableness) might need special consideration. This study's participants identified as White and/or Latino/Chicano. Students of color, particularly Black students in the South, might have different experiences. The ecological forces on them might interact differently creating somewhat different experiences as they navigate intersecting identities and evolving involvement in multiple groups. Nevertheless, some findings might have particular application for counselor

practice, particularly those related to the impact of family and religion on the LGBTQ student.

Academic opportunity and choice. As mentioned earlier, these participants had strong academic records. The experiences of other LGBTQ students in high school might be different. While these students maintained strong grades, or used their academics as a source of resiliency—sometimes as means of avoiding perceived inadequacy in other areas—other LGBTQ students often experience the opposite, receiving lower grades (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Gay, 2010; Peterson & Rischar, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). Not only would these students have a different high school experience, they may represent students who are in even more need of effective interventions by counselors. These students would also have less choice in the college they choose to attend, and therefore less choice in finding a college that was LGBTQ friendly and supportive.

Other LGBTQ students not reflected in this study are those students whose high school-college journey ends at high school; they do not go on to college, or at least not immediately. One student reflecting on this study and what she had learned said "but for people who don't attend college…this doesn't apply, just because well, I mean support systems may not even be. [It] would look much different, but I don't know." Future research studies to determine their level of career development, self-confidence, identify development, family and religious support, and hostile high school environments would help us understand how the findings of this study might have application for counselor practice.

LGBTQ climate. Though this study was done in a major university in the southeastern conservative United States, there are a number of LGBTQ friendly factors at

this university that may have an impact on applying these findings to other colleges. This university had a formal LGBT resource center and full-time staff member. This program was in the university's active cultural affairs department. In addition, there was an active LGBT student organization that participated in many events similar to other student organizations involving student affairs. This university also had some policies and protections officially supporting some areas for LGBTQ students and employees. Presumably, colleges without officially sanctioned or supported LGBT centers, staff, organizations or policies would have different climates and the LGBTQ students have different experiences. For example, from this study, I noted that students often did not seem aware of the LGBTQ environment prior to attending, and there would be benefits in the university's finding ways of communicating these LGBTQ positive factors. In other colleges, a study might indicate that a priority might need to create these things. Such a determination does not negate the uses of the findings of this study, but as in all the areas, it does suggest that the counselors and higher education professionals consider how best to apply them to their situations.

Future Research

All these considerations for usefulness in other settings lend themselves to future research. Nevertheless, there are additional opportunities for further study. One recommendation that I would like to explicitly restate is that a primary area of research should be in determining ways to best to train future and current school counselors with these and other studies' findings in order to be supportive of LGBTQ students on their journeys. Beyond that, the prior consideration of the benefits and challenges of applying this study's findings into practice leads to my suggestions for future research.

Future participant characteristics/groups

In order to understand better LGBTQ students' high school-college experiences doing research using participants with several different characteristic would be most helpful. The first group would be for students, who are at the same or a similar university setting as the one for this study, but who have not self-disclosed. Another equally helpful group would be those who have not affiliated with the university's LGBT student organization. The challenges in both cases, particularly those who have not self-disclosed would be both in locating them and then obtaining their participation in such a study. Stigma issues and fear, particularly with those who have not self-disclosed might make this almost prohibitive. Much could be learned from future studies exploring the experiences of LGBTQ students who were in similar stages of self-disclosure as this study's participant pool, but who were attending institutions of a different type. LGBTQ students attending less selective institutions, regional institutions, private institutions, religious institutions, or institutions in other regions of the United States would likely have unique aspects in their experiences, and would therefore present unique support opportunities. Finally, I see that the most needed study would in understanding the experiences of LGBTQ students who do not continue their high school-college journeys. Learning of their experience (and the ecological/internal forces of career development, family, religion, social development, high school environments, LGBTQ resources, and sexual identity development) would allow counselors and counselor educators to provide more equitable supports ensuring access to college for all.

Additional identities and intersections

In addition to varying the participants based on academic, college choice, and sexual identity development criteria, future research is needed that considers participants with multiple intersections of identity. As I mentioned before, understanding the experiences of LGBTQ students of color is needed. Likewise, while this study did include participants who identified as transgender and gender queer, additional research on their experiences is needed if we are to understand the unique supports that counselors and schools should be providing. Future research into other constructs in identity intersections, such as economically disadvantaged or differently abled LGBTQ students, could provide insights not only in providing better support for them, but for all students. Finally, this study did not have a participant pool with any students from religious groups who are LGBTQ affirming. As more faith communities embrace LGBTQ members, students who grow up in these settings, and encounter their other ecological forces in these religious situations, may have entirely different experiences.

Unexpected findings

I did encounter some findings that were not quite what I expected (Morrow, 2007). One of the ecological forces I expected, but was not anticipating how dominant it was in a student's experience. Family relationships, both past and current, were identified by students as one of the most powerful dynamics in their experience, greater in high school, but still a prominent force in college. If their families remained unaccepting and the college student was moving to a place of financial and emotional independence, much of their experience was as a response and reaction to their family dynamic. More research needs occur in this area.

I was also surprised by the inclusion of religion as such a powerful force in the students' experiences. (Now I find it odd that I was surprised, as my own personal experience was so profoundly influenced by the same force. I believe that since it was so central to my journey, I avoided placing it in the initial conversations with students, assuming that I would be telling my story and not theirs. In actuality, participant after participant brought this up as a significant part of their journey.) Researchers have begun to explore the roles of religious identity and sexual identity—and the role of the counselor in the exploration (Anderton, C., Pender, D. & Asnder-Self, K., 2011; Ginicola, M., & Smith, C., 2011). Nevertheless, further research is needed in this area, and most particularly as it relates to both LGBTQ high school and college students (Gold, S., & Stewart, D., 2011).

Conclusion

The greatest surprise I had was in not being surprised. I was expecting, even hoping, that my presuppositions in some areas might be incorrect as I was working with LGBTQ students a generation younger than I, and that they would therefore have experiences that were more foreign to me. My surprise was in finding that they were not. I attribute this to a couple of factors. First, I have had the benefit of working in education all of my adult life, and with LGBTQ students in an open and direct manner for over 16 years. I have seen their experiences and learned to embrace those experiences and reflect upon them with my own all of those years. Secondly, the ecological/internal forces in one's life—family, religion, peers, sexual identity, social identity, hostile education environments and so on—are the same forces across generations. My surprise was in seeing through the eyes of my participants the powerful ways that these all interacted

within their lives and experiences, and how the change in one of these areas—for good or evil—affected their entire journey. It causes me fear as I think how a hostile counselor, school, family, religion or peer group can cause such great damage. It gives me hope as I understand that a positive change in one area can have impact on other areas and allow LGBTQ students to self-empower and create fulfilling meaningful journeys for themselves.

Epilogue

Experiences of Participants in the research

The act of doing this research study was to have an end in itself. Even if the findings and recommendations of this study do not move into the wider academic and scholarly dialogue, the act of doing this research, with its foundation in narrative, relational, and empowerment theory was to create opportunities for self-empowerment. My goal was to establish a relationship with the participants, so that they could give voice to their lives and personal realities, as well as begin reframing their stories. One of my guiding principles was to affirm to these LGBTQ students that their stories were real (Martin-Baro, 1996). Our interviews were to be relationship forums for co-creating meaning and raising their consciousness to provide opportunities for empowerment (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007a (Hansen, 2006). Since they reflected experiences of oppression that had, as Friere (2000) wrote, sought to take away part of their humanity, our conversations were to be vehicles for self-affirming their worth and humanity (Friere, 2000). In our final group conversation together, I asked them briefly to reflect on what the experience of doing this study had been for them.

Positive areas. It was the consensus that they valued being able to voice their stories. One commented that "It was just nice to share our stories with someone. It was just nice to like to have someone listen and be like affirming and just like hear me out for a while, it was, I don't know, that was like the best part for me." In addition, they found that they appreciated the opportunity for self-reflection at this point in their lives. One college freshmen said that "I liked having the opportunity to do a self-reflect… I usually don't have a lot of time to do that cause I'm usually really busy with all the college stuff, so it was nice to talk to someone and self-reflect on stuff about [things] I don't usually think about." Similarly, a college upper classmen noted the effect on her being able to do personal reflection on making meaning of her experiences.

> After meeting with you I was left [with] big ideas that I thought about for days after. About how one part of your life affects many others or about what it means to like be yourself and what outside pressure [can do]. It [is] just about the whole adulthood and coming into your own skin. I thought about that for days and it was very—it was decompressing a little bit. It was lovely.

If anything, rather than being unsettling to discuss some of their experiences and struggles with negativity and oppression, the one dominant critique was the desire we could have had more interviews and discussions together. "I would have liked to have met with you more [laughing]."

Use of findings. I found these participants were motivated to have other LGBTQ students have better high school experiences than they had. As we discussed what their wishes were regarding the use of the findings of this study, there was complete agreement that they wanted the research (and by extensions their stories) "to help many people."

They wanted changes to occur in high schools and with the work of high school counselors. They hoped that the findings would be used "to help enact the things we were talking about, the changes in high school—you know safe space stickers [and] knowledge of counselors." Moreover, rather than a few select schools (in urban areas) having LGBTQ supports, they wanted all LGBTQ students to have more positive experiences. "My hope is like that is this [information] goes to [the rural] county where I came from and other places where like they don't have [LGBTQ support]… My wish is one day I'll return to my high school and see a safe space sticker up—and like, cry a little." As much as anything, they wanted LGBTQ students to be recognized as existing. One hoped that I would mention that "there's just not a presence [of LGBTQ people in schools] at all. The importance of a presence. Because it's almost worse having nothing… [Schools are not just] homophobic, [they are] homo ignorant—which is worse; it's invisible." The group agreed that they wanted other LGBTQ students to get more support from school counselors than they received. They were clear in their message.

> [I want] like more information for your counselors [so they say] "we're fine with gay people… You can do whatever you like. You'll be special and different… You're just special, that's ok." Embracing that [being LGBTQ] is a normal thing…That is what I think will be mentioned—that [information] at some point will be in your report.

Experiences of the research on me

I cannot deny the positive impact the participants had on me or the concern I developed for the individuals. The more I got to know their individual challenges (many of which could not be fully expressed in this paper), I found myself wondering what was

next for them. I understood my role was as a researcher, not a counselor, and that I would probably not know what was next for them. I am sure some of my interest was in a desire to protect and support them in their journeys. After hearing their stories, and seeing the hurt in their eyes, I had a new appreciation for the hostility they faced. However, I think I learned also how much they have to teach me—and I do regret not being able to learn more from them. I had a growing amazement at the resiliency they showed and how they were carrying this strength into their daily lives. I appreciated that they did more than survive, they were learning to thrive. I was also inspired and somewhat awestruck at their passionate desire to support others, even while they continue working within sometimes hostile family relationships, or growing edges within themselves.

This study also renewed in me the commitment to share the stories of LGBTQ students—and the ways they can be supported—to schools and colleges in general, and specifically to Professional School Counselors and counselor educators. I have a renewed affirmation and belief in the power of LGBTQ supportive Professional School Counselors who are implementing comprehensive counseling programs. Such training is not simple theory to share with pre-service counselors or school counselors immersed in their counseling practices; it is a vital resource to students who face harsh experiences and can benefit from our work.

I was not only professional affected by the participants and this study, I felt personal ramifications too. I began re-reflecting on how the ecological and internal forces they described had shaped and continue to shape my experience. The strong positive and homonegative experiences I have had with religion, relationships and

educational communities is both settled and an ongoing journey for me. This study, and the courageous participants who shared part of their lives with me, have reminded me to continue that journey.

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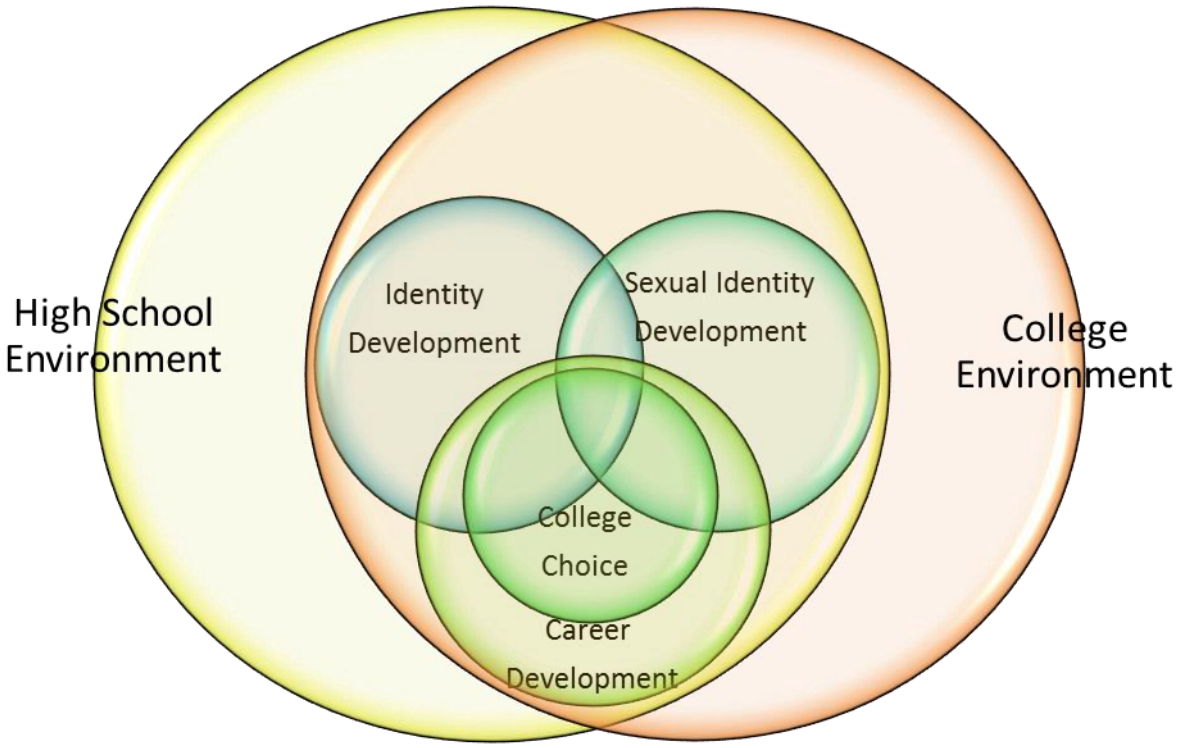
Appendix A: Ecological and Internal Forces



Appendix B: Participant Demographics

Participant Summary Demographics

Age
Nine participants, ages18-21

Sex (biological assignment at birth)
Female- 5
Male-4

Gender (self-identified gender identity)
Male- 4
Female- 3
Transgender male- 1
Gender queer- 1

Race
White-8
Latino/Chicano - 1

Sexual Orientation Identification (some students preferred multiple identifications)
Gay-6
Lesbian-5

Self-Disclosed (Out)
All were out in the college community to their friends. Six had come out in the last year (with one of those coming out in the past few months and one coming out in the past few weeks); three had been out for over a year. Eight were out to their parents, with various levels of acceptance; one was not out to parents.

Year at UGA
1st year- 5
2nd year- 2
3rd year- 2

Previous High School (location, public/private)
All attended high school in Georgia
Large city- 0
Suburban area outside a large city-2
Small city- 4
Small towns- 3

Participant Individual Demographics

Participant	Pseudonym	Year in college	Gender/sexual orientation; race	Area of high school	Sexual Identity and disclosure level
1	Jen	2nd year	Gay female/gender neutral-queer; White	small city	Out for number of years with family and friends; recently out to extended/ past friends; integrated identity
2	Jerry	1st year	Gay male; White	suburban area outside large city	Out to those around him and family
3	Danny	1st year	Gay male; White	small city	Out senior year (recently); parents aware
4	Zoey	2nd year	Lesbian female; Latino/Chicano	small rural town	Out; parents aware but lacking some support
5	Espee	3rd year	Lesbian female; White	small rural town	Out to friends, family, and extended acquaintances
6	Rose	1st year	lesbian Female; White	suburban area outside large city	Out at school; not out to family or friends back home; closeted
7	Jesse	3rd year	Gay/lesbian; Trans-Male, White	small town	not out to family; out to close friends
8	Warren	1st year	Gay male; White	small city	Recently out; parents know but hostile and threatening
9	Stephen	1st year	Gay male; White	small city	Out for a period of time; support from parents

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Part A: Interview #1

General History

- Can you tell me about growing up (your background)?
- Will you describe for me your coming out experience?

High School Context

- What was high school like for you?
- Can you tell me about your relationships with
    a. Your teachers
    b. Your counselors
    c. Your peers
    d. Family
    e. Others (including outside school); NOTE: if they describe a past relationship that brought them zest, then do a follow up question.
- Tell me about a typical day in high school.
- What do you wish about your high school experience that more people could have experienced?
- How do you wish high school could have been different?

College Context

- How would you describe your high school-college journey?
- How did you come about attending UGA?
- Describe your experiences here at UGA
- Can you tell me about your relationships with
    a. Your professors
    b. The staff at UGA
    c. Your peers
    d. Family
    e. Others (including outside school); NOTE: if they describe a past relationship that brought them zest, then do a follow up question.
- Tell me about a typical day here at UGA
- What do you wish about your college experience that more people could have experienced?
- How do you wish college could have be different?

Developmental Context (integrate above)

- What career path do you see yourself on?
- Describe what kind of person you see yourself as.

Concluding questions (reflective of RCT)

- What is one thing that you have learned about yourself today that you feel you could share with someone else?

Part B: Interview #2

Bridge from last time

- How has it gone since we met last time? (any updates?)
- Do you have any thoughts to add from last time?

Themes

- Take a look at the things that we talked about last time. (See "Areas of My Life" Chart)
- Can you take a few minutes to put down major events of people on the timeline from high school (or before) until now?
- [Give participant 5-10 minutes]
- Can you explain to me what you have put down in each area?

Making Meaning:

- What do you see about the connection (relationship) between these areas?
- How do you describe your high school-college journey?
- How could the high school-college journey have been more empowering to you?
- If you could wake up and change anything about the high school-college journey (yours or others), what would it be? (The miracle question)

Sharing of Artifacts

- Describe the yearbook pictures, etc that you brought in.
- Why did you choose them?
- Looking back at all of this, what does all of this mean to you
- Describe the photos that you took.
- Why did you choose these photos?

Part B2: Areas of My Life

High School _____College

Going to school in a Safe Supportive Environment

High School _____College

Coming Out

High School _____College

Having Supportive Friends

High School _____College

Relationship and openness to Family

High School _____College

In control of my life

High School _____College

Support Systems (groups, people)

High School _____College

Religion and Personal Beliefs

High School _____College

A sense of who I am

High School _____College

Career direction

Part C: Focus Group

- Introductions of "names"
- Sharing of procedure for the discussion and the level of confidentiality.

Guiding questions on Findings

- What reaction do you have to the findings I have shared with you?
  - What thoughts come to mind?
  - How do you feel about these findings?
- What reactions do you have to the representations of the findings that I have shared with you in the
  - Quotations that I have chosen to use?
  - In the pictures that I have chosen to use?
- What would you like to change about the findings?
- What is missing that you might like to add?

Part I- Exploration of the findings

Share Findings

- Nine major Topics and Themes (discuss and share on a sheet)
- Graphic #1

Part II- Exploration of the understandings of interactions

- Graphic #3
- Share four concepts

Part III-Exploration of creating a better experience

Part IV- Responses to the Process

- What was most helpful about the process we went through for the past few months?
- What would you have liked to have changed about the process?
- What do you wish that the findings and report would be used?
- How do you see your journey (and the relationships that helped you) continuing into the future voyage?
- How I have been changed?

Appendix D: Timeline for study

2011

Jan	Meeting with LGBT Resource Center personnel
Feb-Mar	Review of Literature, formation of research question, dissertation outline
April	Chapters 1-3; discussions with major professor/committee
May	Prospectus submission to committee
Jun	Prospectus Defense
June/July	Revision of Chapters 1-3 based on Dissertation Committee recommendations
	Submission and approval of IRB
Aug	Participant recruitment/selection; meetings with LGBT Resource Center
Sept-Nov	Data Collection and Analysis; meeting with major professor
	Sept- Interview Series #1
	October- Interview Series #2
	November- Focus group
Dec	Data Analysis continues

2012

Jan	Data analysis, writing of Findings and Discussion; meeting with major professor
Feb 1	Completion of full draft of dissertation; meeting with major professor
Feb 15	Submit to Committee
Mar 6	Defense of dissertation

Appendix E: Data Analysis Process

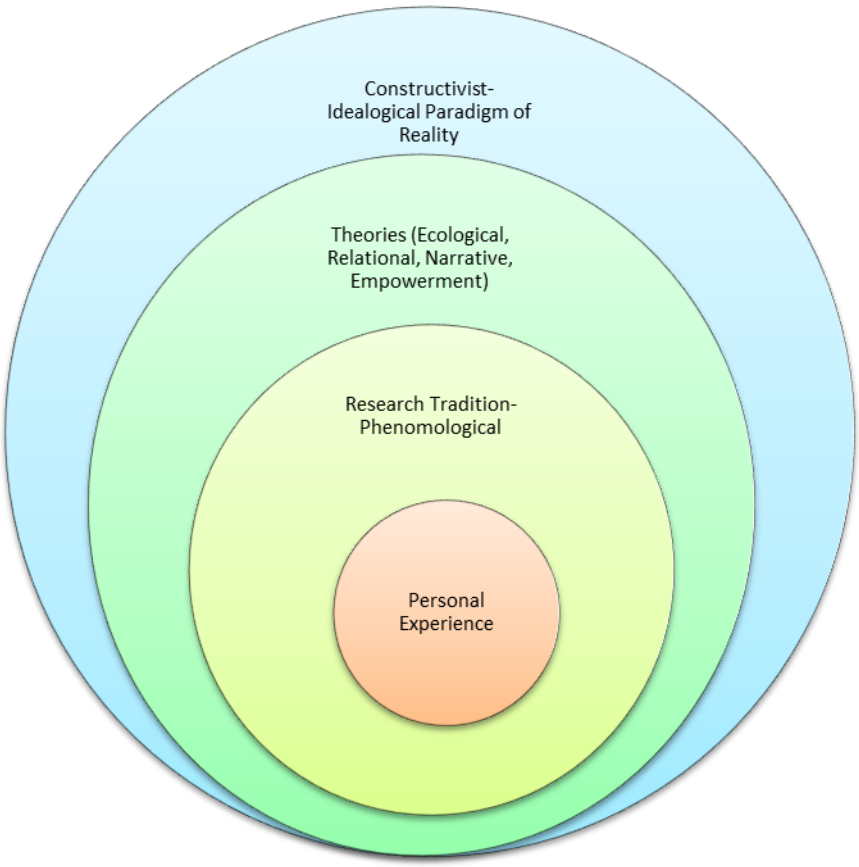
The following is a summary of my process with data collection and data analysis moving from Meaning Units to Topics, Theme Groups, and Interrelationships and then to Applications/Conclusions.

	Data Analysis task	Date
Prospectus and Planning	• Did review of literature, refined question, and methodology, began bracketing; • Reflexivity: Explored and wrote Research Lens (Ch 3) exploring the viewpoint from which I saw the topic, as well as the possible effects it might have • Gave overview to chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback	Feb-Aug 2011
	• Met with chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback	March
	• Met with leaders of university LGBT Center to request support for study and gain insight into communication and needs	April
	• Submitted Prospectus to committee	May
	• Defended Prospectus • Electronic communication with chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback	June
	• Submitted IRB and received approval	July
	• Met with LGBT Resource Center leadership to confirm plans • Attended LGBT student organization retreat to speak with students about study; was invited to attend meeting • Attended two LGBT student organization meetings and spoke to large group (90) regarding study and participation; signed up interested students; met with interested students to: answer questions, give consent form, set possible timelines for meeting, and hear general information of their stories to determine applicability to this study's criteria	August
	• Research Team: met to explore methodology, research question, and researchers' lenses	Sept
Interview One	• Met for two day period for recorded interviews • Students filled out personal bio sheets • Made notes while listening to interview; marked topics and meaning units that seemed at the moment to be important • Modified protocol questions to add specific questions on counselors • Contact Summary Sheet immediately after interview • Reflexivity: wrote in journal exploring my lens with the information shared in the interviews • Met with chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback	Sept
	• Use outside transcriber	Sept

	• Listened to interview tape with transcript; checked for accuracy of transcription; began marking meaning units • Reflexivity: explored my lens with the information shared in the interviews	
	• Sent transcripts to participants to check for content accuracy	
	• Research Team: Check with team to explore methodology and transcript coding of select transcripts	Oct
	• Marked meaning units on three interviews • Created code book (topics) from meaning units • Using Excel spreadsheet, put meaning units into "topics" • Color coded transcripts and put direct quotes from participants into Topics columns • Coded rest of transcripts and replicated above • Reflexivity moment	Oct
Interview Two	• Modified intended Protocol adding in "Areas of My Life" exercise to reflect Topics from analysis of interviews • Met for two day period for Interview #2 • Took Topics to participants' interview #2 (checking for accuracy, discussing relationships) • Made notes while listening to interview; marked topics and meaning units that seemed at the moment to be important • Contact Summary Sheet immediately after interview • Reflexivity moment on my reactions to their stories and conclusions (Noted my surprise at: (1) not previously emphasizing "religion" as a topic and (2) similarities to my experiences • Met with chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback	Oct
	• Use outside transcriber • Listened to interview tape with transcript; checked for accuracy of transcription; began marking meaning units • Reflexivity: explored my lens with the information shared in the interviews	
Continued Data Analysis	• Grouped Topics together into Themes as follows: • Recursive analysis: looking at relationships between topics into themes- seeing the ACA/Ecological nature • Began to look at limitations, surprises, etc. • Began to look at relationship models of how themes units with relate to each other---considering ecological and RCT models	Nov
	• Merged topics into Theme groups • Created statements from Theme groups • Created running graphic to represent	Nov
	• Completed member statements and meaning units into Themes groups for "thick and rich" quotes	Nov

	• Put interview #2 into codebook/Topics • Continued to look at relationship models of how themes units with relate to each other---considering ecological and RCT models • Created forms of Graphic Model of Interactions until arriving at current model	Nov
	• Research Team: Met to review findings at this point	Nov
Group Interview	• Group Interview with participants on findings (participant as researcher!) o Member participation on topics and themes analysis o Member participation on interrelationships analysis o Member participation on implications o Reflexivity moment	Dec
	• Transcription of Group interview • Re-analysis of topics, themes, and interactions based on member participant analysis • Reflexivity moment	Dec
	• Wrote Chapter 4 “Findings”	Dec-Jan 2012
	• Wrote Chapter 5 “Discussion” • Met with chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback	Jan-Feb
	• Rewrote Ch 3	Feb
	• Submitted final draft to committee	Feb
	• Conversation with chair of dissertation committee for review and feedback • Defended dissertation with major committee	Mar
	• Made revisions suggested by committee	April

Appendix F: Constructs for Research



Appendix G: Interrelationships of Ecological and Internal Forces