

LIFE IN THE MARGINS: THE COMING OUT PROCESS

By

MATTHEW JAMES KELLY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education
Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology

July 2013

To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis

of MATTHEW JAMES KELLY find it satisfactory and recommend

that it be accepted.

Christian Wuthrich, Ph.D., Chair

Pam Bettis, Ph.D.

Kelly Ward, Ph.D.

Acknowledgement

There are many people whom I am extremely grateful to for their support, guidance, and encouragement throughout this process. I would like to especially thank Dr. Chris Wuthrich for his support, constant push to produce the best, and encouragement throughout this entire process from the first inklings of idea to completion. Additionally I want to thank Dr. Pam Bettis, and Dr. Kelly Ward for their insight and direction through my coursework and this process. Finally I would like to thank those students who agreed to be a part of this study. Without them there would not be anything to read in the following pages, and I am eternally thankful.

LIFE IN THE MARGINS: THE COMING OUT PROCESS

ABSTRACT

By Matthew James Kelly, M.A.
Washington State University
July 2013

Chair: Christian Wuthrich

Coming out is a process through which individuals disclose their sexual identity as “other.” This study seeks to understand the coming out process, the influences of outside agents such as media and society, and ultimately what can colleges do to aid in this process. Grounded in qualitative research and using autoethnography as a guide, the researcher sought to compare the coming out process of today’s college student to that of his own. Seven students were interviewed and their stories helped frame the results which show what has changed, and what has stayed the same with the coming out process. Suggestions for best practices and a call for more research are also presented as a means to examine the findings which show that college may not be when students come out anymore.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction	1
Story	2
Study Overview	6
Research Questions	6
Methods and Goals.....	7
Literature Review	10
Homosexuality	10
Coming Out Process.....	11
Student Centers on Campus	12
Identity Development in Adolescence.....	13
Student Development Theory.....	15
Outside Influence.....	17
Positive Environment.....	18
Summary.....	20
Design and Methodology.....	22
Qualitative Research and Autoethnography.....	22
Conceptual Framework.....	24

Methods	26
Site Selection	26
Data Collection	27
Data Analysis	28
Limitations	28
Timeline	29
Summary	29
Summary of Findings	31
Respondents	31
Shane	32
Mike	33
Max	34
Aidan	35
Jeff	37
Alex	38
Brian	39
Matt	40
Emerging Themes	41
Compartmentalized Identity	42
Society	42

Role Models	44
Fear and Sadness	46
D’Augelli	48
Exiting Heterosexual Identity	48
Developing a Personal Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Identity Status	49
Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Social Identity	49
Becoming a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Offspring	51
Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Intimacy Status	53
Entering a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Community	55
Conclusions and Recommendations	57
D’Augelli Reconsidered	58
Political and Cultural Climate	59
Campus Centers	59
Student Affairs	60
Recommendations For Further Research	61
Summary	63
Story	64
References	67
Appendix A	73
Interview Guide	73

Chapter 1

Introduction

I am gay.

Three words; inconspicuous really. They look like something you can say simply and succinctly, something off the cuff. You can even shorten it by saying I'm gay; now you only have two words to look at. The brevity of this statement, however, belies the tremendous effort it takes to come to the realization and develop the resolve to utter this simple fundamental phrase. This is a fundamental difference to students; indeed humans, who are gay versus their straight counterparts; they must come to terms with their sexuality and embrace it.

It is hard for anyone who is heterosexual, or straight, to understand this vital component of being gay, the process of coming out. It is this process which I strive to explain through this work. I speak about a fundamental difference between heterosexual and homosexual individuals, the need to come out. It is truly about an individual's identity, who they are, and who they can accept themselves to be. The innate dilemma with this identity discovery is that "the concept of identity has increasingly been used for claims made by individuals about who or what they are in terms of *difference* from other people," (Connell, 2009, p. 107). This *difference* is what makes many gay individuals wary of coming out, because history shows us that those with difference are seldom treated the same.

What follows is a story of difference, a narrative of the beginning of my own coming out process. I share this as a catalyst for examining what it means to come out, as well as a means of comparison through time.

Story

On a night at the beginning of October, 2003 I was walking back toward my residence hall with a few friends from the music department where I was a new freshman. I went to college at a decently sized school in southeast Michigan.

As we were walking, I got a sudden urge to ask them what they thought of my sexuality. I had come out as bisexual over the summer, but girls really did nothing for me. So I turned to them and asked, "hey ya'll, do you think I'm gay?" This question had been weighing on my mind a lot after being exposed to the out members of the music department. After being met with stares which conveyed an attitude of "are you kidding," my friends, all female, basically said that they couldn't see me any other way BUT gay. After this initial quite interesting question and answer session, I began to come out on campus.

Being a member of the Music, Theatre and Dance department this was not an issue. I found that some stereotypes were true and you could find "a gay" just by taking a step around the halls of the department. That being said it was fairly easy for me to begin to come out. I began to freely talk about men, my attraction to them, and the goings on in the gay world. In fact, I went through a phase where everything I did seemed to be about being gay. I lovingly refer to it as the "rainbow stage." I knew what gay people should do, or at least what I saw them doing in movies and as such made sure that everyone knew, either by my comments, dress, or actions that I was out. It consumed my identity to the point where I was gay first and me second. It took a year filled with dating, sexual promiscuity, a suicide attempt, and societal exploration before I was able to make the shift from "I'm gay and my name is Matt" to "I'm Matt, and one part of me is that I'm gay. "

Part of this transition was just coming out. After the first step of telling myself that I was gay and that I was ok with it, I had to tell more people. In particular, I had to tell my family. Being the youngest child of three, I had two college aged siblings to talk to. Both siblings loved me, and so coming out to them was easy, as I expected it to be. I told my siblings over the phone. My sister ironically told me to get involved with people on campus – find others who were gay. My brother I told after just waking him up. The conversation lasted 30 seconds and ended with an “oh ok” from my brother. We hung up, and about a minute later I got a call from him asking if I had just come out. After confirming that I was indeed gay, he responded with an “I love you, man” and left it at that. My parents, on the other hand, were a different story.

My mother had been serving in the position of Director of Religious Education at one of the more conservative parishes within the Archdiocese of Detroit at the time, and needless to say I was somewhat apprehensive about telling her. Additionally, this was during the time of the great “Church cover-up” around priests molesting young boys. Tensions were high, especially around the topic of homosexuality, within the church.

My mother and I had always been much closer than my father and I. My father being a former Marine and conservative republican who was raised by a conservative police officer in New York, and attended boarding school from the time he was 13; all of which gave me even more pause than the normal strained relations we had, and truthfully scared me.

So it was that in November of 2003 when my mother called to talk about the upcoming break she could tell that something was different in the way I was speaking. When she asked I said simply, “remember back in high school when those boys were hitting on me? Well now I’m hitting back.” After the initial shock wore off we decided to meet at Olive Garden, a tradition of

ours, and talk. The tradition being eating at Olive Garden whenever we were both in town, not eating at Olive Garden after I had come out. Two and a half hours and many breadsticks later my mother proceeds to tell me that I needed to see a priest.

While this may seem like a bad thing to some, to my mother this was perfectly normal. In her life whenever you had something going on you would talk to a priest. They were someone who was unbiased, listened, and offered advice and counsel. This was not meant as a way to say that I needed to repent, or pray away my homosexuality, but merely as a way to ensure that I had support in my life. It is also important to know that until I went to college, I was very active within the church. I grew up as an altar boy, became a Eucharistic Minister, sang regularly at mass, and was a leader in the youth group at our parish. So talking with a priest was something I was used to, albeit something I never did on a regular basis.

Once her intent was made clear, as well as the fact that my mother accepted and loved me, we finished our breadsticks and headed for home.

My dad on the other hand was not as easily told. Being a typical man's man, he loved sports, cars, and tools. I was terrified of telling him. As such, it did not occur until the following summer when I was home from school.

One day the men of the neighborhood were standing around congratulating themselves on the help given to a new addition to the neighborhood, a brick walkway for one of the houses. Talk turned to jokes, which led to jokes about gay men of a derogatory nature. At this point, I had been out for almost a year, and unequivocally knew that I was gay, which is essentially what these men, including my dad, were making fun of. My dad and I had also been arguing over my decision to attend my chosen college in the first place. My dad thought that I

was wasting my talent for music and that I could do much more than the smaller state school I was attending.

Roughly a week after the walkway addition, I was home and on the phone with my dad and we were continuing the argument about school. My dad said something to the effect of "I'm just trying to lead you down the right path." Some internal trigger went off and I proceeded to say, er scream, "well when you consider leading people down the right path, maybe you should look to your friends first when they make fun of gay guys because your son is one." I then hung up the phone and retreated, basically sped, to my friend's house for the rest of the evening.

We didn't talk for almost three weeks straight. Then one night, my dad came to my room and sat on the edge of my bed like he did when I was younger. We had a long conversation, but what it boils down to is that he loved me, and while it would take some time, he accepted me and wanted the best for me. I found out later that my dad called the priest that married my parents for advice. Father Jerry had always been a spiritual advisor to my parents and one that they talked to in times of inner issues. Apparently, my dad began to spout off questions of what he did wrong and how to handle having a gay son when Fr. Jerry told him to be quiet. Fr. Jerry then proceeded to ask "what do you think I am?" After the shock wore off, my father began to realize that being gay is just another facet of who someone is nothing more or less.

This was the beginning of my coming out process, something that I continually do, every day. Nine years later it is easier, I know who I am and am confident in myself. I say that I continually come out every day though because I really do. New people who come into my life,

coworkers, friends, and based on societal norms, all assume heterosexuality until given the right cue otherwise. I will be coming out until the day I die and then probably even afterwards. This is life in the margins, consistent justification of one's self to the main body of the population.

Study Overview

The struggle, the coming out journey, is the primary focus of my study. In addition, I looked at one current model of sexual identity development used in student affairs to help frame the discussion and also see if it is still applicable 20 years after its creation.

For my study, I focused on male students at George State University (GSU), a rural land-grant university, enrolling over 26,000 students, with a first year residency requirement. Students at GSU are generally from rural locations, many from farming communities. Additionally students who attend GSU focus primarily on communication, engineering, agriculture, or pre-medical fields of study.

My hope when I began this study was to help current practitioners in student affairs to better understand the needs of students coming out today. The concept that fueled this study was that of examining the differences between coming out in 2003 vs. today. I found this to be of paramount importance because things change over time. In the end, I looked at what it was like to come out, as a static event, and began to propose ideas for ways in which colleges can help students move out of the margins and into the mainstream.

Research Questions

Using Anthony D'Augelli's theory of sexual identity development (D'Augelli, 1994), I formed research questions to help guide the study. I primarily used the three interrelated

variables of 1) Personal subjectivities and actions, 2) Interactive intimacies, and 3) Sociohistorical connections. I sought to provide a fresh perspective from the view of the student, incorporating trends of the time and show how the process of coming out can change over time.

The study itself is autoethnography, focusing on the lives of students their stories, as well as my own which you have already read. Cohler and Hammack (2007) say that “the formation of personal narratives that anchor the life course” (p. 48) is the key/normative connection between human development and identity development. Essentially, our stories, our experiences and the lessons we learn from them, are how we develop as humans. As such, I used following questions to guide my study:

1. What precipitates the coming out process? Why and when do people come out?
2. What outside influences (media, social media, friends, family) contribute to coming out?
3. Does the climate of current events play a role in coming out?
4. What can we do as colleges to help students coming out?

Methods and Goals

The research itself is qualitative and focuses on the actual experiences of gay men. When I began this process, the ideal hope was to have at least 12 respondents from GSU to talk with and have in person semi-structured interviews with. After marketing, using word of mouth, attempting to obtain 12 first year students, I decided to open the study to first or second year students as the age range would still be comparable to when I began my own coming out process in college. After this, 13 respondents were identified and interviews were

scheduled, however, only 7 kept their appointments and thus the study was conducted with their rich stories. The intent behind using semi-structured interviews was to gain a better understanding of individual stories within the coming out process, as well as individual insight to personal experiences.

All respondents are current students at GSU who self-identify as gay men, primarily first year students. Interviews were conducted individually which allowed for more candid discussion. After the interviews concluded, they were transcribed and evaluated for themes and understanding.

The goal of this study was to identify similarities and dissonance between my own coming out process, and the students at GSU today in order to better identify the needs of students through the lens of D'Augelli's (1994) Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development; ultimately adding to the research on the coming out process and to create a better framework for student affairs practitioners. This topic is of personal importance to me, which is why the study topic itself was selected. As an out gay man, one could argue as a person, it is important to learn from where we have been, in order to better shape our futures. That is why I chose to do such a personal reflection of myself for the purposes of this research.

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of literature including the coming out process and current campus climate for LGBT individuals. Chapter 3, Design and Methodology, includes a recapitulation of the research questions, the design framework, method for data collection and analysis, as well as the limitations, trustworthiness, and confidentiality. Chapter 4 presents my findings from the interviews conducted, as well as trends noted from the lived experiences of

my respondents. Chapter 5 discusses what everything means, where we can go from here, and ultimately how to move out of the margins and into the full story.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Homosexuality

“Homosexuality is not an obvious part of one’s identity that reveals itself to others in every social or work interaction” (Schope, 2002, p.1). This unobvious aspect of identity is fundamentally different from heterosexual individuals, and the inherent weight given to the heteronormative structure of today’s society. Heterosexuality is such the mainstream, that prior to 1970, “homosexuality was a deviant, contagious, and dangerous disease that could and should be avoided in the schools” (Renn, 2010, p. 133). The reaction that many out teachers or students faced prior to 1970 was a strict policy on firing teachers who “demonstrated homosexual traits including carriage, mannerisms, voice, speech, etc.” or routinely expelling students “caught in – or suspected of engaging in – compromising same sex activities” (Renn, 2010, p. 133).

Homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973. The removal cleared the path for institutions of higher education to retain homosexual students without the need for psychiatric evaluation or service (Renn, 2010). In addition the University of Michigan opening a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) center on campus in 1971, which began the snowball effect of homosexuality gaining prominence in the world of higher education as a field of study, and a prominent fixture of social justice and diversity.

It is evident that homosexuality took prominence “as gay and lesbian students became more visible on campus, student affairs professionals – charged with attending to the holistic

development of all students – took notice” (Renn, 2010, p. 133). The visibility creates the need for the higher education culture to formally look at the coming out process and the development of sexual identities.

Coming Out Process

Coming out is the process of sexual orientation identity development and disclosure. It has often been characterized by a certain set of milestones or events that mark transition between stages of development (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Additionally, Floyd and Bakeman say that the milestone method is usually outdated and shows a lack of fluidity which is much more realistic in the realm of today’s student.

As such, “coming out to significant others, such as family members, is [still] seen as one of the most difficult, and the most important, developmental tasks for GLBT individuals” (Taub, 2008, p. 20). The coming out process is one that is continual and never ending as seen in the fact that gay persons have to consistently choose whether to tell others about their sexuality in some way, every day, and in every interaction; to change the “socially-learned assumption that he or she is heterosexual” (Schope, 2002, p. 1). Essentially, “coming out is ongoing because of the pervasiveness of heterosexism” (Rhoads, 1994, pg. 86) or heteronormativity, because homosexuality is in the minority, it will always be second to the majority, and therefore must continually be reaffirmed by the person coming out.

Heteronormative ideologies are perpetuated in today’s youth. In a study of masculinity and sexuality in high school, sociologist Pascoe (2007) found that “homophobia was synonymous with being a guy,” where “calling someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you

can call someone” (p. 55). How can any person feel positive about their self-image, or their own worth when their very self is viewed as the lowest form of insult you could call someone?

With this in mind, research has begun to find that “college is often seen as a safer environment in which to explore and “come out” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 306). “Many students begin or accelerate exploration of their sexual identities during college” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 306). This leads many practitioners to increasingly find the need to promote safe zone programs and the formation of centers on campus for LGBT students.

Student Centers on Campus

When LGBT students come to campus, “they expect their voices heard, their concerns acknowledged, their needs met, and their educational environments welcoming” (Sanlo, 2000, p. 486) which is why the rise of student centers focused on supporting LGBT students has occurred in recent years. The first center dedicated to LGBT students opened on the campus of the University of Michigan in 1971, followed by several others in the late 1980s. The majority of existing centers today were founded in the 1990s. The center at George State University, the site of this study, was founded in 1994.

As of 2003 there were only 99 institutions of higher education that had a center on campus. As of 2010, that number had risen to 160 (Rankin, et al., 2010). Institutions have a duty to educate the whole student, and as such they “must hire and reinforce staff members who understand what student development looks like and how to foster it” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 44).

Student centers on campus can help facilitate the coming out experience for students. Commonly a system of coming out occurs when gay students are more involved with their

campus. Students enter LGBT focused involvement on campus, take on leadership positions within this context, and as their level of involvement increases, so does the level of which they are out on campus (Renn, 2007). Additionally, safe zone programs, facilitated by these on campus centers, “provide visible signs of support that can make the climate appear more positive to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people” (Evans, et al. 2010, p. 319).

Student affairs practitioners should also remember that “a worthy student affairs goal is to support LGBT students in ongoing self-work surrounding personal identity” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 33). Many times this involves encouraging the student to examine their own coming out process which usually leads to realizations of homosexual feelings at an early age. In fact, many gay men and women recall a strong same sex attraction from childhood. These recollections are often associated with feelings that they were different or estranged from their peers. These feelings are often what caused them to begin to question their sexuality, and later adopt an identity within the LGBT realm (Carver, Egan & Perry, 2004).

Identity Development in Adolescence

Many models of identity development focus on the coming out process happening around adolescence, or culminating around college aged students going through periods of “alienation and shame” (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006, p. 295). While this is largely the case, research shows that a much more open and accepting climate exists for LGBT individuals to begin to explore their sexual identity and overall make the process much less daunting. (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006).

Additional research shows that “although many college gay and bisexual men may be coming out in college, a growing number entering college already identify as gay or bisexual

men” (Wilkerson, Brooks & Ross, 2010, p. 280). This is a positive turn in the realm of sexual identity formation as younger generations continually show that they are less and less compartmentalizing their coming out process. Gay adolescents are employing an all or nothing mentality that shows in their requests to go to proms with dates of the same gender, or just live their lives as open gay and lesbian individuals (Schope, 2002). In essence, once a student comes out, they are all out or nothing. This is not always the case, as coming out is different for each person, but it is a trend seen recently. In general, the decision to tell and come out has become an increasingly easier question to answer for lesbian and gay men (Schope, 2002).

Moreover, “sexual questioning may begin at a surprisingly early age and may, especially in contemporary culture, be increasingly common” (Carver, Egan & Perry, 2004, p. 43). This coming out at an earlier and earlier age is something that must be examined by educators; especially as the normal context of sexual identity development shows students generally coming out for the first time in a college setting, and not prior to the open nature that is perceived on many campuses.

There is even a trend showing the idea that sexuality as the primary focus of identity for gay youth is fluid and continual. Indeed, “many youth today reject such sexual identity categories as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian,’ in defiance of social identity labels which would suggest the primacy of sexuality in their personal identities” (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 48). What is important to note however is that while the label of being gay may not be needed, the identity is needed because society often times views identity as something that is finite, and as such most people view having an identity as essential rather than optional (Cass, 1990)

Having an identity as a gay student is formalized by the coming out process which in general is “a fluid and complex process influenced by other psychosocial identities” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 28). To understand identity development, however, one needs to understand that “identity is commonly understood as one’s personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups...and the ways one expresses that relationship” (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009, p. 577). With this understanding of identity in mind, student affairs practitioners should remember that “understanding the whole student and understanding what identities constitute that whole will stimulate new ways of understanding students and their development” (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009, p. 593). Understanding the whole student then, practitioners must look at racial differences, mental health issues, and also the influence of the media on society at large.

In a study conducted by Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter, it was found that across racial divides, no real differences exist in the actual process of coming out; it is in the perceptions of different aspects of coming out, such as groups to belong to or comfort in showing affection, where differences lie (2004). This does not say that there are no differences within a racial context of the coming out process; however, for the purposes of the formation of this study, race is not a primary focus.

Student Development Theory

Student affairs practitioners use theories of student development to help guide the best practices in the field. For the purposes of working with college students, student development is understood as a positive growth process (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). These theories can be grouped into two categories, psychosocial theories, and Cognitive structural theories.

Psychosocial theories examine the different events that happen throughout a persons life. They are shown to examine the development of people as these events occur. These events, or psychological issues can encompass how someone sees their relationships with others, what they want to do with their life, and also at a basic level who they are.

Psychosocial theories are generally thought of in age related stages. These occur throughout a persons life, and are usually paired with a specific event, or unresolved internal question arises (Erikson, 1959/1980). Some have more weight than others, but all are important for development. These theories are used to help “provide guidance concerning topics...for particular groups of students” ((Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 43).

Cognitive structural theories are “viewed as [stages] arising one at a time and always in the same order” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 43). Unlike the stages in psychosocial theories, cognitive structural stages always occur one at a time, and always in the same order. These theories do not allow for deviation from the prescribed method of phenomenon being observed. In other words, in order to enter stage 3, someone would have already completed stages 1 and 2 sequentially. For the purposes of coming out, most models use the psychosocial approach.

There are two prevalent models used to explain the coming out process within student affairs. The first is a model designed by Cass (1979) which was later revised and expanded (1996). Cass’ model has six stages and follows the cognitive structural approach. Each stage must be completed before progression to the next. This was widely criticized and suggested measures to allow for more abstract and less concrete stages would better examine the coming out process (Marszalek, Cashwell, Dunn, & Heard Jones, 2004).

The second model was D'Augelli's (1994) model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development. This model utilizes psychosocial ideas and allows for more fluidity through six stages of identity development. This model is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Outside Influence

As it relates to the world at large, the development of gay identity formation and of the coming out process in general is affected by the world around us. Primarily the study of this development shows that history matters in the context of sexual identity development. Society and the discourse surrounding homosexuality have historically *changed* since the 1980s. To say differently would be tantamount to saying that human development is not influenced by the need to join others (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

When I came out in late 2003 the only mainstream gay characters on TV were on *Will & Grace*, *Ellen*, or the cast of *Queer as Folk*. Look a decade earlier and you will be hard pressed to find any at all. Today there are shows like *Modern Family*, *Greys Anatomy*, *The New Normal*, and *Happy Endings*, all on networks which feature gay characters in major roles. Even the Disney channel has announced plans to feature a gay mother in a future part. To put it into perspective, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, or GLADD, an organization promoting LGBT issues to the media recently released a report regarding the prevalence of gay characters on television. In 2003 there were just 26 gay characters on television, in 2012 there were 111 (Townsend, 2013).

The influence and effects of mass media on society in general cannot be understated. Indeed it can be said that mass media has "important consequences for individuals, for institutions, and for society and culture" (McQuail, 1977, p. 20).

Even in the political arena the ideas of homosexuality are becoming more prevalent. When I first came out, politicians were committing career suicide to back a bill that supported gay rights, while today a growing number of them are standing behind things like same-sex marriage, and anti-discrimination policies. True there have been polarized reactions to blatant hate crimes such as Matthew Shepard in 1998, but there have not been widespread political ramifications, or support in a large way until now.

Some things have remained constant and unfortunately these are the things which we find in the media all too often. Such as the affect homosexuality and the relations developed romantically or just interrelationally have on the individual. It has been found that “gay compared to heterosexual individuals are more likely to attempt suicide and to incur serious injuries from such attempts” (Bybee, et al., 2009, p. 144). Most recently, this greater potential for self-harm has been shown in the increase in LGBT related suicides, many of which have drawn national media attention.

Positive Environment

Additionally, the experience of gay students concealing who they are, their sexual identity, can become a kind of private hell. The concealment cuts off ties with sympathetic supporters and creates a sense of abandonment as well as isolation that no one should ever go through (Bybee, et al., 2009). While this is the case, however, “individuals may hide their sexual identity out of shame and guilt or because they fear they will be stigmatized, ostracized, disowned, fired from a job, or even physically attacked” (Bybee, et al., 2009, p. 145). Fear is real and ever present from the first inclinations of same sex attraction through their adulthood. One

positive, or silver lining, is that “problems with depression, anger, and anxiety may ease with adult development, particularly among gay men” (Bybee, et al., 2009, p. 153).

It is not just the world at large that has influence on the coming out process or gay individuals in general. In all actuality, “not only society affects identity development; individuals and immediate families also have their influence” (Coleman, 1982, p. 42). Studies show that “a positive reception from parents to their child’s coming out is associated with positive identity development and with self-esteem” (Taub, 2008, p. 20).

While having positivity at the beginning of the coming out process can lead to a better outlook and higher self-esteem, “few gay and lesbian individuals when they first come out to themselves and others are told that, in addition to challenges, they can anticipate positive outcomes for their lives” (Riggle, et al., 2008, p. 216). In fact, some studies suggest that to a homosexual, “life is defined not by possibility but, instead is rooted in inhibition, denial, and negativity” (Rhoads, 1994, pg. 20).

The lack of positivity, or reassurance, in gay persons can lead to a sense of isolation and perpetuate the fear of not being ‘normal.’ A factor in positivity and hope for the future lies in the ability to see positivity in your future. Having a role model, or a positive figure to look up to, and strive to be, is something every child needs.

Particularly, one of the fundamental needs for LGBT students is a positive role model. Many times these role models are teachers or administrators. Studies show that “teachers who are members of minorities are more likely to be perceived as less credible” which in turn creates a negative outlook on that teacher (Russ, Simonds & Hunt, 2002, p. 311). This is not to

say that positivity in higher education doesn't exist, as characterized by the findings on positive outcomes stemming from student centers and college atmospheres addressed earlier.

Summary

In summation, "the student affairs field brings constant change, constant renewal, and a rich opportunity to learn from many" (Komives & Woodard, 1996, p. xxi). This as well as the notion that "flexible and reflexive autoethnographic methods can be leveraged to better comprehend student's development" (Dreschler Sharp, Riera & Jones, 2012, p. 330) is reason enough for this research to continue in many forms and methods.

As a whole, however, "research on the lesbian, gay, and bisexual college student population continues to lag behind that of other identity based groups" (Dugan & Yurman, 2011, p. 201). Moreover, predominant research has always found that there is a chilly campus climate for LGBT students. This notion has continually been supported and perpetuated by current research (Rankin, et al., 2010). This alone would call any researcher to examine the coming out process and the ways in which college practitioners can increase awareness, visibility, and understanding for LGBT individuals on campus. Even more so in this study particularly, "no measure exists for D'Augelli's model of gay, lesbian, and bisexual development" (Moran, 2003, p. 52). This model is widely accepted as universal and fundamental in the understanding of the coming out process, but there is no way to measure its actual effectiveness.

In the previous pages I presented a review of current literature regarding many facets of the world today as it relates to my research topic outlined here. In the following chapter I

describe in more detail the proposed research, my methodology, as well as limitations and demographic information on my test site.

Chapter Three

Design and Methodology

Qualitative Research and Autoethnography

Within this study, I am focusing on the gay male. As such, I recognize that I am leaving out a large portion of those who fall into the umbrella of homosexuality. Something that must be remembered though is that “gender does not fix...sexual practices,” and that “sexuality cannot be reduced to gender categories and must be understood in its own terms” (Connell, 2009, p. 23). While I am using the male as the finite form of my own sexuality and thus the basis for this research, it can be applicable to homosexuality in general. It is also said “that those of us who conduct research do so to answer questions about ourselves” (p. 195) in an effort to make sense of our professional and personal lives (Dilley, 2002)

Another aspect that increases the ability of this to be applied to many groups is the method in which the research itself is being conducted. This methodology is qualitative autoethnography which is discussed by current practice and use which says that autoethnography “refers to a particular form of writing that seeks to unite ethnography (looking outward at a world beyond one’s own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one’s self) intentions” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 13).

Researchers who employ this methodology found that “using autoethnographic methods to understand [themselves] was insightful and powerful,” (p. 317) and that autoethnography permits “maximum flexibility for gaining understanding of our identities” (Dreschler Sharp, Riera & Jones, 2012, p. 329). As the primary goal of this research is to better

understand the coming out process and its changes as it relates to student identity development, autoethnography is the perfect medium for research.

Even more so justifiable is the use of qualitative inquiry. “Qualitative research focuses on the ‘essence’” of the subject at hand, the “description, understanding, and meaning” of the world, and not the manipulation of data sets (Thomas & Nelson, 2001, p. 333). To fully understand the complex nature of coming out, one must be able to immerse oneself in the voice of the problem being addressed.

Autoethnography requires a use of reflexivity to employ correctly. A key concept of reflexivity is the voice. “Voice has multiple dimensions, including the author’s voice, the portrayal of respondents’ voices, and the author’s voice when self is the subject of the inquiry” (Dreschler Sharp, Riera & Jones, 2012, p. 329-330). At its most basic, autoethnography was “originally defined as the cultural study of one’s own people” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 13). As a self-proclaimed out gay male, I am examining my own people as it were, the gay students of today.

According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is done in an effort to “learn more from participants through exploration,” rather than through review of the current literature (p. 16). As such the focus of this study is on the actual participants, and not solely literature that has been published on the topic at hand.

The purpose of this study is to examine the coming out process of college males in their freshman year. The study is grounded by traditional qualitative research and formed through autoethnography, focusing on the actual happenings of individuals’ personal coming out processes through the telling of their own narratives. More specifically, the stories at the start and end are the recollection of my own coming out journey as a freshman in college and how I

feel today. The inclusion of my story, as well as my own perceptions and narrative, is critical as it puts me in a position as researcher and participant to understand the meanings behind the feelings that are portrayed through the interviews and analysis of the stories I collected.

Additionally, in qualitative research, the “study may begin with a long, personal narrative told in story form,” as such “the standards for evaluating qualitative research...are flexible” (Creswell, 2012, p. 18).

Framed a different way, the distinction between what is said and what is meant is what the process of autoethnographic research is geared toward. We all have lived experiences; it is these that make us knowledgeable in our own spheres of identity and able to speak on different subjects. Throughout the course of our lives though we don’t always take detailed notes, there are no field observations to use to draw findings from. The only thing that exists is our memories and feelings which in turn give us the knowledge to discuss those topics we believe are worth studying. In summation, as an autoethnographer, the goal is not “to portray the *facts* of what happened to you accurately, but instead to convey the *meanings* you attached to the experience” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 228).

Conceptual Framework

The study evolved out of my own perception that coming out has changed over the course of the past ten years. Numerous changes have affected the climate for individuals who identify as members of the gay community. The study was also influenced by D’Augelli’s (1994) Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development.

D’Augelli outlines his theory of development as one formed in two parts. The first looks at three interrelated variables:

1. **Personal subjectivities and actions** – the perceptions and feelings of the individual.
2. **Interactive intimacies** – the influences of family and other close relationships.
3. **Sociohistorical connections** – the social norms, policies and laws, as well as the values of a certain historical period.

With these interrelated variables, it is possible to identify how a development pattern forms as well as when it happens. Within the context of a student developing through their personal coming out process, one is focusing on the personal in terms of the LGBT individual, the interactive intimacies in terms of personal relationships i.e. lover, partner, or friend, and the sociohistorical connections in terms of the culture of the campus environment.

These variables are kept in mind when analyzing the actual development theory itself. The second portion of this theory is of six interactive processes. I list each and explain it in the context of a gay individual:

1. **Exiting heterosexual identity.** Individuals begin to realize that they have non-heterosexual thoughts, feelings and attractions. These feelings are validated and they emerge from a heterosexual identity.
2. **Developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status.** In this stage they truly internalize what it means to be gay to them. The response received from others is crucial for their own development in and around this stage.
3. **Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity.** While working in and through this stage, they are disclosing their homosexuality to others.

4. **Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring.** This stage is in nature the most stereotypically difficult. Not only are they disclosing who they are to their parents and family, they are also asking their parents and family to let go of their preconceived notion of who they are/were.
5. **Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status.** This is the stage in which they get to “explore.” They begin to recognize and become involved intimately with other members of the LGB community.
6. **Entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community.** This is the stage in which they let everything out and become committed, in varying degrees, to the gay community.

This review of D’Augelli’s model hopefully sheds light on what the field is currently working with. Keep in mind that D’Augelli’s model was created in 1994, and has not been updated in more than twenty years. While it is in my personal opinion that it is fairly inclusive, it is still not as extensive or relatable as it could and should be for the field, and the students we interact with. I use this model and show where each of the respondents are within the different processes.

Methods

Site Selection

The site I selected for this study is a rural land grant institution given the pseudonym George State University (GSU). There is a total enrollment of over 26,000, with 18,000 at the main campus location where the study was conducted. GSU has a High Undergraduate classification from the Carnegie Foundation (2012), and is primarily residential. Additionally,

GSU is listed with the Consortium of Higher Education, a resource for professionals in the field of student affairs. This listing is only obtained through the presence of a center on campus designed specifically for LGBT services, and is staffed by either a full time professional, or graduate assistant (Consortium, 2012).

GSU is also listed among the 327 schools ranked as LGBT friendly by the Campus Pride organization. GSU is ranked with a 4.5 star ranking “based on a five star continuum of progress for LGBT-Friendly policies, programs, and practices” (“LGBT friendly campus,” 2011). This ranking, and the listing with the Consortium, make GSU a prime location to conduct a study on the college male coming out process.

Data Collection

Respondents are men who self-identify as gay. Primarily these students are first year students; however some second year students were accepted due to limitations in participation. Respondents were searched for utilizing general advertisements within the residence halls, academic buildings, and student centers on campus. Additionally, respondents will be identified via recommendation from student affairs practitioners at GSU. While working with the students who responded, more potential respondents were identified through word of mouth.

All respondents were interviewed with semi structured questions so as to allow for conversational dialogue. Once all interviews concluded, recordings of the interviews were transcribed and prepared for evaluation.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were transcribed, data analysis began. I coded the transcripts using recurring ideas as a starting point for theme discovery. While there is not a single approach to analyzing or interpreting data in a qualitative study, many guidelines exist (Creswell, 2012). I analyzed the data through the process of inductive analysis in which several overarching themes emerge through interpretation from the data collected. Inductive analysis is a method through which themes emerge naturally from the broad data set. (Creswell, 2007). This form of inductive analysis is typical in most qualitative research (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010).

While reading the transcriptions, commonalities emerged which were then highlighted into different categories. These were initially family, friends, role models, intimacy, fear, college, and society. After this, I then compared the transcribed interviews with my own coming out process.

Following this comparison, the coming out process and general nature of the respondents was tested using the D'Augelli model of identity development. This evaluation aided in determining if this model, created in 1994, is still applicable today.

Finally, the codes that emerged were formulated into four overarching themes. These were Compartmentalized identity, Society and its role including political atmosphere, Role models, and finally Fear/Sadness.

Limitations

Since I am an out gay male, I have a certain schema in regards to gay identity development. As outlined in the story portion of this work, you can see how this identity has developed. Being gay makes me better able to understand the gay world however, and also

better able to give “gay terminology” to something which is purely academic, namely the current model of sexual identity development.

Because of unavoidable time constraints, as well as the likelihood of potential respondents, the sample size was likely to be small. This likelihood was based solely on the assumption that many individuals would be unwilling to come forward and self-disclose homosexual identity. The size of the sample makes it difficult to generalize for the larger population. Additionally, as an employee of GSU, some students would not be included due to ethical reasons. The bias that could result from directly supervising a respondent was large, and was therefore avoided when possible. Moreover, the study was limited to only those that self select to participate.

Timeline

This study took place during the spring semester of 2013 at George State University. Interview respondents were identified quickly, with interviews conducted immediately thereafter. There was one interview per respondent, with potential for a follow up interview, however none were needed. I began data analysis as soon as the last interview was completed, and all interviews had been transcribed. A synthesis of the findings was presented presently following the conclusion of the analysis. For a list of interview questions and protocol see Appendix A.

Summary

In the previous chapter I outlined the general framework for the study. I conducted semi-structured interviews with several first and second year students at GSU. These were then

transcribed and I evaluated and compared the themes which came about with my own coming out process.

In the next chapter I present my findings, and the themes which developed while looking at myself and the seven students at GSU. I give information on who these students are in context, and also what links them through their stories. Finally I offer discussion on what is currently out there for student affairs practitioners, and the gay community in general.

Chapter Four

Summary of Findings

Eight individuals, including myself, self-selected to take part in this study. For the purpose of this study, their names are Aidan, Jeff, Alex, Brian, Max, Shane and Mike. As I have already self-identified as both researcher and participant, my name will stay Matt throughout. What follows is a brief summary of each participant, followed by a summary of the themes that emerged from their different stories is presented.

Throughout the course of the interviews and analysis, the main research questions were kept in the forefront of my mind. They are:

1. What precipitates the coming out process? Why and when do people come out?
2. What outside influences (media, social media, friends, family) contribute to coming out?
3. Does the climate of current events play a role in coming out?
4. What can we do as colleges to help students coming out?

These questions helped to develop my interview protocol which was used for each of the interviews I conducted. These questions also helped in framing the analysis of data collected through transcription review.

Respondents

I chose to present the information gathered from my interviews in as direct a way as possible. What follows is an introduction to each of the eight respondents, myself included. I then present each of the themes which emerged from the analysis. Afterwards, I show each

process within the D'Augelli Model of LGB Identity Development and whether or not each participant had reached this stage or not, as well as information about the participants.

Shane

Shane is a second year student from a small town in western Washington. He is 20 years old and wants to pursue a degree in bio-technology. He graduated from a medium sized high school with a graduating class of 300. Shane said he came from a “really close, pretty close-knit community” and seemed to have fond memories of growing up. Shane is the only child of divorced parents. He has two younger brothers from his father’s second marriage. Shane feels closer to his mother, having lived with her since his parents’ divorce.

Shane considers the coming out process to be “verbalizing or making it known to others your sexual orientation, what it means to you.” He said it is “that step of really explicitly saying like this is...this is my orientation.” Shane feels support for being gay from his mother, but not as much from his father and step-mother that sent him to see a Christian counselor. Shane feels lucky that the counselor he saw recognized he didn’t need help with his homosexuality, as that wasn’t a problem; it was his relationship with his father that needed work. Shane came out to his parent’s right before coming to college.

Reflecting back on his early adolescence, Shane knew he was different long before college age. “In 6th grade, like, I knew I was different. I just like, knew that I had feelings that the other boys didn’t have...and I denied it for years and years. Deny, deny, deny.” Shane said this is because “you don’t want to be different” as a person, no one does. Now he is very comfortable being out. Most of his friends at college know his orientation and he feels as though society as a whole is becoming more accepting.

However, Shane feels the figures you are seeing on TV and in movies are reifying a sense of the stereotypical gay figure, and that having a gay friend is almost turning into a status symbol. Shane says frankly, “don’t become my friend because I’m gay, become my friend because I’m me.” Shane shows that being gay is just a part of who he is, not his defining characteristic.

Mike

Mike is a 19 year-old student who lived in an all male residence hall during his first year at GSU. He is pursuing a degree in political science and may eventually attend law school or become a teacher. He grew up in a major city in Washington, and went to high school with 2000 students. Mike is from a very large family, but is the only biological child from his parents.

Mike said that coming out is “hard to define since it is so ambiguous itself.” Mike reflected that for some people coming out is a long process and involves mapping out who you will tell first, second, third, and so on, which is what worked for him. Mike also believes that “you kind of always come out to anyone that you meet,” and he further recognizes the need for people to come out many times to many people, not just significant people in your life.

Mike never felt like he was closeted, or to put it differently, he felt he just had to confirm that he was gay for people. This process began in 7th grade. In high school, partially due to his family dynamic, Mike moved out of his mother’s house and in with his best friend. He still maintained contact with his parents, especially his father who became very protective of him, similar to the stereotypical father being protective of his daughter, which is how he described it.

Due to his aspirations in political science and becoming a lawyer, Mike sometimes feels that he is the “in your face one,” the one to “stand on your toes” and make sure you know what is right or not in the world of gay. He is very aware of out gay people in congress but also thinks that out celebrities or public figures can be more influential. Mike said that the media is helping in the long run, even going so far as to say that the portrayal of gay is that “gay is average or normal. It’s just part of society now.”

Max

Max is a 20 year-old fashion merchandising major and first year student. He grew up in eastern Washington and graduated from a school of 1300 students. He laughed when he told me his major, saying that he “feels like that’s so stereotypical gay guy, always doing fashion.” Max thinks that coming out is “accepting your sexuality and then letting everyone know about it.” Max was bullied beginning in 3rd grade, and was called derogatory names and gay related slang. He came out as bisexual in 7th grade and in 10th grade came out as gay.

Max was the only gay person he knew in his area and turned to online chat rooms and similar outlets for community. It was there, at the age of 14 that he found someone who he became close with and relied on for help in coping with coming out. Max spent a lot of time speaking with this friend, which racked up a large long-distance phone bill. This lead to his parents discovering he was gay; Max had to explain why he was calling the other side of the country for long periods of time.

In high school, Max was very comfortable being “the gayest gay you could be.” In college, however, his comfort level has dropped with being so out. This is due in part to

rekindling his religious faith, and also because he sees himself as different. “I’m not normal” is what he said when asked to elaborate, as though being gay made him abnormal from society.

To highlight this difference, Max explained that he had just signed into a fraternity. The fraternity discussed at length whether they should allow a gay member. Max now feels as though when he meets any of the other brothers they will just know him as “the gay guy.” He reflected on this by saying that when he meets other fraternity brothers he will say “hi, I’m Max,” but he believes they will hear “I’m the gay guy, Max.” Max said this “bothers me because I feel like my sexuality doesn’t identify who I am as a person, it’s just a fact about me. Like, I like brownies. I like wakeboarding. I like men.”

Max feels a strong connection to popular culture, and associated his stereotypical choice of major and eventual profession in the fashion industry. He wrestles with finding himself in love with “stereotypical gay icons” like “Lady Gaga, Madonna, and Cher” and not wanting to just be seen as a “gay.” Max feels very conflicted in this, but is not sure how to fix it. He is very comfortable being the “out one” on his floor in the residence halls.

Aidan

Aidan is a 19 year-old sophomore who attended a high school of 700 students in an area of Washington with a diverse population due to its proximity to a large Hispanic community and a Native American reservation. Aidan is currently majoring in athletic training and wants to work as a professional team trainer. Aidan thinks he is different from other gay men. Reflecting on his coming out process, Aidan said, it was more personal, not “like standing up in front of a big crowd of people or friends, or posting on Facebook and telling everyone that I’m gay.”

Aidan grew up in a very fluid household where his parents did not impose traditional gender roles, or push any one religion, or “agenda.” Aidan was allowed to pave his own path and learn what he wanted. He participated in Running Start, a program designed to give high school students college credits. Aidan’s high school years were split between his regular high school and two community colleges. Aidan first began to notice he liked men around 8th grade, but it wasn’t until 12th grade when he really admitted it.

Aidan said that he didn’t have a moment when he “was like OMG, I’m gay,” but feels it happened more gradually. However, he did state he had a moment that confirmed it for himself, saying, “if it (liking men) isn’t a phase then I’m gay and I’m ok with that.” Aidan described a moment on the community college campus he was on during a Running Start class where a very attractive male and female walked past in bathing suits. His fellow male classmate commented that “wow, that girl was super attractive.” Aidan said that he didn’t even notice the girl and was in fact staring at the guy and he “just chuckled [to himself] and was like well, I guess I’m gay.”

Aidan says that he is comfortable with the idea of being gay, but doesn’t “broadcast it” or shout it from the rafters as he is “not so much comfortable with how others look at being gay.” Aidan wants to go into a field that is very homophobic and he doesn’t want to hurt his future career aspirations. When discussing coming out to his friends about his sexuality, he said “it’s almost turned into a kind of milestone in my friendships, like an achievement award for my friends.” Aidan said he doesn’t feel he really had a coming out experience because he never went through periods of deep depression or suicidal ideation, which according to the websites he looked at were typical responses to coming out.

Jeff

Jeff is a 19 year-old freshman, pre-med kinesiology major from the same rural town where GSU is located. Jeff's high school had 656 students. Jeff has a twin brother, and an older sister, and described his family life as fairly conservative and religious.

Jeff sees coming out as a multi-step process and explained this as firstly being accepting of yourself or being okay with your sexuality. After this self acceptance comes the need to be okay with telling your close friends and family. Finally, he says, you just need to be okay with being gay in general. Jeff recognized this process beginning at age 8 when he realized he was attracted to the same gender.

At age 10 Jeff says that he "realized that that [being attracted to the same gender] was different and weird." Jeff began giving himself deadlines "like at 13 I'll be straight." When these deadlines came and went, he thought "okay, well maybe this will be around a bit longer than I thought at first." Jeff fully came out as a freshman in high school. Because of the close knit nature of the school, his parents found out when the father of another boy in school called to talk with Jeff's parents about rumors that were spreading.

Because of Jeff's upbringing and familiarity with the area, he was worried about being out at GSU due to the abundance of Christian groups on campus. Jeff also said he didn't really "want people to see me as Jeff who is a gay man, I want people to see me as Jeff." Jeff also seemed to feel that his parents were different; when he told them he was gay, they first and foremost had him get a full STD screening. Jeff said his mother, particularly, "feels like she has this duty to help change" him.

Jeff is in a committed relationship, and his parents have met his boyfriend. He has said that his mom wants to help him. He said “she wants to change me, but also doesn’t want to push me away.” Jeff talked of the STD screening and reparative therapy as some of the things which his mother requested. Jeff said his mother wants him to “be open to those things,” and to “make sure you’re not putting yourself in a gay box.” Jeff said that this “invokes this image of this rainbow box with glitter coming out,” but in the end wants to prove to her that being in the box isn’t what’s happening, it’s just who he is.

Alex

Alex came to GSU from a 45 person private Christian high school in an affluent area of Northeast WA. Alex is an 18 year-old first year student who is deciding between graphic design and communication with a minor in hospitality and business management. Alex is the only child of divorced parents, came out when he got to GSU, and is engaged to a man from Idaho.

Alex has an interesting relationship with his parents. Both of them know of his homosexuality; however, he isn’t quite sure where things stand on a number of levels. His father maintains that he is completely comfortable having a gay son, citing having worked with gay people in his job before. At the same time, however, Alex describes his sexuality as being “swept under the rug” and not talked about. Alex’s mother shows signs of acceptance, allowing Alex and his fiancé to sleep in the same bed while on a family vacation for instance. However, she also shows signs of being very uncomfortable or less than accepting, making it very clear that public displays of affection are not allowed around her, and calling Alex’s relationship a “friendship.”

Alex is very comfortable with being out at college. He has had some interesting conversations with friends regarding being gay because they are from different backgrounds, including one friend from Africa who didn't know that gay people existed. The idea of someone not knowing that gay people existed was different for Alex, but their friendship is still very strong.

Alex sees coming out as just "telling who you are," adding, he "[doesn't] believe that when you come out you are all of a sudden gay. You always kind of were, you know you always are." Alex says that he was probably 11 or 12 when he knew he was gay, but for sure when he was 15. He says for sure because that is when he vividly remembers being sexually attracted to men and not women, which was different than his classmates.

Brian

Brian is a 19 year-old freshman who plans to major in computer science. Brian is very active in on campus groups for LGBT individuals and works at the LGBT student center on campus. He comes from a high school of more than 2,500 people and says it was very diverse. He is the eldest child and his parents are divorced. He is also a member of the ROTC program and hopes to enter the Air Force.

Brian sees coming out as "just telling someone something...so you can come out as a computer science major," you can come out as anything. The gay part, according to him, just adds more background to it. Brian is out to everyone but his family, and is cautiously out around his ROTC friends.

Brian first came out as bisexual in 10th grade, or as Brian puts it "I was like 10% maybe guys, and 90% I like boobs." He goes on to say that he actually first started to realize it in 7th

grade, when his friends were beginning to notice girls and he found guys and his reaction was “wow...guys! A+!” You could say that he was enthusiastic but reserved in sharing his enthusiasm.

When describing his coming out process, Brian says “I don’t come out of the closet, I trip, and land face first.” This is primarily from people not expecting a conversation about sexual identity, and Brian not feeling very good at articulating his sexuality. For example, Brian was talking with friend who was complaining about “crazy ex-girlfriends,” to which Brian responded “yeah, glad I never have to deal with them.” It took his friend 20 minutes to understand that Brian had just in fact come out, not as asexual, not as bisexual, but as gay.

With the humor that Brian uses to come out, he also describes how he felt coming out in college. He was scared at first because he didn’t want gay to be the only thing he was known for and actually planned on staying in the closet through sophomore year. Discussing his thoughts about coming to college Brian said he “didn’t think there would be other gay people [at GSU].” Describing an encounter with another male who was “on the radar” or gaydar as it is sometimes called, Brian felt that he had found the only other gay man, but as it turned out “there was a whole bees nest of them.”

Matt

I was an 18 year old college freshman when I came out. I am the youngest of three children, and went to a high school in southeast MI with roughly 2200 students. The majority of my coming out story has already been told, the memorable and strongest parts of it at the very least.

To highlight, I came out fully in October 2003. I had come out as bi the summer before to my best friend from high school. Prior to that I had always known that I was different from the norm of heterosexuality. I remember in 5th or 6th grade finding the covers to adult films in a video store with one of my friends. They made comments about the girls physical body, or physical assets, while I only had eyes for the guys. I never talked about this, but in high school I further solidified this feeling of attraction with gay pornography.

I also recall learning what gay meant from shows like *Will & Grace*, or *Queer as Folk*. I had come out, but I didn't really have anyone to tell me what that meant – there were no classes or social cues to learn how to be gay, so media had to suffice. This was also before the advent of Facebook; MySpace was the new trend, although I never really understood it as much as I would grow to enjoy Facebook. I still remember the day that I changed my Facebook profile to say that I was interested in men. It felt like a badge of honor – like it proved to the world that I was comfortable with who I was.

It took me some time to get there though. I also remember that first year going through heavy bouts of depression. My mother was pressuring me to tell my father that I was gay, and I had broken up with my first boyfriend. I also didn't really have a sense of community, which lead to a suicide attempt. All of these experiences led me to be the person I am today however, and I wouldn't change anything looking back.

Emerging Themes

Each of the 8 participants in this study had a different coming out process. As shown later through the lens of the D'Augelli model, many of their stories were very similar. Also, from reading the interview transcriptions and through the process of inductive reasoning, four

additional themes emerged. These include: 1) Compartmentalized identity; 2) Society and political atmosphere; 3) Role models; and 4) Fear and sadness.

Compartmentalized Identity

Wanting to be seen as a whole person, not just as gay was reiterated many times by most of the respondents. There was a general feeling that each person wanted to be seen as a whole person, and not as a jumbled mix of identities. As Aidan put it, “being gay doesn’t really make me who I am; it’s just my sexual preference.” Max had a very laissez faire attitude about his sexuality. He said “it’s a factor, it’s a fact, like I like wakeboarding or cake or whatever.” It is just part of the identity of a gay person, but that does not mean that it is the only thing that defines them, nor does it make it their primary identity.

This distinction was similar to Torres, Jones, and Renn’s (2009) study showing that there was a need to view the student as a whole person. The different identities that make up a person all influence each other, but one cannot over take the other when working with students. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) also emphasize the idea of many psychosocial identities influencing the coming out process. Accepting and embracing a gay identity is influenced by the other identities in a person, but these identities should not be looked at individually.

Society

Max offered a poignant response when asked about societal influences. Max said, “people view [him] differently” and that he “didn’t get the same opportunities as everyone else.” I say this is poignant because my interviews took place after the Supreme Court heard testimony on two landmark cases regarding marriage equality and gay rights. These were the

Defense of Marriage act, or DOMA, and Proposition 8. While both DOMA and Proposition 8 were still in effect, since the interviews both cases have been deemed unconstitutional.

The subject of marriage was brought up many times, by all participants except Shane. Both Alex and Mike said that they keep track of the marriage rulings, while Jeff said marriage equality is something that needs to be worked on, but isn't the end. Jeff described being gay in society when he said, "it's still not reached the point of societal norm yet, but you still have obstacles that you have to face in society, particularly when you are coming out." His mother's first concern after coming out was a full STD screening because "she believes that the gay lifestyle is one of many challenges and hardships and AIDS."

The different stigmas or stereotypes are portrayed constantly though. As Aidan stated, "you see these extremely flamboyant rainbow flag draped people who are running around naked in the streets, and those are really the only portrayal that the general public gets." To put it simply, he said "I think that society has a horrible influence on people coming out."

Max sums up societal influences on coming out as it pertains to the media when he states he thinks gay people are "portrayed as slutty and either really fem or super ridiculously masculine." He goes on to talk about stereotypes of gay men on TV, which includes musicals, fashion, music, and promiscuity.

Jeff also discusses his love/hate relationship with the term "gay culture" To Jeff, gay culture has a stigma attached to it, one that is getting better, but still one that is not positive. In Reflecting on the cultural aspects Jeff said, "when a lot of people think of what gay culture is, they think of San Francisco, and they think of Castro, and they think of AIDS, and a lot of sex." Shane summed up society though when he said "I think as society begins to progress and time

goes on and people really begin to understand that it's not a choice and that it's no different from being Asian or anything. It's all, you can't choose it."

Role Models

Society has been successful with providing gay role models through media; the idea of homosexuality being common place. When I came out, *Will & Grace* was one of the few shows I knew of in mainstream media. As Townsend (2013) noted, there were only 26 gay characters in all of television in 2003. As of 2012, 111 gay characters are on television, many of them more recognizable.

In 2003, to my recollection, there were no gay news anchors, or talk show hosts living an open lifestyle, no one in the media besides fictional characters portrayed on screen were gay. When asked about role models now, each respondent was able to name off a number of real people, not characters, who influenced their coming out process. These included Elle DeGeneres and her wife Portia de Rossi, Rosie O'Donnell, Anderson Cooper, Lance Bass, Ricky Martin, and most of all, Neil Patrick Harris. Many respondents mentioned Neil Patrick Harris and I personally find Neil Patrick Harris to be the most intriguing, because he is the most contradictory. Alex spoke about this as well saying that "it's funny because [he] is not gay looking at all, I mean Neil Patrick Harris plays a very very straight guy [on the TV show *How I Met Your Mother*]."

Jeff also talks about, and looks up to Neil Patrick Harris as a role model who has a steady boyfriend, works a lot with charity and also has two kids. He is seen as a recognizable face and someone who is doing what a role model should; portraying themselves in a respectable manner and emulating good qualities for people to aspire.

Brian also talked about mainstream television shows with gay characters and shows. When asked, he rattled off *Modern Family*, *the New Normal*, *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Glee*. Brian also talked about the character Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* series being gay, and the reactions that people had to that. "J.K. Rowling said that, that Dumbledore was gay" but "everyone said, he's not gay, look at him." The author of the series, J.K. Rowling, who created the character, said that she created Dumbledore to be gay, and still people didn't want to see it. Brian said that this was because "you had to do gay to be gay." In essence if you didn't fit the mold of what gay was, you couldn't be gay.

Aidan also talked about new professional athletes coming out, and the impact that that has on his field. Most notably was Jason Collins, the first active gay male professional sports player to come out in the U.S. Collins played for the Washington Wizards in the NBA. During my interview with Aidan I asked if he had a role model, either in professional sports or otherwise. Aidan said "[he] did not. I could have used someone like that, but I flew solo."

The need for role models or people to look up to is prevalent, even more so for the gay community where fear and alienation are widespread. This mirrors the findings on positivity by Riggle, et al. (2008).

When talking about role models, Shane said that "just seeing the way they acted just gave me so much more confidence just in myself, seeing how they held themselves, they're completely normal."

Fear and Sadness

Discussing role models also brought up themes of fear and sadness. Aidan demonstrated this directly when describing online searches he did when we was beginning to think he was gay:

I would go online and look at websites and look up kind of the gay culture, and I kept seeing the NOH8 campaign and 'It Gets Better.' So I read into those a little more and just kept reading about these stories about gay teenagers who were committing suicide or were very depressed or were having trouble accepting themselves. I think that's one of the reasons why I thought I wasn't gay, I wasn't experiencing self-denial.

In contrast, my own process took me to a very dark location where I didn't feel connected to anyone at all. I felt isolated and thought, there was no one for me, which lead me to a suicidal path. I was lucky that I had friends who recognized some of the signs and helped me through it. Others are not as supported. Brian talked about hearing others using the term 'gay' as a derogatory state of being and not wanting to be that. "I kind of remember where I rationalized suicide down the line," he said, "where it was just gonna be like, I really don't want to live." The rationalization came from not wanting to be this so-called horrible 'gay.' Brian also talked about the large number of nationally recognized gay related teenage suicides in 2010 which spurred projects like "It Gets Better." This more than anything else led Brian to want to work in the LGBT center on campus and help "lay the groundwork for a better future for tomorrow's rainbows."

Shane talked about fear in actually coming out to others. He called it a “sense of fear.” Saying that “you can never be 100% sure of your friends unless they explicitly say ‘if you were gay or straight I wouldn’t care.’” Shane elaborated more on his own coming out process. Shane had a sense of fear or struggle in deciding to come out to some, especially “the ones that I felt that I had the most to lose, those were the ones that I came to last.”

Aidan, who felt as though he did not have a “normal” or “traditional” coming out process, also talked about the fear he felt before he came out for the first time in person. It happened at a Denny’s restaurant, which was where Aidan said “you go for deep conversations.” He said that they were sitting and he “told [his friend] I was gay and that was kind of really scary for me.” Aidan recalls that he actually got so choked up, and couldn’t actually say the words so he had to write them on a paper towel.

Lastly, Max speaks to fear and sadness about what coming out is like for gay people. Indeed he summarizes what being gay is like. He says:

I feel like everyone, every gay person has struggled through something. I don’t think there’s...I just don’t know any one gay person who didn’t have some kind of difficulty accepting they were gay and different. And maybe if they did, then maybe their family didn’t. Or they were bullied....I feel like everyone has gone through some kind of adversity.

In Aidan’s coming out process, he actually felt as though he might not be gay because he wasn’t feeling depressed, or that he didn’t want to commit suicide. He actually felt that this was a needed response to coming out – extreme sadness and difficulty. While he never acknowledged it, his first experience telling a real person that

he was gay caused him to feel choked up, and was extremely difficult, in essence fulfilling his aforementioned idea that gay people are supposed to feel scared or sad.

D'Augelli

Through the interview process, I asked each participant questions pertaining to their experiences coming out. The topics varied from family to friends, social media outlets, personal stories, and the participants' roles in the world. The questions were geared towards looking at their coming out process through the lens of D'Augelli's model of LGB Identity Formation. The model includes 6 processes that can be entered into fluidly, at any point throughout the life course in any order, or many at once. The processes are: 1) Exiting heterosexual identity; 2) Developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status; 3) Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity; 4) Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring; 5) Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status; and 6) Entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community.

Exiting Heterosexual Identity

For many of the participants, this stage occurred at a younger age. All eight participants marked this as a time when homosexual feelings were felt and knowing that having said feelings could be seen as something different. Jeff experienced this at the youngest age, 8, while the majority of the participants began to realize this at the 11-12 age range.

Aidan talked about his friends "looking at porn magazines that were in their father's garage" and would wonder "why are we excited about this" referring to the naked women. For Jeff it was realization that he was attracted to the same gender, which "was different and weird."

This stage is the first time that different, non-heterosexual or mainstream feelings of attraction occur. It should be noted that this is typically the age in which puberty begins for males. As Brian put it, “in 6th grade you’re not too worried about your sexuality...then...it’s just like, every hormone is kicking in.”

Developing a Personal Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Identity Status

For most, this primary function of accepting who you are and declaring to yourself that you are in fact part of the LGBT realm is the primary aspect of coming out. For me this occurred when I was 17 on my way to college. For every other participant this occurred prior to college.

Jeff, Max, Brian, and I all started this stage as bisexual, almost as a stepping stone to being fully out as gay. This helped me rationalize the change from being in the majority to being in the minority. For Brian, this was an attempt to appear “normal.” Alex, Aidan, Mike, and Shane all self-identified as gay initially, without the ‘bi-stepping-stone’.

The idea that coming out happens prior to college is fundamentally different from the majority of mainstream identity development models (Cass, 1990; D’Augelli, 1994). Current literature on sexual orientation describes coming out happening at a younger age (Carver, Egan & Perry, 2004; Schope, 2002; Wilkerson, Brooks & Ross, 2010). The respondents of this study solidify these findings, showing that coming out is happening prior to college age.

Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Social Identity

All of the participants felt comfortable within this stage, which encompasses coming out to the world at large. All participants disclosed their identity to friends, and most were very open with it. This process most closely correlated to a desire for a role model, as discussed in previous themes.

A new aspect to take into account for this stage is the aspect of social media. More and more, there is a plethora of information shared via the internet and social media is one way in which to share your sexual identity. Social media also allows for people to come out en masse.

When I first came out in 2003 Facebook had yet to be established. Aidan, due to his career goals doesn't have his orientation listed on his Facebook profile. He says that "I don't say anything that has lots of 'hey, I'm gay' or would presuppose that I'm gay." Conversely, Alex has listed that he likes men, and that he is in a relationship, but doesn't post a lot because his fiancé isn't out to his family yet.

Max is out on Facebook, and likens it to being asked on the street if he was gay. He would be comfortable telling people in that situation, so "why not Facebook?" Shane says the same, but adds he is "not good with social media." He does have his orientation listed, and pictures from different pride parades.

Jeff and Brian both brought up a newer gay online community in Tumblr. Brian utilized it as a coming out tool where he had "gay things on my Tumblr, just reblogging pictures of guys and other rainbowing stuff." For Brian it was a conscious decision to give out the URL for his Tumblr as a sign of coming out. Tumblr is an online community where users are able to post pictures, text posts, or re-post pictures or blog postings from others.

Brian, who works for the LGBT center on campus, also thinks that the internet has helped facilitate coming out as evidenced by his Tumblr recollection. Moreover though, he says that before social media, coming out meant a very individualized process; telling one person at a time. He says, "being socialized as a gay individual meant that you had to exist in the limits of the straight world. I think that changed with the internet." Jeff talks about Tumblr specifically in

a more community based way, saying that for many people in the LGBT community, “that’s their outlet.”

Becoming a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Offspring

For many this is the most difficult part of the coming out process. Telling your parents and family has many possible consequences. Being unwanted, disowned, losing all support (monetarily and personally); the list goes on. I was fortunate to have parents who were understanding, who accepted me with love and support and continue to do so.

Max, Mike and Alex had similar experiences to mine. All are out to their parents and have seen little consequence from the coming out process. They each still talk with their parent(s) and have a good relationship with them.

Jeff and Shane are also out to their parents, or were outed to their parents. Shane’s father found text messages between Shane and a boy and confronted him. When his father asked him about the texts, Shane said “I’ve got nothing to lose so I might as well come out with it so I did.” This was difficult for Shane though because his father and stepmother were “very religious, very conservative, believe that homosexuality is a choice” and they were “crying on the couch and decided that they wanted to send me to a Christian counselor.” For Shane this ended up being a good thing as his counselor said, “I’m gonna help you work with your relationship with your father instead because obviously, you know, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re not broken. This is not a disorder.”

Jeff was “horribly, horribly, horribly afraid to tell” his parents. Like Shane however, his father found out before Jeff was able to tell him. Jeff’s parents were told by the parents of a classmate. Jeff’s parents thought it was a reoccurrence of teasing and rumors when Jeff was in

elementary school. His parents simply approached Jeff about the rumors, expecting this to be the same as before, but asking if the rumors were true this time around. Also similar to Shane, Jeff had a moment to decide he “was like well, I can lie to my mom and tell her the truth later, or I can tell her the truth now. And obviously it started some crying.”

Jeff’s family was also very religious, and over the next few months “there was a lot of religious type talks.” These have since stopped as Jeff has continued practicing his faith at the family church, and was very open to talking it through with his parents.

Shane has since all but cut ties with his father and stepmother as they do not approve of his gay identity. Jeff’s mother believes that being gay is just a phase and that Jeff will find and marry a girl one day.

Aidan and Brian both chose not to tell their parents at this time. Both have expressed they are waiting for the right time. Brian doesn’t feel threatened by anyone in the family and knows of a gay aunt. He also mentioned an uncle who uses the term “tree-hugging faggots to describe people who he doesn’t agree with” which doesn’t create a welcoming environment. He has had conversations with both of his parents before about the gay community because his mother was afraid his sister was dating a bi-sexual boy. He plans on telling his parents this summer or just letting them figure it out for themselves. He has plans to attend 3 pride events and get a job working in the gay community. As he says, “they should figure it out.”

Aidan has never told his parents outright because he described an unspoken acceptance from his father. Aidan described a time when his father was worried over Aidan's younger brother being gay. Aidan asked his father “what would happen if Jack was gay?” Aidan was more or less asking what would happen if I was gay. Aidan’s father replied “some of our

extended family might not accept that, but he's still my son and gay or straight I'd still love him." While he has never told his parents, Aidan feels like he has their approval. He talked about it and said:

I think that's what made it so much easier for me, just knowing that my family was so ok with it. Even though I haven't told them, and still haven't, just knowing that they would be ok with it; that's what really helped me.

It should be noted that many aspects of the Fear/Sadness theme mentioned previously stemmed from this process in the D'Augelli model.

Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Intimacy Status

Intimacy is, due to its very nature, a difficult topic to discuss with any student. Some of the difficulty was alleviated, however, through the conversational nature of the semi structured interviews. From the conversations, it was very apparent that all 7 participants had explored this process.

More candidly, several mentions of sex being used as a way to "confirm" or "make sure" of sexuality came up. For Jeff it involved a girlfriend in high school. He said "sexual things started getting involved and I just didn't enjoy it, in fact I was really like freaked out about it."

Aidan talked about his friends finding pornography in their father's garages and not understanding what the fuss was about. Later as he was beginning to explore his attraction he remembered "looking at [gay] pornography, exploring that and being like, ok, this is cool." I asked Alex about when he knew for sure that he was gay and he referenced a time when he "was exploring online, and watching straight porn, and found that I was watching the guys doing stuff more than anything else, and I was like, 'oh ok, this is clear now.'" Because I had a

similar experience I asked him if he thought “that the sexual aspect of it helped confirm it for you?” His response was “Yeah, I mean, I always felt like it confirmed it.”

Brian also used pornography to confirm he was gay. He described a conversation he had online with a friend who was also questioning his own sexuality. They were exchanging pornographic websites and at one point his friend sent one of a homosexual nature. Brian’s first response was “Oh – seen that.” So while exploring his own sexuality, he found the sexual aspect helpful in coming out to a peer. Similar to Alex, Brian found himself more interested in the males than females when he explored online pornography.

I recall a similar occurrence, but because the internet was a novelty my father quickly found out. At the time I said I had just clicked on the wrong link, however my father was concerned enough to actually offer a subscription to watch female pornographic content. This incident, more than anything else, made it more difficult for me to come out to him later on.

Mike didn’t explicitly talk about pornography or anything of that nature. He did however mention that he knew he liked Kathy Griffin as a gay icon. He said that “even though she’s not gay, she represents a lot of our community. (laughter) She talks about Grindr in her stand up.” Grindr is a mobile to mobile dating and meeting application that many men in the community use. It is also something that provides ease of access to talk with other gay men, something which Shane discusses as one of the difficulties with this process of coming out.

Shane talked about the different aspects of what is easy about being gay. He mentioned he didn’t think being gay was easy or hard, but it did have some challenges. “Seeing an attractive person and not being sure if they are gay or straight...how do you go about that?”

This process of the model can be one of the most confusing, but one which most solidifies a gay identity.

Entering a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Community

When I came out, my sister suggested I seek out the Gay Straight Alliance on my college campus. This was a group of gay and straight people who were accepting of my gay identity. It was a community of people just like me. I found solace in them, and they helped to normalize being gay for me. That being said, they also influenced what I thought being gay meant, which is to say, I thought in order to *be* gay, I had to act just like them.

None of the other respondents spoke about this high of a level of the community itself dictating what you were supposed to be. Many talked about finding a community, however did not see their lives dictated by it. This shift in identity development can be attributed to the changing nature of society, as well as the prevalence of “normal” gay people seen in mainstream media. All of the respondents were aware of the LGBT center on campus where you could go hang out or ask questions. Most were aware of the LGBT student groups.

Jeff talks candidly about the community of gay men at GSU. He says that “particularly among gay men everyone knows each other in some way or another through social interaction. Whether that be a date, or a hook up, or you hooked up with my ex, everyone knows each other to some degree.” Jeff also talks about trying to help those who aren’t out yet find the resources in the community that are needed. Jeff compares intentionally trying to help others come out to the depiction of a door to door evangelical knocking and asking “have you heard the good news?” He sees it as “putting what you think is best for another person’s life” onto the other person, and not allowing for them to come to their own conclusions.

Aidan feels that he found himself in college, but doesn't feel part of the gay community. He also talked about there being a lack of gay community, at least in the dating sense. Aidan said, "everyone says there are a bunch of fish in the sea, but when you are in the gay world you have a puddle. And when you are [around GSU] you have a glass of water." Besides this examination, he found that there were more people in and out of a gay community who were more accepting of gay rights which felt welcoming.

On the other hand, Alex knew of student organizations on campus at GSU, but had no idea of a specific center that helped facilitate a community atmosphere. None of the respondents made reference to their communities being facilitated by an on campus office or club, though they all mentioned knowing of a gay community at and around GSU.

The majority of the respondents had gone through each stage, however it should be noted that they were unaware of progressing through specific fields. Some felt that there were certain things that they had to do, but there was not a universally understood progression. In the following, final chapter, I discuss conclusions reached, and recommendations for the future based on the findings listed in this chapter.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

All eight men in this study had very different experiences coming out, yet they all had similar undertones. While I shared many of these similarities, there were some that have changed with time. I now will present my conclusions on what the interviews uncovered and recommend courses of action for colleges to better equip themselves to serve this ever increasing, and ever changing population.

This study was called for due to the need to understand the changing climate of the LGBT community as it fits into the world today. Much of the research on this topic, [Cass (1990), D'Augelli (1994), and Rhoads (1994)], is dated. Changes since the 1990's are wide ranging from politics to media and from public support for gay rights to the state and federal law. This study, and others like it, are important to better understand this new world for homosexual individuals.

The need to understand students who are homosexual today is ever increasing. While the majority of my respondents did not profess feelings of suicidal ideation, the study by Bybee et al (2008) shows that suicide rates are high among gay individuals. Taub (2008) explained that the need for positive parental response to coming out is needed for someone to have positive self-image with coming out. From the respondents this holds true, the feelings of fear and sadness expressed surrounding parents was evident.

Conclusions to be drawn from analysis of respondent interviews are a sense of positivity, as well as possibility, in coming out, a very different landscape than the one painted by other similar studies (Rhoads, 1994). Many of my respondents found communities and even

love after coming out. As Riggle (2008) found, positivity needs to exist for people coming out to feel positive about their lives. Studies like this one are needed to confirm this thought, especially in the changing climate for LGBT students.

What follows are conclusions around D'Augelli's (1994) model, the political and social climate, and student affairs practitioners. I then propose recommendations for future research. Finally, I summarize the chapter and conclude in the same manner the study began, with a story.

D'Augelli Reconsidered

The conversations I had with the participants in this study, did not conclude students going through any kind of stage, or that the participants had to do one thing and then the next in order to come out. Only Jeff mentioned some kind of order in coming out. Each respondent found himself coming out in different ways and at different times. D'Augelli's model does allow for changes and looks at the entire life course, which indicates that you are always coming out as Max so easily put referencing his likes of other things the same as men.

To answer the question of whether D'Augelli's models is appropriate for the current generation, I have to say that yes it is. Twenty years after its creation, the D'Augelli model works for students today. An inherent issue, however, is that you can't only trust, or try to fit people into, the six processes in order to understand the coming out process, or the gay community as a whole. As the respondents explained, coming out means something inherently different to each person who goes through the process. To some it is a process, and to others it is just a gradual set of experiences that requires little consideration. It is a very individual happening.

Political and Cultural Climate

Recently, the Supreme Court handed down rulings that were monumental for the gay rights movement. I conclude the rulings to be on par with the beginnings of the modern gay rights movement which started at Stonewall. Marriage equality has been seen as a hurdle to be overtaken in order to feel included as a full citizen of the country. Put into perspective, in 2003, when I came out, national support for same sex marriage was 33%, well below the majority. In the past decade that number has risen to 53% (Townsend, 2013). In today's climate, the majority of Americans are in favor of recognizing same sex couples, and of giving them equal rights under the law.

Political climates change over time. For example, when I came out, Don't Ask Don't Tell was a policy enforced by the military as a way to bar LGBT individuals from service. The federal government at the time had also not ruled that a hate crime could be committed on the basis of sexual orientation. The topic of hate crimes had been in national attention due to the horrific killing of Matthew Shepard in 1998.

Changes in the political structure have also helped to change the way society views homosexuality. Gay characters are more prevalent on television, 111 known gay characters in 2012 compared to 26 in 2003 (Townsend, 2013). Having a gay identity is also being met with more positivity. This is a fundamental change from studies in the 1990s which are the basis for LGBT student identity development models. (Rhoads, 1994; Taub, 2008).

Campus Centers

The need to have centralized locations on college campuses for LGBT individuals is still paramount to showing that students should feel welcomed and open to being themselves. A

shift on college campuses, however, is the manner in which these centers are being utilized. All the participants in my own study felt that the center was great, but only if you knew about it, if you were completely out, and if you really needed to go. LGBT centers have been on campus since the early 1970's, and they provide a positive environment for students in which to come out (Evans, et al., 2010; Renn. 2007). What about for students who are already out? The majority of the students I interviewed were already out when they came to campus, and as stated previously, only utilized the center if they had a specific need.

According to Sanlo (2000), LGBT students want their campuses to cater to their needs. If students are coming to college already out, as this study shows, LGBT centers need to re-examine how they provide services for their students. A change in services can take the form of increasing holistic development for students, promoting artistic endeavors, and academic initiatives. By branching out from the normal model of an LGBT student center, practitioners can move to providing first class support and a well rounded program for students.

Student Affairs

Student affairs practitioners need to utilize their students and become more knowledgeable of current trends. One conclusion regarding the participants in this study was that sexual exploration is one of the key aspects of coming out, or finalizing commitment to a gay identity. A large majority of the participants turned to online sources for this outlet. Campus practitioners need to be aware of this occurrence. Moreover, practitioners need to be ready, willing, and able to have frank and honest conversations regarding safety and responsibility in sexual exploration. This can begin with a basic understanding of what is available to our students in today's culture. One such example is the use of dating services.

There are many mainstream dating websites like O.K. Cupid or Match.com. There are however a number of mobile dating applications such as Grindr, Growlr, Scruff, or Hornet which are more subversive than mainstream dating websites. Understanding vocabulary will help in knowing what students mean when they talk about their interactions, whether it be an actual date, or a physical encounter. This knowledge can aid in determining the best course of action to help students.

Finally, it is imperative students know that colleges and practitioners will provide support. Developmentally appropriate and effective support needs to be presented in readily identifiable ways and universally across college campuses. Suggestions from the participants included statements in all university syllabi, or a blanket proclamation from the president's office. Other alternatives can be increased training for Resident Advisors in on-campus housing, training for off-campus housing offices, law enforcement collaborations, or bystander awareness training. No matter the method, the voice of the student needs to be central to the decision making process.

Recommendations For Further Research

This study concludes there are several areas in need of additional research. First, I believe that D'Augelli's model is appropriate for today's students, but needs of updating. D'Augelli does not address the difference between finding a *gay* community, and that of a *support* community. Many of the respondents spoke to this in the ways they came out. A support community is one where the student feels supported in his identity. The support community can be filled with friends, family, and practitioners, but does not need to be filled

with other gay individuals. A gay community, however, is needed to feel a sense of belonging, a sense that the student is not alone in their identity.

Additionally, as was found with the majority of the respondents to this study, the sexual intimacy process of coming out was also a means by which to solidify a gay identity.

Homosexual intimacy does not carry a stigma as such today, and it is something heavily discussed by gay communities today. Sex is now seen as full commitment to a homosexual identity. Further study is needed to address the differences in these communities, as well as the significance of sexual exploration and development as a finalizing event.

Secondly, the landmark change in federal standing, as well as the changes over time of the American public's support of marriage equality, shows that new research is needed in the area of societal effects on coming out. Under the new rulings, same sex couples are eligible for many federal tax benefits, and are also now required to disclose all money on the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA). The state of Washington, where GSU is located, allows for same sex marriages allowing GSU to offer partner benefits that other institutions cannot. These are fundamental shifts from previous years which can have a profound effect on the coming out process.

Finally, more research is needed on the effectiveness of student LGBT centers and the general LGBT populations to determine the best course of action as centers enter their 4th decade in operation. For example, are safe-zone programs and aiding in the coming out process all that they can be used for? Students come to campus and want to be seen as a whole person. Centers need to address this growing trend, through more effective advertising, as well as a wider range of programs. Centers should utilize general population surveys, targeted

questionnaires and community outreach to determine the best course of action for future programs. Understanding the impact that the center on campus can have is also imperative. Schools in Washington are now asking about sexual identity on college admissions forms to better assess the target population of programs on campus that cater to LGBT students. The need for an LGBT center on campus is felt; however, the perception of ineffectiveness is clearly stated, especially for those students who, like Aidan, are unable to go to such centers for fear of being “outed.”

Summary

Many aspects of establishing a gay identity in the United States have improved over the last 45 years. Since I came out in 2003, there are earlier ages for coming out, or self-actualizing a homosexual identity. The earlier age of coming out represents a fundamental shift in LGBT identity models and much previous research. Specifically for college students, the studies and models relied on by student affairs practitioners (Cass, 1990; D’Augelli, 1994; Rhoads, 1994) all suggest that coming out occurs in college, which is no longer the case.

There is now a positive outlook on homosexuality, with students today readily able to find role models, and public figures that are gay. Previously mentioned is the number of gay characters on television rising by 85 identifiable characters (Townsend, 2013). Also adding to the positivity around homosexuality is the national acceptance of gay marriage, 53% today compared to 33% in 2003 (Townsend, 2013). Moreover, the Supreme Courts positive rulings regarding DOMA and Proposition 8 showcase the support that gay people have in this country on a national level.

As gay students come to college already out, and already comfortable with being out, programs and services need to shift from helping during the coming out process to helping the student as a whole. Students want to be looked at as a whole person, not just identified by one facet of their being. As Jeff put it, "I really don't want people to see me as Jeff who is a gay man; I want people to see me as Jeff." Seeing students holistically, rather than compartmentalizing their identities into different centers on campus, or based upon variables to be assessed will help student affairs practice in the future. To fully summarize this study, I include a story of my life today.

Story

I am twenty-seven. I know that that doesn't seem significant, but to me it is. I recently was asked to attend my high school ten year reunion. I used to be terrified of people knowing I was gay, particularly in high school. It seemed like I had a lot to lose then. Looking back I know that that wasn't always the case, but at the time it seemed like no one would like me.

I've been out now for almost a decade. My relationship with my family is strong; they even regularly ask when I will find a guy. My mom wants to have grandchildren; my dad just wants to make sure I find someone that makes me happy. My siblings have partners, and my older brother even has a daughter. Being gay is just a part of who I am.

I think that is the biggest change for me over the years. My ability to say that being gay is just a part of me, and actually fully meaning it. People don't introduce me as their gay friend, or think of me as such, I'm just me. In today's climate that me is much more positive and feels connected to the world.

It's difficult to fully recollect all of the feelings I have had over the past few years; I didn't exactly take field notes. What I do remember though is that I have felt positive about gay culture. In talking with the students in my study, I found that they also felt positive. I could tangibly see the differences from when I came out to now. I could see the future of gay culture being bright. I felt that things were changing and becoming much better.

That is what I find my study illustrating the most, at least for me. I remember a time in high school that we had to write a poem similar to Walt Whitman's *I Sit and Look Out*. At the time I didn't realize it but it is a very depressing piece of poetry. It talks about a man, or mankind sitting idly by and watching the atrocities in the world pass them by.

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame;
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men, at anguish with themselves, remorseful
after deeds done; I see, in low life, the mother misused by her children, dying,
neglected, gaunt, desperate; I see the wife misused by her husband – I see the
treacherous seducer of young women; I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited
love, attempted to be hid – I see these sights on the earth; I see the workings of battle,
pestilence, tyranny – I see martyrs and prisoners; I observe a famine at sea – I observe
the sailors casting lots who shall be kill'd to preserve the lives of the rest; I observe the
slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers, the poor, and upon
negroes, and the like; All these – All the meanness and agony without end, I sitting, look
out upon, See, hear, and am silent (Whitman, 1999)

Sitting and just watching, and doing nothing, not feeling anything. It is ironic that while writing this last passage of introspection I should think on that particular poem. I think I have a different feeling toward it now. I think that now I have to say that I sit and look out, and feel hope.

References

- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorensen, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education*. (8th ed.). Wadsworth Pub Co.
- Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice. *New directions for student services*, 2005(111), 25-39. doi: 10.1002/ss.171
- Bybee, J. A., Sullivan, E. L., Zielonka, E., & Moes, E. (2009). Are gay men in worse mental health than heterosexual men? The role of age, shame and guilt, and coming-out. *Journal of Adult Development*, 16. doi:10.1007/s10804-009-9059-x
- Carnegie. (2012). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education* Retrieved January 10, 2012, from <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/>
- Carver, P. R., Egan, S. K., & Perry, D. G. (2004). Children who question their heterosexuality. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(1). doi:10.1037/0012-1649.40.1.43
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4, 219-235.
- Cass, V.C. (1990). The implications of homosexual identity formation for the Kinsey model and scale of sexual preference. In D.P. McWhirter, S.A. Saunders, & J. M. Reinish (Eds.), *Homosexuality/heterosexuality: Concepts of sexual orientation* (pp. 239-266). New York: Oxford University Press.

- Cass, V. C. (1996). Sexual Orientation identity formation: A Western phenomenon. In R.P. Cabaj & T.S. Stein (Eds.), *Textbook of homosexuality and mental health* (pp. 227-251). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cohler, B. J., & Hammack, P. H. (2007). The psychological world of the gay teenager: Social change, narrative, and "normality". *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 36. doi:10.1007/s10964-006-910-1
- Coleman, E. (1982). Developmental stages of the coming out process. *Journal of homosexuality*, 7(2-3), 31-43. doi: 10.1300/J082v07n02_06
- Connell, R. (2011). *Gender*. (2 ed.). Madlen: Polity Pr.
- Consortium of higher education lesbian gay bisexual transgender resource professionals*. (2012, February 28). Retrieved from <http://www.lgbtcampus.org/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design, choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CAA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research, planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development. In E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context* (pp. 312-333). San Francisco: Joosey-Bass

- Dilley, P. (2002). *Queer man on campus; a history of non-heterosexual college men, 1945-2000*. New York, NY: Routledge Farmer.
- Dreschler Sharp, M., Riera, J. L., & Jones, S. R. (2012). Telling our stories: Using autoethnography to construct identities at the intersections. *Journal of student affairs research and practice*, 49(3), 315-332. doi: 10.1515/jsarp-2012-6338
- Dugan, J. P., & Yurman, L. (2011). Commonalities and differences among lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students: Considerations for research and practice. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(2). doi:10.1353/csd.2011.0027
- Erikson, E.H. (1980) . *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: Norton. (Original work published 1959)
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2003). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (pp. 199-258). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Evans, N. J. (2001). The experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths in university communities. In A. R. D'Augelli (Ed.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and youth: psychological perspectives* (pp. 181-198). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college, theory, research, and practice*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc Pub.
- Floyd, F. J., & Bakeman, R. (2006). Coming-out across the life course: Implications of age and historical context. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 35(3). doi:10.1007/s10508-006-9022-x
- Komives, S. R., & Woodard, D. B. (Eds.), (1996). *Student services: A handbook for the profession* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

LGBT friendly campus climate index. (2011). Retrieved from

<http://www.campusclimateindex.org/>

Marszalek, J. F., III, Cashwell, C. S., Dunn, M. S., & Heard Jones, K. (2004). Comparing gay identity development theory to cognitive development: An empirical study. *Journal of Homosexuality, 48* (1), 103-123.

McQuail, D. (1977). The influence and effects of mass media. *Mass communication and society, 70-94.*

Moran, C. D. (2003). Conceptualizing identity development: Unmasking the assumptions within inventories measuring identity development. *NASPA Journal, 40*(3). doi:0310508264004

Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students.* Jossey-Bass.

Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school.* Berkely: University of California Press.

Rankin, S., Weber, G., Blumenfeld, W., & Frazer, S. (2010). *2010 state of higher education for lesbian, gay, bisexual, & transgender people.* Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride.

Renn, K. A. (2007). LGBT student leaders and queer activists: Identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identified college student leaders and activists. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(3). doi:10.1353/csd.2007.0029

Renn, K. A. (2010). LGBT and queer research in higher education: The state and status of the field. *Educational Researcher, 39*(2). doi:10.3102/0013189X10362579

Rhoads, R. A. (1994). *Coming out in college: The struggle for a queer identity.* New York, NY: Bergin & Garvey.

- Riggle, E. D. B., Whitman, J. S., Olson, A., Rostosky, S. S., & Strong, S. (2008). The positive aspects of being a lesbian or gay man. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(2). doi:10.1037/0735-7028.39.2.210
- Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., & Hunter, J. (2004). Ethnic/racial differences in the coming-out process of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths: A comparison of sexual identity development over time. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10(3). doi:10.1037/1099-9809.10.3.215
- Russ, T. L., Simonds, C. J., & Hunt, S. K. (2002). Coming out in the classroom...an occupational hazard?: The influence of sexual orientation on teacher credibility and perceived student learning. *Communication Education*, 51(3). doi:10.1080/03634520216516
- Sanlo, R. L. (2000). The LGBT campus resource center director: The new profession in student affairs. *Journal of student affairs research and practice*, 37(3), 199-209.
- Schope, R. D. (2002). The decision to tell: Factors influencing the disclosure of sexual orientation by gay men. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 14(1). doi:10.1300/J041v14n01_01
- Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stevens, R. A. (2004). Understanding gay identity development within the college environment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(2). doi:10.1353/csd.2004.0028
- Taub, D. J. (2008). Exploring the impact of parental involvement on student development. *New directions for student services*, 2008(122), 15-28. doi: 10.1002/ss.272
- Thomas, J. R., & Nelson, J. K. (2001). *Research methods in physical activity*. (4th ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

- Torres, V., Jones, S. R., & Renn, K. A. (2009). Identity development theories in student affairs: Origins, current status, and new approaches. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(6). doi:10.1353/csd.0.0102
- Townsend, M. (2013, June 26). *Infographic: LGBT television characters and couples paving the way on the road to marriage equality*. Retrieved from <http://www.glaad.org/blog/infographic-lgbt-television-characters-and-couples-paving-way-road-marriage-equality>
- Whitman, W. (1999, July). *I sit and look out*. Retrieved from <http://www.bartleby.com/142/83.html>
- Wilkerson, J. M., Brooks, A. K., & Ross, M. W. (2010). Sociosexual identity development and sexual risk taking of acculturating collegiate gay and bisexual men. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(3). doi:10.1353/csd.0.0131

Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Background
 - a. Where are you from?
 - b. How old are you?
 - c. What was your high school experience like?
 - d. What is the make-up of your family? (only child, single parent, etc.)
 - e. What is your major? What do you want to do when you graduate?
2. Coming Out Process
 - a. What does coming out mean to you?
 - b. Tell me about what coming out was like for you.
 - c. When did you come out?
 - d. Where is your comfort at with being out
 - e. Do you remember who the first person you told was? Tell me about that experience.
 - f. Do you have any other memorable coming out moments? Share them if you can.
 - g. Did you have any gay role models?
 - h. Do you think being gay is easy? Will it get easier?
3. Family/Friends/Socially
 - a. Who are you out to?
 - b. Tell me about the relationship you have with your family. Do they know?
 - c. What was it like telling your friends? Did you tell your friends?
 - d. Is there anyone who helped you come out, or anyone you look up to?
 - e. How supported do you feel by your family? Your friends? Society?
4. Current Events/Media
 - a. Can you think of any gay figures in the media like TV, Movies, etc? What do you think about them?
 - b. How do you feel about the way being gay is portrayed in the media?
 - c. Tell me about your experience being gay on social media websites, i.e. twitter, facebook, pinterest, etc.
 - d. What are your thoughts on the current political atmosphere for gay people? How do you feel about current events surrounding being gay?
 - e. Large catalysts or moments in the gay world today?
5. Student Affairs & College
 - a. What is it like to be gay in college?
 - b. Have you used any resources on campus regarding your coming out process or sexuality?
 - c. What can colleges do to improve your experience as a gay student?