Heteronormativity and Its Impacts on the Identities and Life Experiences of LGBQ Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity is deeply ingrained in U.S. society. Heteronormativity is the normalization of the heterosexual identity and the othering of any identity that does not fit within the strict ideals of heterosexuality. My study explored the impact of heteronormativity on the life experiences and identities of LGBQ-identifying individuals. In my study, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with participants who had been in different-sex relationships. The interviews illuminate the impact that heteronormativity often has on people who identify as LGBQ with their experiences of coming out, identity formation, and religion. Heteronormativity is deeply ingrained in U.S. society and impacts LGBQ-identifying individuals in more ways than just the three that were explored in this study. In my study, I learned that heteronormativity is even more ingrained and widespread than previously believed. Early life experiences such as coming out, identity formation, and religion reverberate decades later and throughout people's lives, further strengthening the impact of heteronormativity.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study examines the impact that heteronormativity has on the identities and the life experiences of LGBQ-identifying individuals[1]. In the United States, heterosexuality is the norm that everyone in society is expected to fit into. There are many myths surrounding heterosexuality and what considered to be the desired heterosexual identity (Sumara and Davis 1999). The heterosexual ideal is one that is often unachievable even for heterosexual-identifying individuals. Heteronormativity as an institution is actively regulating individuals in society in order to keep them within its boundaries while marginalizing and othering individuals who fall outside of heterosexuality (Jackson 2006). Due to heteronormativity, homosexuality has been defined as a sin, a mental illness, and has even been defined as a crime (Zachary 2001).

In my study, I examined the impacts that heteronormativity had on LGBQ-identifying individuals. Heteronormativity is deeply ingrained into U.S. society and has an impact on many aspects of an LGBQ-identifying individuals life. Previous beliefs about the impact of heteronormativity do not accurately represent just how ingrained and widespread heteronormativity is in U.S. society. My research is important because it draws attention to just a few of the countless impacts that heteronormativity has on LGBQ-identifying individual's. It is important to draw attention to heteronormativity and its serious and powerful impact on LGBQ individuals in order to disrupt the traditionally held ideas and beliefs of heteronormativity. In my study, I learned that early life experiences of LGBQ-identifying individuals such as coming out, formulating their identity, and the experiences they had with religion, reverberate decades later

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[1] In my study I use the term "LGBQ" rather than "LGBTQ." I do not include transgender identities in my study because it is a gender identity rather than a sexual orientation. That is not to say that transgender individuals should not be included in my research, rather that the focus of my research was an individual's sexual orientation instead of their gender identity. Furthermore, within the transgender identity there is a range of sexual orientations.

and throughout an individual's life, which ultimately strengthens the impact of heteronormativity. [2]

While there is quite a lot of research surrounding coming out, religion, and identity, to my knowledge there appears to be a lack of research that discusses how embedded heteronormativity is in all three. As a result, I wanted to look at the impact that heteronormativity had on individuals who identify as LGBQ. Furthermore, in my research I interviewed many individuals who are part of the older LGBQ generation. To my knowledge, previous research tended to focus a lot on youth and on middle-aged adults. While looking at other research, I found that the older LGBQ generation was often ignored or disregarded. Therefore, with my research I sampled LGBQ identities from a wide range of ages. That being said, I think that research surrounding the experiences of the LGBQ youth is extremely important because the early life experiences that an individual has can impact them for the rest of their lives. However, for my research I am interested in learning about the experiences of LGBQ-identifying individuals across all ages. Furthermore, I think it is important to look at the experiences of the older LGBQ individuals in order to learn about how much has truly changed between the older LGBQ generation and the younger LGBQ generation.

In the upcoming chapters I will first discuss some of the important theories and background about coming out, identity, and religion, as well as the support and stigma for LGBQ individuals. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the methods that I used in order to conduct my research. In Chapter 4, I will begin to explain my findings about coming out. Chapter 5 will look at the experiences that my participants had with heteronormativity and their identity. In chapter 6, I

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[2] Within my study, one of the life experiences involved with coming out and identity formation that all of my participants had in common was that they had been in different-sex relationships. I will use the term different-sex relationship rather than opposite-sex relationships in order to expand my definition beyond the gender binary of just male and female.

will discuss my findings in regards to religion. In Chapter 7, I will summarize my findings and

discuss the implications of my findings for research and policy.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND BACKGROUND

The term "homosexuality" was first coined in 1869 (Zachary 2001). This labeling of individuals as homosexuals in turn led to individuals being identified only by their sexuality rather than being identified by a more holistic and complete representation of who they are as an individual (Zachary 2001). In 1885, homosexuality became a crime and continued to be criminalized until 1967 (Zachary 2001). In the 1920s, homosexuality became defined as an illness (Zachary 2001). Homosexuality continued to be considered a mental illness and was listed as a mental disorder by The American Psychiatric Association until 1974 (Cain 1991).[3]

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity refers to the heterosexual privilege that is incorporated into all aspects of social life, which in turn orders everyday existence (Jackson 2006). Heteronormativity is embedded in institutions that disadvantage individuals who have a non-heterosexual identity (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan 2009). In heteronormativity, everyone is presumed to be heterosexual and as a result, any sexual orientation that falls outside of heterosexuality generally remains invisible and unacknowledged (Herek et al. 2009). It is when sexual minorities become visible that they are problematized and considered to be abnormal, unnatural, and requiring an explanation (Herek et al. 2009). As a result of being problematized, sexual minorities are considered to be deserving of discriminatory treatment and hostility (Herek et al. 2009).

While the institution of heteronormativity is exclusionary, it also governs the lives of those who fall within its boundaries (Jackson 2006). Heteronormativity relies on the privilege of heterosexuality due to its normalization (Jackson 2006). As a result, in the United States, the terms "normal" and "heterosexual" have come to be understood as synonymous (Sumara and

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[3] Homosexuality was removed by The American Psychiatric Association from the list of mental illnesses in 1973 rather than 1974 (Human Rights Campaign 2017).

Davis 1999). Due to heteronormativity, heterosexuality often goes unmarked, uncontested, and unchallenged because it is almost always labeled as the norm or the default (Yep 2003). While heteronormativity is deeply ingrained in all parts of society, it is not a fixed or stable category (Yep 2003). Instead, heterosexuality must constantly reproduce a perpetual appearance of being as authentic and uncontaminated from homosexuality as possible (Yep 2003). Therefore, heterosexuality is an unstable construct that is in need of constant validation and protection (Yep 2003). As a result, both individuals who fall inside and outside of heteronormativity find themselves continually governed by heteronormativity.

Stigma

Sexual stigma is often used to describe "the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords anyone associated with nonheterosexual behaviors, identity, relationships, or communities" (Herek et al. 2009:33). As a result of heteronormativity, LGBTQ individuals are often stigmatized as an "Other." According to Yep (2003:18):

> This process of othering creates individuals, groups, and communities that are deemed to be less important, less worthwhile, less consequential, less authorized, and less human based on historically situated markers of social formation such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality.

Due to the devaluation of homosexual behaviors and attractions, many LGB-identifying individuals are aware of the hostility and malicious stereotypes that are often attached to LGB-identifying individuals (Herek et al. 2009).

Some of the sexual stigma that LGB individuals may face is being ostracized, and being the victim of homophobic epithets, discrimination, or violence (Herek et al. 2009). Additionally,

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an example of stigma that many LGBQ individuals face from government institutions is that

LGBQ sexualities are often framed as a security issue, which makes it appear as though

homosexuality is a threat (Henshaw 2014). Due to the sexual stigma that exists in the United

States today, many LGB individuals as well as heterosexuals may have internalized sexual

stigma (Herek et al. 2009). In order to avoid sexual stigma, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike

both use a variety of strategies to prevent being labeled with a non-heterosexual identity (Herek

et al. 2009). Some of the internalized sexual stigma that a heterosexual person may have is the

fear of being interpreted by others as non-heterosexual. Due to sexual stigma, heterosexuals may

possess homophobic or homonegative attitudes towards sexual minorities (Herek et al. 2009). In

order to prevent being perceived by others as non-heterosexual, a heterosexual-identifying

individual may reinforce and support commonly held beliefs of homophobia. Additionally, the

fear that a heterosexual-identifying individual may have of being perceived as LGBQ

demonstrates how the LGBQ identity is perceived by many people in society as bad or morally

wrong. As a result, many heterosexual-identifying individuals will go to great lengths to portray

themselves in ways that they believe could not possibly be interpreted by others as anything

other than heterosexual. Therefore, many heterosexual-identifying individuals may not only

internalize homophobia and police themselves, but they may also reinforce homophobic ideas

and beliefs in order to police the actions and presentations of other individuals as well.

For sexual minorities, internalized sexual stigma can be directed both inward and

outward, meaning that sexual minorities can have negative attitudes towards other LGBQ-

identifying individuals as well as towards themselves (Herek et al. 2009). In most cases, the

internalized stigma that sexual minorities often have is directed toward themselves and their own

same sex attractions (Herek et al. 2009). Internalized and self-directed stigma, such as accepting

or agreeing with negative beliefs and attitudes surrounding non-heterosexual identities, is also referred to as internalized homophobia or internalized heterosexism (Herek et al. 2009).

<center>Social Support and Networks for LGBQ</center>

The stigma that surrounds the LGBQ-identifying individuals may ultimately prevent support from being provided. Instead of receiving much needed support, many individuals may ultimately find that they are instead ostracized or shunned. That being said, support is extremely important for individuals in the LGBQ community. In Eisenberg and colleagues' 2018 study they examined how LGBTQ youth were more likely to have negative health outcomes due to the resources and support that they recieved. In their study, they found that for LGBTQ youth, friends and family were identified as being the most important resources (Eisenberg et al. 2018). Family is extremely important to LGBTQ youth due in part to the dependency that most youth have on their families. As a result, many families not only have the possibility of creating supportive homes, but families also have the possibility of helping LGBTQ youth find support outside of their homes (Wolowic, Sullivan, Valdez, Porta, and Eisenberg 2018).

In a study looking at family acceptance and the impact it had on LGBTQ youth and their health, Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2010) found that family acceptance was dependent on multiple factors. Some of the factors that impacted whether an individual had family acceptance was whether the LGBTQ identifying individual was born in the United States, if they were raised religiously, and their social class (Ryan et al. 2010). In their study, one of Ryan et al.'s (2010) findings regarding family acceptance was that people who were born outside of the United States were less likely to be accepted by their family. Another factor that impacted the acceptance of the family was if a child was raised religiously. If the adolescent reported growing up with a religious affiliation, they reported lower family acceptance compared to

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individuals who were not raised religiously (Ryan et al. 2010). Lastly, social class was another important factor that appeared to have a significant impact on family acceptance. In their study, Ryan et al. (2010) found that parents who had a higher occupational status were more likely to be accepting of LGBTQ youth.

The support that LGBTQ youth received from their parents was incredibly influential to their health (Ryan et al. 2010). Young adults who reported high levels of familial support had better general health, social support, and also had better self-esteem than individuals who did not have high levels of support from their families (Ryan et al. 2010). For the LGBTQ youth who reported having low support from their families, Ryan et al. (2010) found that they had substantially worse health. Many LGBTQ youth who received very little support from their families generally suffered from depression, substance abuse, and many of the LGBTQ youth had suicidal thoughts and attempts. LGBTQ youth who received high levels of support from their family had half as many suicidal thoughts and attempts compared to those who received very little support from their family (Ryan et al. 2010). However, while Ryan et al.'s (2010) study largely focuses on the support that LGBTQ youth received, the support that LGBQ-identifying individuals receive when they are growing up may ultimately have an impact on an individual for the rest of their life. Furthermore, the support that an individual receives is also important and influential for all LGBQ-identifying individuals regardless of their age.

Wolowic et al. (2018) examined the supportive resources that were available to LGBTQ youth. Wolowic et al's 2018 study found that one of the most important sources of support that LGBTQ youth received was from their friends. Friends not only provided LGBTQ youth with much needed emotional support, but friends could also provide connections to other forms of support such as resources, events, or programs (Wolowic et al. 2018). Friends were an important

source of support to LGBTQ youth because their friends could attend programs or events with them or their friends were already involved in supportive resources for LGBTQ individuals (Wolowic et al. 2018). About half of the participants in Eisenberg et al.'s (2018) study said that the most important form of support that they received came from friends and family. One participant in their study when discussing the support that was most important to them stated, "'my parents, my family, my friends. If they accept me, I don't care about strangers. I don't care about my workplace. I don't care about the school. If people close to me accept me, I can make it through life'" (Eisenberg et al. 2018: 975).

Besides family and friends, other resources that many of the youth in Eisenberg et. al.'s (2018) study found to be helpful were spaces, activities, and support created for people who identify as LGBTQ. In spaces, activities, and support that is geared toward the LGBTQ community, the youth said that they felt safe, they were provided with services and tailored information, and that they felt a sense of community (Eisenberg et al. 2018). Due to the many challenges that most LGBTQ youth face, having resources and strong support could be lifesaving (Eisenberg et al. 2018). Regardless of age, support is important for everyone.

<div align="center">Identity</div>

Identity is how people present themselves both internally and externally, as well as how an individual fits into socially constructed categories. The process of identity formation truly begins when an individual acknowledges their LGBQ identity for themselves. Individuals who identify as LGBQ are often met with stigma and a lack of support which may, in turn, have an impact on their identity. In general, an individual's identity can be largely impacted by other people. In both social identity theory and identity theory, the self, or an individual can categorize, classify, or name themselves in relation to other existing social categories or

classifications (Stets and Burke 2000). It is through the process of self-categorization (social identity theory), or identification (identity theory), that an identity is formed (Stets and Burke 2000). In identity theory, identification consists of people naming others as well as themselves through the recognition that individuals have positions or roles in society (Stets and Burke 2000). For LGBQ-identifying individuals, they are often placed by people in a heteronormative society into the role of "other," or are placed in an outsider position that is "different" from the norm of heteronormativity. As a result of the position as "other" or as an outsider, the LGBQ identity is one that is highly stigmatized. In identity theory, the basis of an identity is the categorization of an individual as occupying a role in society and how that role is then incorporated into an individual's behavioral expectations and understandings (Stets and Burke 2000; Thoits 1986). For many individuals in the LGBQ community, their non-heterosexual identity falls outside of the heteronormative expectation.

In social identity theory, a social group is comprised of individuals who share a common social identity and view themselves to be a part of the social category associated with that identity (Stets and Burke 2000). Having a particular social identity means sharing common ideas and being like others in the group and seeing things from the perspective of the group (Stets and Burke 2000). As a result of a shared social identity, individuals who are similar often categorize themselves as belonging to the in-group and those who differ from that identity are categorized as part of the out-group (Stets and Burke 2000). In heteronormativity, the in-group consists of individuals who identify as heterosexual while individuals who identify as non-heterosexual are classified as being a part of the out-group. As a result of belonging to in-groups or out-groups, an individual's self-esteem is enhanced when evaluating the in-group that they belong to positively and the out-group negatively (Stets and Burke 2000). In society, people often determine their

identity broadly from the different social categories that an individual belongs to (Stets and Burke 2000). Each individual throughout their life belongs to a unique variation of one-of-a-kind social categories (Stets and Burke 2000).

In a society where there are seemingly only two or three sexual identities, homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual, that are widely accepted, individuals must try to choose an identity that best fits their own experiences regardless of whether any of the three identities are an accurate representation (Horowitz and Newcomb 2008). As a result of the limited categories, it might be difficult for an LGBQ-identifying individual to choose an identity that accurately represents who they are and their experiences. Not only is it difficult choosing one identity to represent all of an individual's experience, but it can also be difficult to identify as part of the LGBTQ community due to the stigma surrounding these identities. Therefore, for an LGBQ-identifying individual, they may be feel as though it is difficult to claim an identity as a result of the stigma that surrounds it. Due to the stigma surrounding LGBTQ-identities, many LGBTQ individuals internally process the stigma, which ultimately impacts how an individual navigates their sexuality (Rosenberg 2018). Therefore, the stigma that often surrounds the LGBQ community as a result of heteronormativity impacts how an individual may acknowledge, accept, and define their LGBQ identity. One of the impacts that stigma might have on identity formation is that some individuals may be aware of their sexual orientation long before they begin to acknowledge or accept their LGBQ identity. After a non-heterosexual identity is recognized, an individual can begin developing a LGBTQ identity and incorporating said identity into their broader understanding of themselves (Horowitz and Newcomb 2008).

Coming Out

After an individual begins to claim an LGBQ identity, they can then begin the process of coming out. Many individuals in the LGBQ community are often expected to engage in a process of sharing with others their non-heterosexual identity, also known as "coming out." As a result, the expectation to come out applies to LGBQ-identifying individuals but not heterosexual-identifying individuals. Coming out can be described as the process of acknowledging one's sexual orientation to oneself and then sharing it with others (Rasmussen 2004; Jordan and Deluty 1998). As a result of heteronormativity, many individuals in the LGBQ community may face stigma, harm, and they may ultimately lose major sources of support such as their friends and family, and an individual could even lose their job when sharing their sexual orientation with others (Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Cain 1991).

Lesbian and gay-identifying individuals engage in the lifelong process of managing information surrounding their sexual orientation and their identity (Cain 1991). Likewise, all individuals who identify as LGBQ are expected to engage in the lifelong process of coming out. Furthermore, as a result of stigma and a general lack of acceptance of individuals who identify as LGBTQ, both coming out and concealing one's identity can be difficult (Cain 1991). It may be difficult for an individual to come out to others because disclosure often involves careful planning and execution (Cain 1991). Similarly, it may be difficult to conceal one's identity because it requires an individual to pay attention to many aspects that may be normally overlooked such as how they present themselves to others and their lifestyle (Cain 1991). For instance, an example of the planning that may be involved in the coming out process is finding an "appropriate" time to disclose one's sexual orientation to others.

Due to the expectation of LGBQ individuals to share their sexual orientation with others, many individuals have to constantly determine when the right time to come out to others is. One of the reasons that LGBQ-identifying individuals constantly determine when to come out to others is to avoid making others uncomfortable or to gain acceptance and support. For instance, an individual may ultimately decide to conceal their homosexual identity in order to respect someone else's feelings or beliefs (Cain 1991). Similarly, some individuals may choose to not come out or they may choose to wait to come out to others because they feel that it would be an inappropriate time for them to discuss their homosexuality with others (Cain 1991). In comparison, heterosexuals do not have to worry about an "appropriate" time to share their sexual orientation, because anytime is an acceptable time. LGBQ-identifying individuals constantly have to manage if they come out, when they come out, and how they come out to others. LGBQ-identifying individuals are not only expected to share their non-heterosexual identity with others, but they also have to manage many aspects surrounding the process of coming out.

Another reason that some individuals may be hesitant to come out, or may ultimately decide to not come out, is due to the stigma that surrounds people in the lesbian and gay community (Cain 1991). As a result, many individuals when deciding if they should come out to others may determine that disclosing their stigmatized identity would not be worth the problems that may ensue (Cain 1991). For many LGBQ individuals the process of coming out is not one that is straightforward. Rather, LGBQ-identifying individuals must constantly manage their social presentation as well as manage what they say so as not share information that might inform others of their LGBQ identity. As a result, many LGBQ individuals may find themselves in situations where they feel as though they cannot come out due to a fear of safety, to avoid stigma, or because they do not know how others will react.

Coming out is expected of people in the LGBQ community because their identity is "different" than the culturally expected "norm" of heterosexuality. If lesbian and gay identifying individuals are not out, they are considered by many to be hiding an aspect of themselves from others (Cain 1991). Furthermore, many people believe that when an individual does not share their sexual orientation with others, it indicates that a person has guilt or shame whether or not that is how the individual actually feels (Cain 1991). The belief that people who are not out are experiencing guilt or shame causes many individuals to experience a lot of pressure to share their sexual orientation with others (Cain 1991). Yet, for many lesbian and gay individuals the expectation of disclosing their sexual orientation to others is supported by the belief that hiding one's sexual orientation suggests shame or guilt (Cain 1991). The decision whether or not to share one's sexual orientation with others is shaped by a variety of factors which can often change in particular situations (Rasmussen 2004; Cain 1991). For instance, some individuals might be out in some contexts and not out in others. Being out in some contexts and not in others may be difficult for an individual's identity because in some contexts an individual must actively try to conceal a large part of their identity.

The process of coming out can be scary and intimidating for many people in the LGBQ community. However, coming out for some individuals who identify as LGBQ can also be a relief. For instance, coming out to others might relieve the stress that an individual feels when they do not share their sexual orientation with others. Furthermore, "Disclosing one's sexual orientation also diminishes the need to hide relationships from friends, family, and coworkers and can promote more authentic relationships" (Grafsky 2018:784). That said, there are also many possible negative outcomes when disclosing a sexual orientation to others. Therefore, when an individual is deciding whether or when to disclose their sexual orientation to others,

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many individuals consider some of the advantages and disadvantages that they may face when coming out (Corrigan and Matthews 2003). When coming out to others, one of the most serious possibilities that some LGBTQ-identifying individuals may worry about is the risk of serious physical harm (Corrigan and Matthews 2003). Another problem that an individual may face when disclosing one's sexual or gender identity to others is that an individual may face stigma surrounding homosexual identities and may ultimately be ridiculed, harassed, and they may even risk losing their friends and family, or even their jobs (Cain 1991). An LGBQ-identifying individual may choose not to come out at work because of a fear of losing their job. In fact, in 28 states it is legal to fire someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (outandequal.org 2017). The expectation that LGBQ-identifying individuals should publicly disclose their sexual orientation is not also expected of heterosexual individuals. Therefore, because coming out is only expected for people within the LGBQ community and not for heterosexuals, many LGBQ individuals may feel as though by participating in the coming out process, they are treating their sexual preferences as unduly special (Cain 1991).

While coming out may be difficult for all members of the LGBQ community, one of the groups that might find it most difficult to disclose their sexual orientation to others is LGBQ youth. One of the reasons that it may be more difficult for youth to come out to others is that they are more vulnerable to how others react, specifically their parents or guardians. Due to the youth's dependency on their parents or guardians, it can often be more difficult to come out. For many people, youth included, choosing when to come out is extremely stressful because of all of the potential negative outcomes. For instance, many youths, when coming out to their peers and families often experienced hostility (D'augelli, Hershberger, Pilington 1998). For some youth who disclose their sexual orientation to their family and friends may ultimately be ostracized,

and even in some instances, may ultimately become homeless as a result of their disclosure

(D'augelli et al. 1998). In a study surrounding the experiences that youth aged 14-21 had coming

out to their parents and families while they were still living at home, D'augelli, Hershberger, and

Pilington (1998) found that about a fourth of the youth in their study who came out to their

parents were verbally abused by their parents and at least 10% of the youth in their study

endured threats or physical abuse. Usually expecting the worst, many LGBQ youth did not know

how someone was going to respond when they shared their sexual orientation with them and as a

result, many individuals felt safer just avoiding coming out at all (D'augelli et al. 1998).

<div align="center">Religion and LGBQ-Identifying Individuals</div>

For many LGBQ individuals, their religious identity and their sexual orientation seem to

be incongruent. As a result, an individual who is both LGBTQ and religious may feel as though

they are forced to choose between the two opposing identities (Dunn and Creek 2015). The

LGBQ community and religion are often in opposition to each other's identities since many

religions are unaccepting of LGBQ individuals. Furthermore, religion and governmental

institutions often propagate beliefs and policies that perceive homosexuality negatively

(Henshaw 2014). In many religions, homosexuality is perceived to be morally wrong and a sin.

Heteronormativity is a strong and pervasive force in religion because of the importance of

heterosexually structured life (i.e., married heterosexually, having children heterosexually). As a

result of the heteronormativity that is embedded in the institution of religion, many people who

identify as LGBQ struggle with the question of their identity as well as accepting and sharing

their identity with others.

A study done by Schuck and Liddle (2001) looked at the perceived opposition between

religion and sexual orientation of LGB individuals. In their study, Schuck and Liddle (2001),

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found that the largest source of conflict that an individual felt between their sexual identity and their religious identity was the way in which they were taught by their religion that homosexuality was a sin or that generally, LGB people were bad. Furthermore, in Schuck and Liddle's (2001) study they also found that some of their participants were advised to pray for forgiveness and that they should make an attempt to overcome their homosexuality. As a result of the religious teachings against homosexuality, some of the participants in Shuck and Liddle's (2001) study were fearful that they would go to hell or that God would reject them. Not only did LGB individuals worry about going to hell or being rejected by God, but many individuals worried that other members of their religion judged them (Schuck and Liddle 2001). Therefore, many of the participants in Schuck and Liddle's (2001) study felt as though their sexual orientation was something to feel shameful or guilty of. A couple participants in Shuck and Liddle's (2001) study reported severe depression, self-hatred, or suicidal ideas due to their religion.

In Beagan and Hattie's (2015) study, they conducted 35 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ-identifying adults to explore the experiences that they were having with religion. Beagan and Hattie (2015) found that the condemnation of homosexuality by many religions inflicted harm on sexual and gender minorities. Some of the negative impacts that religion had on participants in Beagan and Hattie's (2015) study included participants feeling shameful, guilty, disconnected from their body, sex negativity, and experienced a loss of relationships. For instance, participants who were asked to leave their religion due to their sexual orientation often lost their whole social network, which often included their family, friends and community (Beagan and Hattie 2015). Even participants who ultimately chose to leave religion on their own often lost relationships with their friends, their religious community, and their family (Beagan

and Hattie 2015). While religion might not have ultimately been a source of support for an individual's sexual orientation, religion was still a large source of support and community for many LGBQ individuals. Additionally, for many of Beagan and Hattie's (2015) participants they found that religion often had negative effects on the emotional well-being for LGBTQ-identifying individuals. For instance, many participants struggled with self-esteem, depression, self-harm, feeling unworthy or unlovable, fear of going to hell, and some participants even had feelings of extreme shame (Beagan and Hattie 2015)

Due to the seemingly opposing identities of religion and being a part of the LGBQ community, many individuals who were raised religiously often struggled with how to manage their two different identities. Dahl and Galliher's (2012) looked at LGBTQ-identifying individuals who had been raised religiously. One impact that Dahl and Galliher (2012) found for their participants who had been raised religiously was that they described feeling different and they often had a difficult time defining and describing their same-sex attractions. Furthermore, they found that almost all of their participants actively tried to not act on their attractions as well as ignoring the thoughts and attractions themselves. Due to feelings of needing to deny and not act on their attractions, many of the LGBTQ-identifying individuals felt very alone (Dahl and Galliher 2012). As a result of the conflict that many LGBTQ-identifying individuals felt between their religious identities and sexual identities, many individuals ultimately questioned their religious teachings (Dahl and Galliher 2012).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

In this study, I used qualitative research methods. I chose to conduct in-depth interviews in order to learn more about the experiences of people in the LGBQ community. Originally, I had hoped to learn more about why people in the LGBQ community chose to be in different-sex relationships and what the different-sex relationships meant to them. However, after interviewing my participants, I learned that different-sex relationships were very common and important to the larger process of coming out and identity formation. As a result, my new research question focuses on heteronormativity and the impacts it has on the identities as well as the life experiences of people in the LGBQ community. Ultimately I decided to use a qualitative research method because it allowed me to learn more about the experiences that people in the LGBQ community had with coming out, identity formation, and religion.

Recruitment Method

I found participants for my study through snowball sampling (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). Snowball sampling is used by connecting with individuals who are part of the population that you are studying and asking them if they know of another person in the population that you could also speak with (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). After I interviewed the people that I personally knew, I asked my participants if they knew anyone who would be interested in participating in the study. I was not successful with snowball sampling in terms of directly receiving new participants from old participants. However, I was successful with snowball sampling because I found new participants while talking to people who did not meet the requirements to participate in my study. After talking with people I knew, they connected me to people who they thought would be interested in participating. It was through people who could not participate themselves that the snowball sampling approach ended up being most effective

for me. Furthermore, while current participants did not directly give me new participants, I was invited to attend multiple LGBQ groups where I met people who were interested in participating in my study. I chose to use snowball sampling because of the limited time that I had to work on my honors thesis. Snowball sampling was an effective way to find participants for my study since I wanted over 10 people for my study, I did not have funding, I did not have a large background in the LGBQ community, and I am also not an active in the LGBQ community. Because I am an outsider to the LGBQ community, I relied on snowball sampling and individuals to be gatekeepers into the LGBQ community.

Another way that I gathered participants was through participating in groups within the LGBQ community. Engaging in different groups allowed me to participate in the LGBQ community and meet individuals and hear their stories. While at the groups, I shared why I was interested in learning more about LGBQ people who had been in different-sex relationships. Additionally, I brought my information and consent forms to hand out to people who were interested in participating in my study. Some people in the groups were interested and ultimately did do interviews with me. In some of the activities that I participated in, people asked if they could either get a copy of my final thesis or if they could come and support me during my final presentation of my thesis. Many of the people that I spoke with in the LGBQ community were excited that I was interested in the stories that they had to tell. I found that this was particularly true for participants who were older than 60 years old. Many of my older participants shared with me that they were happy to have the opportunity to share their stories, especially with someone of the younger generation. Furthermore, many of the people that I spoke with were happy that I would share their stories with others so that others could learn about their experiences.

A final way that I found participants to interview was through a flyer that I posted. On the flyer, I stated that I was an undergraduate at the University of Colorado at Boulder who was doing an honors thesis about individuals who had been in different-sex relationships. On the flyer, I also had my information so that anyone who was interested in participating could reach out to me. I ultimately decided to post a flyer as a recruitment method because I lacked individuals who were under the age of 40. Before posting my flyer, I only had one participant who was under the age of 40. As a result, I wanted to speak with people who were younger to gain a more diverse sample of participants. I wanted to hear from younger individuals to see if the opinions and experiences that they had differed from the experiences of the older LGBQ generation. After posting my flyer, I found one participant who was under the age of 30.

<div align="center">Researchers Background</div>

I am a 21-year-old white heterosexual cisgender woman, and I am not a part of the population that I was researching. As a result of my identity, participants may not have felt comfortable sharing certain information with me. This could have been a disadvantage for the research. That being said, I did not share with my participants my heterosexual identity. As a result, it was ultimately up to my participants as to what they thought my identity was. While I do not know what all of my participants thought my identity was, I did learn some from comments that people made in the interview. Some participants assumed that I was heterosexual, while some participants assumed that I was myself a part of the LGBQ community. Another boundary that I faced when speaking with most of my participants was the discussion of sex. In my study, I asked if participants were having sex and who they were having sex with. I am unsure if participants were reluctant to talk about their sexuality due impart to my age, sexual orientation, my gender, or if it was simply because they did not feel comfortable discussing their

sexuality in general. Lastly, because of my background as a white cisgender heterosexual woman, I do not fully understand the life experiences of my participants as a result of heteronormativity and I will never fully understand the experiences that my participants had (England 1994). However, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how heteronormativity impacted the identities and life experiences for people in the LGBQ community.

With my own identity in mind, I was originally interested in learning more about people's experiences in different-sex relationships as a result of the experiences of my family member. As someone who has lived either with me or nearby, I am very close to my family member. When I was in middle school, my family member told me he was gay. Over the years, I have learned more about family member's experience in different-sex relationships as well as the life experiences that he has had with his identity formation, coming out, and religion. Before my family member came out as gay, he was married and had three children. Before fully identifying as gay, my family member first identified as bisexual. However, after being in a different-sex relationship, my family member began to learn more about and acknowledge his LGBQ identity. After my family member came out as gay, he and his wife got a divorce. After their divorce, my family members went their own way and began having relationships with other people. However, about 10 years ago my family members moved back together in a house that they now share. Not only are they living together again, but my family member also often refers to his ex-wife as his wife. Because of my family members own experience and his relationship, I wanted to learn about other people's experiences in different-sex relationships. While I do know other people who identify as LGBQ and who have also been in different-sex relationships, my family member's experience is the one that is most familiar and the one that is closest to me.

Due to my experience with my family member, I had some previous opinions and experiences before I interviewed participants. One of the opinions that I had because of my experience with my family member was from the perspective of a gay man. The experiences that I heard from other participants, for example, participants who were women and bisexual, were different from the experiences that I was used to. Due to my own experience with my family member, it impacted the questions that I was asking participants. I based a lot of the questions that I asked the participants on subjects and topics that I thought were important to my family members experience. After interviewing a few people, I learned that there were some questions that I was not asking that I should have been and other questions that I was asking that were not applicable to my participants in the same way that they were for my family member.

Data Collection

Using an interview guide, I conducted semi-structured interviews with my participants. The interview was conducted in a location of the participant's choosing in order to ensure that they felt comfortable during the interview. Furthermore, in order to allow my participants to feel more comfortable during the interview, I gave them the option to do the interview over the phone or in person. Another way that I tried to make the participant feel comfortable sharing their own stories and experiences with me was by building rapport with my participants (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2015). Some of the ways that I established rapport with my participants before the interview were: not immediately beginning the interview by making small talk and sharing my own background and my experiences with my family member (Hennink et al. 2015). That being said, I also think that sharing my experience with participants impacted the interviews that I had. For instance, a couple of my participants would answer questions thinking that I only wanted to hear experiences similar to the experiences that my family member had. For instance, one

participant in particular thought that I was only interested in experiences where LGBQ-identifying individuals came out and were still living together and in a relationship with their different-sex partner. As a result, I do not know if some of my participants manipulated the answers that they gave if they thought that I was looking for experiences that were only like my family members. That being said, most of my participants did not appear to be answering questions in a way that only applied to my family member's experiences. But sharing with participants why I was interested in looking at the experiences of LGBQ-identifying individuals who had been in different-sex relationships did impact some of my participants in the answers that they provided. Another way that I built rapport with participants was how I interacted with them. For instance, during the in-person interviews, I continued to establish rapport by making eye contact and using other body language to convey to my participants that I was listening to them (Hennink et al. 2015). If the interview was conducted over the phone then I made sure that they knew that I was listening by giving small verbal responses such as "okay" and "yeah."

I used interviews for my research design in order to gain a better understanding of what life experiences my participants had with heteronormativity (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). One of the reasons that I used in-person interviews or interviews that were conducted over the phone to gather data was because they were more personal than other research methods. Another reason that collecting data by conducting interviews was important for my study was that it allowed me to see how participants reacted to the questions that I asked. By watching participants' reactions as well as listening to the responses that they had to many of my questions, I could better understand how the participant felt about the questions that I was asking them. Lastly, by conducting in-depth interviews with my participants I was able to learn what was important to

each individual participant. As a result, my research question changed because I learned that different-sex relationships were part of a larger process of identity formation and coming out.

Because I asked my participants about their sexuality in some parts of the interview, some may have felt uncomfortable answering or talking about sexuality. Using an interview guide enabled me to personalize each of my interviews with each of the participants in an effort to help them feel more comfortable while discussing their experiences or beliefs. I adopted the participant's language and asked questions based on how the flow of the interview was going. If a participant appeared hesitant to share certain information, I reminded them that the study was completely voluntary and they did not have to answer a question if they did not feel comfortable. Using in-person interviews was an important part of collecting data in my study because it has the highest response rate of any survey design (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). Due to the delicate and uncomfortable subject of sexuality, I wanted to ensure that I got the most responses possible from my participants. I chose to do in-person interviews instead of conducting a questionnaire in order to gather data due to some of the limitations and the drawbacks that come with using a questionnaire (Chambliss and Schutt 2013).

If I had instead used a questionnaire to ask participants about their sexuality they might have skipped the question if they did not feel comfortable answering it. Another limitation that I did not want when collecting my data was to limit the participants in their responses. I was worried that in a questionnaire I might impact the quality of the responses from my participants because they felt the answers did not apply to them. In-person interviews allowed participants to elaborate, discuss, or correct me if they felt that the question did not apply to them. In this sense, in-person interviewing allowed me to get more in-depth answers than I would have in other research methods. Furthermore, due to my position as an outsider to the field that I am studying,

I do not think that I would have been able to understand the implications of heteronormativity if I had just done observations. In hearing experiences and personal opinions of all of my participants I was able to learn more about the experiences and beliefs from LGBQ-identifying individuals than I would have gotten strictly from observations. Additionally, another positive aspect that I found when conducting the in-person interviews was that I was able to explain a question further if there was any confusion. If I had instead asked my participants to fill out a questionnaire, my participants may not have answered at all or correctly if they did not understand the question. Additionally, I was also able to redirect my participants if they did not answer the question in the way that I had anticipated. That being said, I also made sure that I was not asking my participants leading questions that would impact their answers.

New questions and themes arose in interviews with my participants that I had not expected. If I had conducted a questionnaire instead of interviewing my participants, new questions and information might not have necessarily emerged in the data collecting process. Furthermore, by conducting in-person and phone interviews, my participants were able to talk about the things that they thought were important to them. In my interviews, my participants were not limited to choosing from a few answers with no room to expand or elaborate. As a result of allowing my participants to talk about what was important to them, I learned that different-sex relationships were part of a larger process of identity formation and coming out due to heteronormativity.

Furthermore, by conducting interviews with my participants, I was able to give the participants the opportunity to explain their answers rather than choose an answer that they may not have felt like fully applied to them. Conducting interviews with my participants allowed me to work more with them on the order that questions were asked. Instead of having a rigid and

structured order to the questions I asked, I was able to follow the flow of the interview and use my interview guide to ask questions accordingly. Another reason that interviews were important was that I did not ask all of the participants all of the questions or I did not ask the questions in the same order (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). Some of my participants were not asked all of the questions because sometimes they addressed multiple questions when answering one question, because we did not have enough time to answer the questions, or because I added or removed questions as the interviews went on.

In order to ensure the confidentiality of my participants, I used pseudonyms for all of my participants. The participants either chose their pseudonyms at the time or the interview, or I assigned one to them. Additionally, in order to ensure that my study was completely confidential, I removed any identifiable information about my participants. By ensuring confidentiality with my participants, it allowed them to share experiences, stories, or beliefs that they might have previously worried about others knowing. Furthermore, some participants were hesitant to even participate because they were worried that they would be identified from my study. Not only were participants worried about being identified but they were also worried about people they were close to would also be identifiable as a result. By making my study completely confidential, it allowed for people to feel comfortable participating, as well as sharing stories, experiences, and beliefs.

<div align="center">Sample</div>

The participants in my study were: people who were a part of the LGBQ-identified, above 18 years old, were currently "out," and were either currently in or had been in a different-sex relationship(s). In this study, my participants identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer. The average age of my participant was 55 and ranged between 28 and 83 years old. All of my

participants had been in different-sex relationships before they "came out." While many

participants were not in different-sex relationships at the time of the interview, many participants

did acknowledge that they had been in different-sex relationships after they had come out.

Many participants were active in the LGBQ community, especially those over the age of

60. For participants who were under the age of 60, I found that they usually struggled with being

active in the LGBQ community because of a lack of time. I think that this impacted the data that

I gathered since more of my participants than not were very active in the LGBQ community. I

found that participants who were active in the LGBQ community often had support from groups

that they were involved in, and participants also had access to information about the LGBQ

community through said groups. In fact, many of my participants who were over the age of 60

were very active in the LGBQ community and were often in multiple LGBTQ groups.

Another commonality that I found was that many participants had previously identified as

something other than their current identity. Almost all of my participants identified as

heterosexual before they identified as LGBQ. Another important commonality between all of my

participants was that all of my participants were raised religiously. Due to my sampling method,

I found that the majority of my participants were raised religiously. As a result of snowball

sampling, many individuals often would tell me about people who they thought would be

interested in participating in my study who were very similar to themselves (i.e. religion, race,

age). Another reason that I believe snowball sampling resulted in all of my participants being

raised religiously, was due to the impact that religion had on many LGBQ-identifying

individuals. For instance, some participants may have felt as though religion had an impact on

their life experiences. Therefore, due to the impact that religion had on many of my participants,

some individuals may have been more willing to share their experiences with me. An individual

who was not raised religiously and did not feel as though they were greatly impacted, may not have felt as though they needed or wanted to share their experiences. While the degree of participation in religion varied between all of my participants, it was interesting that all 12 of my participants were raised with religion. I think that this had an impact on the data that I found because for most of my participants' religion impacted them in many ways. The one way that I found that religion impacted my participants was accepting their identity. As a result, I do not know if people who had not been raised religiously would have had as much trouble acknowledging and accepting their identity as someone who was raised religiously.

<center>Procedure.</center>

In my research, I conducted 12 in-person and over the phone interviews. I reached out to people I knew and asked them if they might be interested or knew anyone who might be interested in participating in my study. Once a participant reached out to me and showed interest in participating in my study, I answered any questions that they might have had about what my study entailed. I also ensured that interested participants fit the criteria of being over 18, identified as LGBQ, that they had been in or were currently in a different-sex relationship, and that they were "out". Additionally, I made sure that the interested participant knew that my study was completely confidential and I would not use any identifiable information in my thesis. If they were still interested in participating in my study, we scheduled a time and location to conduct the interview. After the interview was over, I asked the participants if they knew of anyone else who might fit the criteria and who might also be interested in participating in my study. If they did know other people who were interested, I asked if they would reach out to possible participants and give them my phone number.

For my interviews, I brought a notebook, printed interview guide, two consent forms, a printed copy of resources for my participants, and my phone to record the interview if the participant agreed. At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the consent form with my participants. While reviewing the consent form, I answered any questions that my participants had. While explaining the study and what it entailed, I made sure to let each participant know that my study was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. None of my participants did end up withdrawing from my study. Additionally, I informed my participants that I would not contact them in the future unless they indicated that they wanted me to contact them or if they wanted like to receive a copy of the final thesis. Another topic that I addressed with each of my participants was the use of my phone to record all the interviews. I informed the participant that they could decide whether or not I recorded the interview. If I did record the interview I would immediately transfer the recording onto my computer. After doing so, I would transcribe the interviews using the recorded conversations. After the participants signed the consent form, I gave them a copy of the consent form to contact me, an individual on my board, or the University of Colorado's IRB. I also gave my participants a list of resources that they could speak to if my study upset them or brought up information that was difficult for them.

<center>Research Terms</center>

In my research, I chose to use the term different-sex rather than different-gender as a way to challenge a rather common belief about the biological construction of sex. Often times, there is the belief that unlike gender, sex is stable and is not socially constructed. Furthermore, the biological construction of sex is often used as a means to support the gender binary. However, both sex and gender are constructed (Sterling-Fausto 2007). Gender ambiguous individuals,

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intersex individuals, and transgender individuals destabilize the gender binary (Sterling-Fausto 2007). By using the term different-sex I wanted to challenge the idea that sex is stable and is not socially constructed. Additionally, in my study I chose to use the term different-sex rather than opposite-sex in order to be more inclusive. Rather than using the term different-sex and limiting my participants and their partners to fitting within the gender binary, I used the term different-sex in order to represent more gender identities than just male or female.

Additionally, in my study, I use the "LGBQ" community rather than the "LGBTQ" community. I did not include transgender identities within my study because transgender is a gender identity rather than a sexual orientation. This is not to say that transgender identity should not be included; rather, my goal was to focus on the sexual orientation of an individual rather than their gender identity. Furthermore, within the transgender identity, there is a range of sexual orientations for each individual. As a result, I did not ultimately include the experiences and perspective of people who are a part of the transgender community.

Lastly, in my research, I found that some of my participants identified as bisexual before they identified as their current identity. For some of my participants, they chose to identify as bisexual before they identified as their current identity for many reasons. That being said, I am not dismissing the fact that bisexuality is a very real and stable sexual identity for many individuals.

Data Analysis

The results of my study were analyzed using modified ground theory and ethnographic coding. Ethnography can be described as the study of culture(s) that was common among a group of people (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). Ethnography can be used to describe and understand the social world (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). In my own research, I used ethnographic coding to

find themes that were used within the culture that I was studying. Grounded theory "is 'grounded' in, or based on the observations" (Chambliss and Schutt 2013:221). Through observations, interviews and reflections, researchers are able to formulate conceptual categories (Chambliss and Schutt 2013).

Additionally, the use of verbatim transcripts is important when using grounded theory in order to gain a better understanding of the views of the participants, interpret their meanings, and formulate themes that are rooted within the data (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2015). In my study, I used verbatim transcripts to code and construct categories from my data. All of my participants agreed to me recording the interviews. Shortly after each interview, I transcribed the recording. From the transcriptions, I coded the information and began to look for themes within my data. Some of the themes that arose from my data were coming out, identity and religion.

<div align="center">Processing the Data</div>

While transcribing my interviews, I chose to do selective transcription. I transcribed all parts of the interviews that I thought would be relevant. For the parts of interviews that I did not think held information currently relevant, I did not transcribe them, but I did write the time stamps and a brief description about what was not transcribed. I wrote the time stamp and what was being discussed so that if needed, I could go back to my recordings and transcribe information that may have been left out if I needed to ultimately use them. After doing so I created a checklist of all of the ideas that I thought might end up being themes within the interviews. I went through the transcriptions multiple times to thoroughly read through and to look for themes. After re-reading the interviews, I would make a note of the possible themes and what interview it occurred in. By using a list to look for themes and marking what interviews they occurred in I was able to find the main themes and sub-themes of my thesis.

Additionally, I gathered my notes that I took in each interview about the setting, the interview, the participant, and my own opinions and feelings from each interview. After looking for themes within the interviews and analyzing data, some of the themes that emerged were; coming out, identity, and religion.

In the next three empirical chapters I will be discussing my findings. First, in Chapter 4 I will be discussing the process of coming out as an ongoing process filled with many decisions. In Chapter 5, I will be discussing the identity of my participants and the ways in which they began the identity formation process. In my final data chapter, Chapter 6, I will be discussing religion and the impacts that being raised religiously had on my participants. Throughout all of my data chapters, I will be discussing the impact that heteronormativity has on my participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMING OUT

Judy, 51-year-old who self-identified as a lesbian woman, first began coming out after she had her "first sexual experience with a woman…and we ended up in a relationship, but even after that relationship I still kind of dated guys on and off." After being in relationships with men on and off and acknowledging that different-sex relationships were not for her, Judy came out to friends and family. When describing her coming out experiences in general, Judy said that "about 90% were totally positive" and that while there were a couple of friends and family "that definitely had a really hard time with it," overall the experiences she had were positive. For friends that she came out to, she said that many of them were accepting because "they already knew and[…] they were[…] like, 'What took you so long? We've known this for a long time. Like, why didn't you know it?[…]' and I was just like, 'Great, why didn't you tell me?'" After coming out to friends and having generally positive experiences, Judy decided to come out to her family. When coming out to her mom, Judy found that her mother "didn't hear that [coming out] part or didn't want to hear that part and turned around and focused" on other information that Judy told her at the time. Looking back at it now, Judy said that she knew that her mother's "denial kicked in right away." When Judy discussed what her experience was like coming out to her mom she said:

> it [her sexual orientation] was just one of those things that we didn't really talk about. It was like once I put it out there, it was like that's just how it is and I kind of moved on. And I-I'm sure she probably did have some feelings about it, but she didn't really express them to me.

Coming Out: What Does it Mean?

Coming out is a process that many LGBQ-identifying individuals are expected to do and is not a process that is expected of heterosexual-identifying individuals. Coming out is acknowledging a non-heterosexual identity to self and/or others. Leah a 41-year-old who self-identified only when pressed by others to classify her sexual orientation, identified as bisexual. When discussing coming out, Leah said, "straight people don't come out. They just-they just are. You know so… I think that's just part of the process right now till the world evolves into a bit more accepting." Leah acknowledges that coming out is a process that is only expected from LGBQ-identifying individuals. Due to heteronormativity, heterosexuals do not have to share with others their sexual orientation; rather, as Leah puts it, straight people "just are." Furthermore, Leah also acknowledges that coming out is a process that most LGBQ individuals do. Due to heteronormativity, coming out is expected for people in the LGBQ community since their sexual orientation is "different" from the norm of heterosexuality.

The process of sharing this information with oneself or others is the process of coming out. For all of my participants, coming out did not just occur one time. Instead, after initially coming out to those they were close to, my participants had to continually come out to others. Coming out is an ongoing process that is expected of LGBQ-identifying individuals every time they are in a new environment or meet someone new. For instance, Olivia, a 38-year-old who self-identified as bisexual, shared with me how coming out is an ongoing process when she said:

>I mean unfortunately, like sometimes I feel like I have to come out kind of often still to
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>this day. Like that, I don't read as lesbian necessarily umm, when you see me. Umm so
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>like, let's say I'm getting my nails done, and umm you know they ask me about my
>
>family, and like sometimes it's a lot to always have to come out over and over again. You

know? To correct people and be like, "No I have a girlfriend," you know? […] But it is like an ongoing process. I would say coming out doesn't really ever actually ever end. Cause you meet new people, and you have to tell them sometimes if they haven't- don't know you from another place.

For Olivia, coming out is a process that is ongoing as a result of being in a same-sex relationship. Due to Olivia's identity as bisexual, she did not have to come out to others while she was in different-sex relationships. That being said, because she is currently in a same-sex relationship, coming out for Olivia is a continual process. For individuals who identify as heterosexual or who are in different-sex relationships, coming out is not expected of them. However, for Olivia, being in a same-sex relationship, and for my other participants who identify as LGBQ, the continual coming out process is one that is exhausting and never ending.

When I asked what coming out meant to my participants, I found that coming out meant very similar things for many of my participants. For some of my participants, when I asked what coming out meant to them, they said that it first meant acknowledging and accepting their own LGBQ identity before they could even begin coming out to others. Another answer that many participants gave when asked about coming out was said that it was an ongoing process that required constantly decision making about when and how to best come out to others in various situations. Some participants said that coming out was a relief because they felt that they were no longer hiding or keeping a secret about a large part of their identity. As a result of no longer hiding their identity, many participants were able to finally live as their true selves. The biggest commonality I found between all of my participants when asked what coming out meant to them, was that it was an instrumental and expected process because of their LGBQ identity.

Coming Out to Self

For most of my participants, when asked what coming out meant to them, they said before they could even start coming out to others, they had to first come out to themselves. For instance, Pam, a 76-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when asked what coming out meant to her said, "Uhh coming out means- uhh first it's coming out to yourself. You know? Uhh realizing and accepting that you are such and such a sexuality and then there's the other coming out to [other] people." For Pam, it is clear that coming out is more than just coming out to others. Instead, Pam viewed coming out as a process not only for herself but also as a process for others. Similarly, Patty, a 76-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when describing the process of coming out to herself said, "Well, the most important part of it, of course, is coming out to yourself because you can't come out to anybody else if you don't know what you are yourself and haven't accepted it yourself." For Patty, the most important process in coming out was coming out to yourself. For Kelly, a 64-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, coming out meant, "Just acknowledging to yourself that 'Yeah, I'm a lesbian or I'm a gay man or transgender or I'm any of the other, um, members etcetera.'" Similar to Pam, Patty, and Kelly many of my other participants also felt as though coming out meant first acknowledging your identity and then sharing it with others. For Pam, Patty, Kelly, and many other participants coming out meant that you first had to go through the process of coming out to yourself. After acknowledging an LGBQ identity, individuals could then begin the process of coming out to others.

Decisions: "Scary as all get out"

Due to the expectation that LGBQ-identifying individuals need to come out to others, my participants often shared with me how they constantly had to manage when it was an appropriate or safe time to come out to others. Almost all of the participants shared that they had to consider

many factors before deciding whether or not to come out to others. Judy, who was discussed at the beginning of the chapter, spoke about the decision-making process involved with coming out:

> Umm and-because I think that for us, we-we kind of factor in a bunch of different scenarios before we make that decision. And believe it or not, the things that-that's driving the decision to say something or not say anything at all, is all about fear…You have to weigh out before you-you're ready to take that plunge and deal with any possible repercussions. But it's-it's definitely scary as all get out.

For Judy, she must constantly decide whether or not to come out to others. Unlike heterosexuals, people in the LGBQ community have to manage when the best time to come out to others is since it is not always deemed an appropriate time to do so. For Judy, the decisions that she had to make when engaging in the process of coming out was based on fear. Due to heteronormativity, people in the LGBQ community make these decisions largely out of fear for the worst. Whether it is fear of physical harm, fear of losing relationships with family and friends, or a fear of losing their job, LGBQ individuals have to go through a decision-making process when coming out to others. Similarly, many of my participants also shared with me that they constantly had to decide whether or not to come out to others. For instance, Patty, a 76-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, shared with me how for the first time she had just recently come out without thinking about whether or not she should. When discussing this particular instance of skipping the decision-making processes, Patty said:

> Oh, I came out and I didn't even stop to think about it. Cause I've just have been filtering it, you know, you filter it through. Is this a-do I need to come out here? Do I need to come out there? Is this a good time to say it? And it was the first time in my life that I had

come out without going through that filtering. But now I pretty much do it[…] I just do or

don't depending on the circumstances.

Due to heteronormativity, deciding when to come out to others, or filtering when to come out to others, has become a natural reaction for Patty and many other LGBQ-identifying individuals. In Patty's quote, it seems as though there are two different and almost opposing expectations. One expectation is that because Patty does not identify as heterosexual, she must partake in the ongoing process of coming out to others. Another expectation is that Patty must come out at a time that is appropriate because unlike heterosexuals, coming out as LGBQ is not always seen as appropriate. These two expectations can be opposing because while there is the expectation for LGBQ-identifying individuals to come out, it must also be at an appropriate time. Yet, it may seem as though there is never an appropriate time to come out to others. For instance, when discussing coming out Susie-Q, an 83-year-old who self-identified as a lesbian said, "It [coming out] doesn't mean necessarily broadcasting it, but if it's appropriate […]" Rather than sharing or "broadcasting" to others her sexual orientation, Susie-Q feels as though there are appropriate and inappropriate times for people within the LGBQ community to come out. In Patty's quote, she was surprised that she did not engage in the decision-making process before she came out to others. Due to the expectation that LGBQ individuals should come out and come at an appropriate time that is seen in the quote from Susie-Q, Patty was shocked that for the first time in her life, she came out without deciding or filtering whether or not she should come out to others.

One of the biggest reasons that most of my participants engaged in the decision-making process when coming out was because they did not want to make others uncomfortable. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, shared how she was particularly

worried about not making the other person uncomfortable when disclosing her sexual

orientation. When discussing coming out to others, Sarah said:

> Like a new friend like, are they gonna react that way or are they going to react this way,
>
> you know? So well, for me, it's always sort of like I'll just-I'll just, like, drop it into
>
> conversation like it's not a big deal instead of like saying, "Hey, just so you know," you
>
> know? Like because for me, it seems like that-that's like, the best way to avoid people
>
> getting like upset or like, feeling really uncomfortable.

For Sarah, deciding when to come out largely depended on coming out in a manner that would

not make other people uncomfortable or upset. Therefore, one of the ways that Sarah would

ensure that she would not make other people uncomfortable when coming out is through the

decision-making process.

Similarly, when discussing coming out and avoiding making others uncomfortable, Pam,

a 75-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, said, "So it [coming out] sort of has to work into

other sort of things, and uhh that's when I will come out. I don't know that I feel unsafe. It's just

maybe, uhh sometimes it might make other people feel uncomfortable. Right?" For Pam, part of

choosing when to come out involved choosing a time to come out when it would not make the

other person uncomfortable which would ultimately resort in making her uncomfortable as well.

Rather, Pam found that she and others felt more comfortable when she came out by working it

into a conversation. Later in our discussion, Pam also said, "There's a lot of people who aren't

gonna really know how to respond." When coming out to others, Pam shared that some people

might become uncomfortable because they do not know how to respond. Therefore, when

coming out to others Pam tries to come out in a way so that the other person can easily respond

so as not to make the other person uncomfortable. As a result, one of the decisions that Pam

makes when deciding how and when to come out to others is to consider how she could tell someone in a way that they would feel comfortable and know how to respond. Similar to Sarah and Pam, many of my participants considered making others uncomfortable during their decision-making processes when coming out to others. Therefore, one aspect of the decision-making process that I found to be important for many of my participants was taking into consideration the possibility of making the other person comfortable. Individuals in the LGBQ community while they are expected to come out, are also expected to take into consideration the feelings of others when they come out. Yet, heterosexuals are not held to the same expectation of taking others into consideration when sharing their sexual orientation. Rather, due to heteronormativity, heterosexuals do not have to worry if sharing their sexual orientation with others is going to upset others or make them uncomfortable.

<div align="center">"Hi, I'm ___, and I'm gay"</div>

As a result of not wanting to make other people uncomfortable when coming out, most of my participants did not come out to someone when they first met them. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old self-identified lesbian shared that she struggled knowing the right time to come out to others. When discussing the decision making process of when she should come out, Sarah said:

> I kind of feel like you have to come out like every time you meet someone that you kind of get to know well [...] You just meet someone you don't have to come out to them. "Hi, my name's Sarah. I'm gay," you know? But you do kind of have to, like every time you get to know somebody. Eventually, it's gonna come out that you're gay, you know?

Not only is coming out a continual process, but it is also a difficult process for Sarah as well as for many of my other participants. Due to the continual and ongoing process of coming out, Sarah struggles knowing when it is an appropriate time to tell others that she is gay. Sarah

acknowledges that while she won't have to introduce herself as, "Hi my name's Sarah. I'm gay," she also struggles when knowing the right time to tell others that she is gay. Unlike heterosexual-identifying individuals, it is not always deemed an acceptable time for people in the LGBQ community to share their sexual orientation with others.

Sarah, and many of my other participants, shared with me how difficult it was for them to know when a it was a good time to come out. However, similar to Sarah, many of my participants shared with me that they also did not think that it was appropriate to come out when first meeting someone new. Similarly, Susie-Q, an 83-year-old who self-identified as lesbian demonstrated how absurd it would be to come out to someone when first meeting someone. Susie-Q jokingly said, "'How do you do? I'm attracted to women.'" For Susie-Q it is clear that coming out when you first meet someone new is not appropriate. In fact, Susie-Q demonstrated just how odd it would be to do so. It would be odd for an LGBQ-identifying individual to introduce themselves that way because heterosexual people do not share their sexual orientation when coming out to others. Yet, as a result of heteronormativity, heterosexuals do not have to worry about when the right time to share their sexual orientation with others is. Similar to Sarah and Susie-Q, many participants shared that they do not just come out when they introduce themselves to new people. Instead, many participants had to gauge the person, the situation, as well as many other factors particular to each situation in order to decide if that was the best time to come out.

Many participants did not feel that it was appropriate to come out when introducing themselves to someone new. However, many participants did also acknowledge that they could come out with little comments to others. Pam, a 75-year-old self-identified lesbian, shared that at

a conference she attended for work, they had skits to educate people about the LGBQ community. When describing what the actors were saying in the skit, Pam said:

> "I'm straight, but I never come out. I don't go around saying 'Hi, I'm straight'" or something like that, right? And-and-and so they had little skits or something and they have like [people saying], "What did you do this weekend'" and "Oh my husband and I went you know blah blah blah […]" And then we-they had the gay person thinking, "Well, am I going to say that I went to a lesbian weekend'" And [then the person asks the other person] "What did you do?" "Oh, I went to the movies. I had a good time."

At this conference, Pam shared that through the skits given at this conference, they demonstrated how due to heteronormativity, straight people do not have to come out because they are seen as the norm. Furthermore, in the skit, it showed how it would be silly if someone who was heterosexual was to introduce themselves as such when meeting someone new. In the skit, the impacts of heteronormativity are clear. The skit demonstrated just how difficult coming out to others as an LGBQ-identifying individual is. Rather than portraying coming out as an easy and straight forward process, the actors in the skit portrayed coming out as something that the non-heterosexuals have to constantly do and monitor what they say to others. For instance, in the skit, there is a lesbian who went on a lesbian weekend excursion but could not share it with others without also coming out to said person. This example of the lesbian who went on a weekend lesbian excursion, demonstrates how someone in the LGBQ community might not feel as though they can share what they actually did because they might be disclosing their sexual orientation to others. Yet, heterosexuals do not have to worry about sharing what they did over the weekend, or what they did with who, because they do not have to worry about disclosing their sexual orientation to others. Rather, for heterosexual-identifying individuals, sharing their sexual

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orientation to others is not something that they usually pay attention to. For heterosexuals, sharing their sexual orientation is not something that they have to think about before they do. Similar to the skits that Pam described, some participants also shared the frustration that they had to hide more than just their LGBQ identity if they did not want to be out.

Coming Out at Work

For the majority of my participants, coming out at work was different than coming out to friends, family or to someone new. Instead, coming out at work meant that participants could lose their jobs. While all of my participants did face many negative repercussions when coming out to others, the repercussion that many of my participants faced at work was the possibility that they would lose their livelihood. Due to this possible and very serious repercussion, many of my participants struggled knowing when and even if they should come out at work. For many participants, they did not come out at work because they were fearful that their job might not be accepting of their sexual orientation if it was something other than heterosexual. As a result, many participants feared that if they did come out at work they would lose their job. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, while attending graduate school could not be out at school because if she was, she would lose her funding from the university. Sarah said:

> And so if you, if you […] are openly gay than the-then the school itself will not fund
> you being there. You can still attend, like they won't kick you out or anything. But you
> can't get any funding […] so I was on like a really massive scholarship that like funded
> like all-almost all my education. And I was like "I'm not gonna, like, blow that [funding]
> on this[sharing my sexual orientation] […]" Definitely really careful even with, like,
> classmates and stuff like that. I might talk to some of my classmates who became my

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friends and stuff, but for the most part, it was pretty much like, three, maybe four people

who actually knew, umm, the whole time I was there, so yeah.

While Sarah would still be able to attend the university while being openly gay, she would lose

her funding. As a result, Sarah had to be extremely careful of who she told and what she said. In

order to continue getting an education, Sarah had to hide her lesbian identity. Similarly, Grace, a

78-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing coming out at work said:

> The one [woman] that turned me into the inspectors [at work] […] I was investigated and
>
> I lost a job that I had over suspicion of being homosexual and I didn't realize- I went to
>
> her because she was still my friend. And […] I said, "Who could have turned? Who could
>
> have said anything?" She thought it was my grandmother, so she told me, and I didn't
>
> think it was my grandmother. But that stopped the conversation. And that kept me in the
>
> closet for another fifteen years. That was real scary and real. I don't know. Debilitating. I
>
> don't know, it wasn't healthy.

After being investigated for being homosexual, Grace was fired from her job on the suspicion

that she was homosexual. As a result of this very negative experience of losing her job, Grace

was scared to share her lesbian identity with others. Not only did Grace lose her livelihood, but

being fired from work for being lesbian created a fear in Grace that would cause her to hide her

identity for 15 years after being fired from her job. Likewise, Jane, a 64-year-old lesbian, when

discussing her lesbian identity and work, said, "And I was also a teacher. So um there were years

where I could have been fired for being gay, so I just wasn't safe." Similarly, Kelly, a 64-year-

old who self-identified as lesbian, shared with me that she was not out to everyone at her work

because another woman at work was receiving hostility from co-workers because of a

relationship she had with someone who was in the LGBQ community. Kelly said, " I just didn't

feel safe to come out there." Similar to Sarah, Kelly, and Jane, there are many instances where my participants did not feel like it was safe to be out at work. As a result of the fear of losing their jobs, some participants never came out at work. That being said, some of the participants did ultimately come out at work, but they still struggled with knowing if they should come out at work.

For some, coming out at work was necessary even for such small interactions as talking about their weekend. Many participants felt that they could not come to the office and share what happened over the weekend like their heterosexual co-workers, similar to the skit that Pam described earlier in this chapter. Similarly, Patty shared with me that she came out at work so that she would no longer have to hide a large part of her identity. When discussing coming out at work Patty said:

> But one of my logical reasons for coming out was I was so sick of not being able to talk
> about my life. Monday morning, coffee time. You know what he's talking about. "What
> did you do […] over the weekend?" "Went here and there with your hubby or with your
> boyfriend or whoever." I could never say anything. I just sort of well, "I went with a
> friend somewhere." But, you know, it wasn't-it was a half-truth all the time, and I was
> sick of it. So that was one reason for coming out was to be out at work.

Not being out at work for Patty was frustrating because many of her heterosexual co-workers were able to share what they did over the weekend while she was not able to share her weekend along with them without being out at work. Patty shared that because she was not out at work, she was frustrated because she felt as though she was only telling a "half-truth" all the time. Many LGBQ individuals are not able to share what they did over the weekend or what they did

with who, because in sharing that information they would also be sharing their sexual orientation.

<center>"Expecting the Worst"</center>

One of the biggest factors that my participants made when choosing whether or not they should come out was the reaction that the other person would have. Many of my participants shared with me that they were not sure how others would react. For instance, Leah, a 41-year-old who only self-identified as bisexual when pressed by others to label her sexual orientation, worried about how others would react when she was first beginning the process of coming out. Leah, when discussing coming out to her family said:

> Umm, and although I didn't feel safe initially with my family, just because I think I was-you know, you expect the worst. They were great. And they were wonderful. So I think they've all been really accepting. Even the ones that I was like "hmm what are they gonna say something crazy?"

One of the many considerations that Leah and my other participants made when deciding to come out was the reaction of others. For most of my participants, how the person was going to react was one of the biggest concerns that they shared about deciding whether or not to come out. Furthermore, because many participants feared the worst when disclosing their sexual orientation to others, the process of coming out was often extremely stressful. For Judy, a 51-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, this fear for the worst resulted in a loss of sleep. Judy said:

> Umm, it was interesting in that uh, when I made the decision to come out I-I didn't sleep. Uh, and then I first came out to a couple of friends, and they were like "Yeah we already know. Like what took you so long?" And then they laughed, and it really, really eased that transition for me, and we kind of talked about it.

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Due to the worry that Judy had coming out to others and how others might react, she lost sleep over disclosing her sexual orientation to others. However, on this occasion, not only was Judy accepted by her friends, but they also shared with her that they already knew. For Judy, the friends who knew about her identity before she came out, helped her feel more comfortable and accepted during the coming out process by talking about her sexual orientation further. For many participants, they found that it was helpful when others were willing to have a discussion with them following their disclosure. When participants came out to others who were not supportive or accepting of their sexual orientation, they often times found that the topic of their sexual orientation would be a subject that was typically avoided and not really talked about. Therefore, the participants who could talk about their sexual orientation with others, like the experience that Judy had with her friends, helped support them during the coming out process.

In some instances, the fear of the worst could cause some of my participants to even face people who were accepting with suspicion. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing coming out to others, said, "And so it's kind of like I never know what to expect when I'm coming out to someone that I know for the first time, you know?" As a result of expecting of the worst, Sarah shared with me that she never quite knew what to expect when disclosing her sexual orientation to someone new. In fact, later on in the interview, Sarah shared with me that as a result of never knowing what to expect when disclosing her sexual orientation to others, she often felt as though she was hesitant and did not trust people who were accepting. When talking about people who seemed to be too accepting when she disclosed her sexual orientation, Sarah said:

Umm, but there were always like those people who just like, you know, crawl out of the

woodwork and [would] just be really weirdly accepting. And it was always like, "What

do you-what do you-what's your deal? You know, like, are you gonna like out me or

something? What are you going to do exactly?"

For Sarah, having a good experience when coming out to someone was something that she faced

with suspicion. Instead of expecting people to be accepting of her identity, she expected the

worst. People who seemed to be too accepting of her sexual orientation, seemed as though they

might have an ulterior motive. Similarly, due to the fear of the worst that was often as a result of

past negative experiences with coming out, many participants were surprised when people were

accepting of their sexual orientation. In fact, because many of my participants expected the worst

when coming out, there were times that it seemed too good to be true when people were

accepting.

"I'm Not Sure I Would've Survived Trying to be Something I Wasn't"

I found that many participants shared the frustration about living a half-truth or hiding

who they were when discussing coming out in general. Many participants shared with me that

after coming out, they felt a big weight off of their shoulders because it was stressful trying to

hide a large part of who they are. For instance, when discussing this frustration of not being able

to share with others who she was, Leah, a 41-year-old who only self-identified as bisexual when

pressed by others said:

Yeah. Like I said, I think it's-it's exhausting hiding stuff from people. You know umm

and it's just such a big part of my life. And it's not like you're hiding you know, your

secret-you had a secret guilty pleasure of like reality tv. You know, which I do. Umm but,

you know, it's not like you're like, "Oh I don't watch housewives of whatever," you

know? It's- I mean it's a BIG [emphasis added] part of my life and so I think that that

changed it, and so it had to be worth it because otherwise I was just gonna lead this- I'd never be able to be real. And then I think I would've forced myself to like engage in a relationship I didn't want to be in because everybody else wanted me to be in that relationship so.

Leah and many other participants shared with me just how exhausting and stressful it was keeping a secret about a large part of their identity from people close to them. Furthermore, many participants felt relief and the freedom to be who they truly are after coming out to others. Like Leah said, hiding such a large part of an individual's identity is not the same thing as hiding an addiction to a reality tv show. Instead, almost all of my participants felt as though they were hiding a large part of their identity from others when they were not out. Matthew, a 57-year-old who self-identified as gay, shared with me that something that ultimately pushed him to come out was because of the stress he felt. Matthew said, "Umm sort of feel like I was […] the stress [of] holding a secret about myself to my family and friends." Therefore, as Matthew shares, coming out was a big relief because he no longer felt as though he had to hide his true self. Similarly, for many of my participants, they felt as though coming out was not only a relief, but that it also allowed them to live as their true selves. When asked if she thought coming out was worth it, Susie-Q, an 83-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, said:

> Yes, I think I saved myself. I'm-I'm not sure I would have survived trying to be something I wasn't. I was getting very depressed. And who knows? I mean, I suppose maybe I could've survived, but not as a-as a real person. Not as a not as fulfilled kind of person. Maybe a very depressed person. Or maybe not at all.

For Susie-Q, she felt as though coming out allowed her to be truly happy. After coming out, Susie-Q felt as though she could finally be herself, a "real person," rather than being someone

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she was not. Similarly, many participants felt as though they could finally live their lives being themselves. Rather than hiding or trying to act like someone else, participants felt as though they were finally free to be themselves.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Due to heteronormativity, coming out is the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation to others. Heteronormativity and the invisibility of LGBQ identities makes coming out necessary for people who identify as LGBQ. People in the LGBQ community are expected to share their sexual orientation with others because their sexual orientation is "different" from the norm of heterosexuality. Therefore, coming out is a process that is expected of the LGBQ community but not also expected for heterosexuals. I found that coming out was a process that all of my participants went through and still continue to do on a day to day basis. As a result, all of my participants had extra work that they were expected to do because they identified as LGBQ. For instance, my participants constantly managed when and how to come out to others in order to receive the best possible reaction. If my participants were not out, they also had to do more work than heterosexuals because they had to be careful of how they acted or what they said, so as not to share their sexual orientation with others.

Coming out is an expected and ongoing process for many individuals in the LGBQ community. As a result, many of my participants had to constantly filter and question when an "appropriate" and safe time to come out is. However, many of my participants shared with me that it was worth coming out to others because they felt that they no longer had to hide who they truly were. Many participants felt that when coming out, they were no longer hiding a large part of their identity and they could finally be themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE: IDENTITY

Patty is a 76-year-old woman who self-identifies as lesbian. While Patty currently identifies as lesbian, this was not always the case. Before identifying as lesbian Patty "identified as straight because I didn't know there was any other identity I could have." When discussing when she first began to identify as lesbian, Patty said, "Well, I mean, I've always known all my life that there was something wrong long before puberty […] And there was-I always knew there was some way I was different." Due to heteronormativity, Patty has felt as though her sexuality was "wrong" and "different" from the norm of heterosexuality. Due to the belief that Patty has that her sexual orientation is "wrong" and "different," Patty says that she "was always trying to fix it. So at some level, I knew that was there was that [my sexual orientation] to fix, but I didn't want to deal with it." Patty's sexual orientation became "this problem I had […] I was trying to fix. And I was sure that if I just kept screwing around I would find someone that works for me. Well, of course, that didn't work." Patty tried being in different-sex relationships in an attempt to fix her sexual orientation. However, after being in different-sex relationships, Patty learned that her lesbian identity was something that she could no longer ignore or fix.

LGBQ Identity

Identity is how people present themselves both internally and externally and fit into socially constructed categories. For most of my participants, identity, similar to the process of coming out, first started with acknowledging it for themselves. For some of my participants, they previously identified differently than what they currently identify as. For instance, many participants thought about themselves or identified as straight or bisexual before they began to acknowledge their identity as lesbian or gay.

For the most part, my participants felt that the available labels in the LGBQ community accurately represented them. For those participants who felt that the labels in the LGBQ community were representative, they typically strongly identified with one label. However, not all of my participants felt that the labels in the LGBQ community accurately represented their identity. I found that the participants who did not like the labels in the LGBQ community did not strongly identify with anyone label. Many participants who strongly identified with one label, felt that there was one existing identity label that fit their experiences and was an accurate representation of who they are. Participants who did not strongly identify with any of the existing identity labels often did not like the idea of labeling people. As a result, many participants who did not strongly identity with the existing identity labels often rejected labels in general. For instance, Leah, a 41-year-old who self-identified as bisexual only when pressed by others to choose an identity, when asked what her sexual orientation was, said, "Umm you know it's weird. I don't really put any sort of label on it. Umm, I'm probably most attracted to women [...] But if I had to classify it, I assume it would be like bisexual but I just don't really ever. It's just kind of there." For Leah, she does not like labeling people in general. As a result, it is difficult for Leah to choose a label that accurately represented her and her experiences. For my participants who did not strongly identify with any of the existing categories, I found that they would often try to pick a category that fit them best, even though they felt that it was not an accurate representation of their identity. For instance, Charley, a 71-year-old who self-identified as bisexual only when pressed by others, when discussing labels that are used in the LGBQ community said, "But, you know, in human experience right now, the[…] trending is toward fluid sexuality, ideas of fluid […] As something fluid in human experience. And that would be akin more akin to my experience […]" For Charley, the labels in the LGBQ community do not

seem to fully describe his and many other individuals' identities within the LGBQ community. Instead of using the available labels in the LGBQ community, Charley feels as though fluid sexuality is more representative of who he is and the experiences that he had.

That being said, identity was not always straightforward even for participants who strongly identified with an existing identity label. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, felt as though lesbian was a pretty accurate representation of who she was. That being said, Sarah still felt as though she was picking a label that did not fully represent all the experiences she had had with her sexuality up until that point. When discussing her identity Sarah said:

 I try to pick the most correct thing that I think is what they'll understand, which is

lesbian. But, I mean, like, if someone were to talk to me, like, really, really in depth about

like my sexual experiences and stuff, I probably just be like, "I mean, there's lots of

different things going on there." You know?

Sarah, while still having a somewhat strong identity, still felt as though the label lesbian was more for others than herself. Sarah explained that her identity is complex, and something that she feels is not fully described by the label of lesbian. Instead, Sarah feels that the label of lesbian does not represent her identity and the experiences that she had with different-sex relationships. Similarly, Olivia, a 38-year-old who self-identified as bisexual, strongly identified with an existing identity label. However, when asked how she identified she said, "Hmm you know, I would say technically I'm bisexual. However, I live my life now, most people would probably say that I'm a lesbian because I'm in a committed lesbian relationship. But technically I'm bisexual." Even though Olivia strongly self-identifies as bisexual, others feel as though she is lesbian because she is in a serious committed lesbian relationship. While Olivia feels as though

she is bisexual, others have a difficult time understanding why she chooses to identify that way since she is in a serious committed lesbian relationship. For many participants, I found that whether they strongly identified with existing identities labels or not, a part of choosing their identity largely depended on what made the most sense to others. Later in the interview, when asked whether or not the LGBQ labels applies to her Olivia said,

> Well I-I mean I believe there's more of a spectrum then like having more of a specific label. Umm I think most people are on the spectrum umm so maybe it's not, it doesn't completely work for me but I mean it works well enough for me that I'm comfortable with it.

Olivia acknowledges that while she believes that the labels in the LGBQ community apply to her, there are others who might not feel as though the existing identity labels in the LGBQ community work for them. For those individuals who do not think that the existing identity labels in the LGBQ community apply to them, Olivia believes that the spectrum does a better job of accurately depicting some individuals' identities. Whether or not participants had strong identities or had identities that they felt were not represented accurately by the current identity labels, identity was a complex subject for all of my participants.

All of my participants thought that sexuality existed was on a spectrum. The spectrum that many of my participants are referring to is the spectrum from different-sex attraction to same-sex attraction. In the middle of this spectrum would be the attraction to both individuals of the different-sex as well as individuals of the same sex. However, some of my participants thought that the spectrum also represented more than lesbian/gay, bisexual, and heterosexual. For instance, Kelly, a 64-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, said, "Yeah, but umm, I get it for people that are on a spectrum because we're not even all just lesbian, bi or gay." Instead, for

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Kelly and even some of my other participants, the spectrum represented a wider range of identities than the labels ever could. Therefore, for many participants, they thought that the spectrum was an easier way to represent their identities rather than the labels in the LGBQ community. Many participants felt that falling somewhere on the scale was a better representation of their identity rather than the labels in the LGBQ community. Furthermore, many of my participants thought that they fell somewhere closer to the middle of the spectrum rather than falling somewhere on the far end of the same-sex attraction side of the spectrum. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing the spectrum said:

> Umm, but that's what I've always like wondered about, because like, so for instance, like for me[…]if this is the spectrum of the like lesbian to completely straight, then I'm probably over here somewhere [gestures towards the middle]. But I'm probably not all the way at the very, very end.

For Sarah, she thought that she fell closer to the middle of the spectrum instead of falling on the far end of the spectrum toward the end of same sex attraction. Similarly, many participants felt as though they fell more toward the center of the spectrum of attraction rather than falling on the far side of the same-sex attraction. Even for participants who strongly identified with existing identity labels, some felt as though they fell somewhere along the middle of the spectrum rather than on the far end of same-sex attraction. Both participants who strongly identified with existing identity labels and participants who did not strongly identify with existing identity labels felt as though they fell somewhere toward the middle of the spectrum of sexuality.

Acknowledging Identities

Similar to the process of coming out, I found that my participants often had to first acknowledge their identity before they could share it with others. For many of my participants,

they knew about their LGBQ identity before they began to identify as such. For instance, Susie-Q, an 83-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing when she began to identify as such said:

> When I started to, um, realize that I was um-I was homosexual and always had been. Because growing up as a child, I knew what my sexual attractions were and um like in high school. But I didn't accept it as being, "Well I'm homosexual" because I didn't have enough awareness.

For Susie-Q she was always aware of her same-sex attractions. However, while Susie-Q acknowledged her sexual attractions in high school, it was not until she was married in a different-sex relationship that she began to acknowledge her lesbian identity. One of the reasons that Susie-Q explains why she did not acknowledge this identity was due to a lack of information surrounding the LGBQ community. Due to heteronormativity, the stigma and the lack of knowledge about the LGBQ community, Susie-Q, as well as many of my other participants, often acknowledged their LGBQ identities later in life. Through the process of learning more about herself and the LGBQ community, Susie-Q began to acknowledge her identity. Similarly, Judy, a 51-year-old who self-identified as lesbian said:

> So umm yeah like I said, I'm not even sure that even though I like called myself that [bisexual] I'm not really sure that I had a bisexual lifestyle other than kind of like forcing myself to kind of date guys periodically to kind of prove that I was. Umm, but it wasn't what I was really comfortable with. So I think I've always been a lesbian actually and I've just had a hard time accepting that.

For Judy, she tried to prove to herself and to others, that she was bisexual by being in relationships with men. However, Judy would learn more about her identity as a lesbian through

experiences such as different-sex relationships as well as learning more about the LGBQ community. For most of my participants, learning about themselves and acknowledging their identity was the way that they learned more about their LGBQ identity.

<p style="text-align:center">"It is Wrong to be Gay"</p>

In the United States, we live in a heteronormative society. Being heterosexual is an identity that is expected and has consistently been the norm. I found that this heterosexual norm had an impact on many of my participants, even in the words that they used when they described their sexual orientation. Some of the words that participants used to describe their LGBQ identity was that it was "different," "wrong" or that their identity was one that needed to be fixed. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian shared her struggle that she never felt that she would be able to accept her identity. When discussing this struggle of acceptance Sarah said:

> So umm coming out of that, I have struggled over and over and over with, "Is my-my sexual orientation wrong? Like is it wrong?" I've done this for years, and I still even today, like I was thinking about this literally just yesterday. Like even today, I sometimes feel like I just have this doubt, you know, just this little doubt that it's [my sexual orientation] wrong, you know? And it's a little-it's getting to the point where I sort of, like, rationalized myself out of it and I have to because the-the natural sort of visceral reaction for me is that I-it is wrong to be gay. Like that's because that's how I was raised.

Because Sarah was raised to believe that the LGBQ community is wrong, she feels as though she might always have a doubt in her mind that her sexual orientation is wrong. While not quite addressing heteronormativity straight on, Sarah shares with me that due to the expectation to be straight and the belief that homosexuality is wrong, Sarah feels as though there will always be a

small part of her that feels as though her sexual orientation is wrong. I found that it was hard for all of my participants, especially when coming out, that they or even others should be accepting of their identity. Heteronormativity impacted my participants by making them feel as though their sexual orientation is something that is wrong and something that they or others would not be able to accept as a result.

Another way that I found many of my participants were impacted by heteronormativity and demonstrated just how ingrained heteronormativity is within our society is when participants would use words such as different, wrong, and feeling as though their LGBQ identity was one that needed to be fixed or that it was an identity that could not be accepted. For instance, when looking at Patty as introduced at the beginning of the chapter, she shared that she always felt that there was something "wrong" or "different" about her identity. Patty's feeling that her sexual orientation is wrong and needs to be fixed is something that many of my participants may have experienced when they first started learning about their sexual orientation. Charley, a 71-year-old who self-identified as bisexual only when pressed by others to identify, when discussing his identity said, "But I knew I was different. They knew I was different." For Charley, his "different" identity was something that both he and his family were aware of growing up. He and his family knew that rather than having a "normal" sexuality of heterosexuality, Charley instead had a sexuality that was "different." It is clear from the language that many of my participants used when describing their homosexuality that their sexual orientation differed from the expected "norm" of heterosexuality. As a result of using words such as "different" and "wrong" my participants are acknowledging on some level that because their sexuality is not heterosexual, it is therefore different, wrong, and not accepted.

Similarly, participants were also impacted by heteronormativity because of others. Matthew, a 57-year-old who self-identified as gay, when discussing stereotypes surrounding the LGBQ community said, "You know, or do people stereotype you as, I think I remember a word sort of like perverted because you have-you wanted to have sex with someone who was the, you know, same sex as you. That was sort of a perverted thought." For Matthew, his same-sex attraction was viewed as something that was perverted since it strayed from the norm of heterosexuality. Matthew shared that due to heteronormativity, his sexuality, as well as other individuals in the LGBQ community, were also viewed as perverted if they were attracted to other individuals of the same sex.

Expectations to be Straight

Due to a lack of information surrounding the LGBQ community as a result of heteronormativity, most of my participants did not think that there was any other option to identify besides heterosexual. Heteronormativity not only impacted my participants by creating a lack of information surrounding the LGBQ community but also impacted what was expected of my participants by others. For instance, almost all of my participants shared with me that they felt as though they were expected by society, their family, their community, as well as their religion, to be in a different-sex relationship. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian said, "And so it is-it is expected of some people to be straight." Sarah acknowledges that because heterosexuality is the expected "norm," everyone in society is expected to be heterosexual and be in heterosexual relationships. Similarly, Susie-Q, an 83-year-old who self-identified as lesbian said, "I didn't think there was an alternative, so I was aware at some level of those attractions. But I-I thought it would change or it would go away or something. So I never acted on those feelings, but I knew what they were." For Susie-Q, because

she did not know anyone who identified as LGBQ or even much about the LGBQ community, she did not have enough knowledge to fully understand at the time that she could be anything other than the expected "norm" of heterosexual. Instead of thinking that she was lesbian, Susie-Q perceived her feelings towards women as something that would go away, or that her feelings towards the same-sex were just a phase. Matthew, a 57-year-old who self-identified as gay, when discussing why he was in the different-sex relationships said:

> Umm probably just because that [different-sex relationships] was what I thought I was supposed to be in. You know, that was sort of the way I was brought up and the logical, you know, sort of what you know. What people did […] growing up, as they, you know, became a teenager or young man. You obviously were supposed to date, you know, a woman and eventually get married so I was just sort of following that path.

As a result of heteronormativity and the expectation for him to be in different-sex relationships, Matthew followed the path that was expected of him. Since different-sex relationships and different-sex attraction was the path that was expected for him, as well as other individuals in the LGBQ community, Matthew may not have even been aware that there was another option. Growing up, Matthew was taught that for a man, being in a relationship with a woman was the logical and "normal" thing to do. Many participants identified as heterosexual and were in different-sex relationships because it was what they were taught and expected by others to do. Due to heteronormativity, being heterosexual or being in different-sex relationships seemed like the "normal" and expected thing to do for many of my participants.

Testing the Waters

Some of my participants did not come out with the same identity that they currently identify with. For instance, when Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, first began

coming out to others, she initially identified as bisexual instead of lesbian. For Sarah, coming out as bisexual was easier for others to accept than coming out as a lesbian. For instance, when discussing coming out to coworkers at a previous job, Sarah said, "Uhh I was like, 'Yeah, I'm kind of like, you know, bisexual.' That I thought that was probably the easiest way to like approach it at the time." Rather than coming out as a lesbian and facing the stigma of being a lesbian, Sarah came out to others as bisexual in hopes that it was an easier identity for others to accept. Instead of initially coming out as lesbian, it was easier for Sarah to ease herself into her lesbian identity by coming out as bisexual to others. Similar to Sarah, many of my participants came out as bisexual before they came out as lesbian, gay, or queer.

The process of coming out to others was often an instrumental part for all of my participants in their process of identity definition. For instance, Judy, a 51-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing how she identified as bisexual before lesbian said:

I never had a serious relationship with a guy, but I think that the overall stigma of being a lesbian was like too much to kind of accept and I think it was- I assumed it would be too much for my family. Uhh as well-so I think I created this persona of being bisexual cause I thought that it would be easier for them to accept[…] I call it the mind masturbating game. It's like we kind of do this thing with each other[…] or with ourselves, and then with our families and friends and, you know, it's just kind of weird because when I look back on it now I'm like "what the hell were you thinking?"

For Judy, the stigma surrounding the lesbian identity was one that was too difficult to face when she first began coming out to others. As a result, Judy identified as bisexual in order to get an introduction to what it was like to be a part of the LGBQ community. Additionally, by identifying as bisexual, Judy was able to see the reactions that others had to her non-heterosexual

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identity. Rather than facing all of the stigma that surrounded the lesbian identity, Judy began her

transition to her lesbian identity slowly by first identifying as bisexual. Similarly, many of my

other participants identified as bisexual before their current identity, because they were worried

about the perception of others. For many participants, coming out as bisexual was a way to begin

to live their lives in the LGBQ community. Coming out as bisexual before coming out as lesbian,

gay, or queer was a way that my participants could begin to become immersed in the LGBQ

community. For Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, coming out to others as

bisexual seemed to her to be "probably the easiest way to approach it at the time." Identifying as

bisexual was a middle ground for Sarah to introduce herself to the LGBQ community as well as

a middle ground for others who she came out to. Many of my participants may have identified

themselves differently than they identified themselves to others in order to ease their transition in

the LGBQ community while also trying to avoid some of the stigma surrounding the LGBQ

community.

While not fully immersing themselves, my participants were able to learn more about

themselves, as well as pave an road that made it easier for them to come out to those they were

close to. Additionally, one of the reasons that many of my participants identified as bisexual

before lesbian, gay, or queer was so that they could gauge the reaction that others had when

sharing their new LGBQ identity. For instance, Sarah came out to others as bisexual only to find

that many people she came out to were more accepting than she had expected. Similarly, many

of my participants found that others were more accepting than they had originally expected them

to be.

Bisexuality might be easier for some individuals to accept because half of the bisexual

identity is heterosexual. Rather than drastically deviating from the norm, bisexuality deviates

only slightly from the "norm" of heterosexuality. Furthermore, as Olivia, a 38-year-old who self-identifies as bisexual, shared with me that because of her bisexual identity people expected that she would ultimately end up with a man in a different-sex relationship. When discussing this expectation, Olivia said, "I think a lot of people wouldn't understand why I would choose to be in a lesbian relationship like as someone who's bisexual, you know?" For Olivia identifying as a bisexual woman, she felt as though others did not understand why she would choose to end up with a woman when she could instead end up with a man and fit into heteronormative expectations. Even for bisexual-identifying individuals, there is the expectation that ultimately, in the end, they will be in a serious committed relationship with someone of the different sex.

Another reason that some of my participants may have identified as bisexual before coming out as lesbian, gay, or queer is due to their lack of information surrounding the LGBQ community. Many participants shared with me that they did not know a lot about the LGBQ community growing up. Usually, it was after learning more about themselves through experiences and meeting other individuals in the LGBQ community that my participants began to learn more about their LGBQ identity. For instance, Kelly, a 64-year-old who self-identified as lesbian shared with me an experience that she had that caused her to question her identity. Kelly, when she was younger took a class about sexuality where she said, "and we went-one of the field trips was to, um, a lesbian bar [...] That was quite amazing and heady and wonderful[…] and I came home, and I said to myself, 'Okay, I'm bisexual […]'" For Kelly, coming into contact with the LGBQ community at the lesbian bar caused her to question her heterosexual identity. Similar to Kelly, some of my other participants may have identified as bisexual, which often lead individuals to learn more about themselves and the identity that they would eventually come to identify with.

Another reason some of my participants came out as bisexual before their current identity was because of the strict categories and labels in the LGBQ community. For example, some participants shared that it would be confusing if they identified as lesbian or gay but then were in different-sex relationships. For instance, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when asked why she first began identifying as bisexual, said:

Uhh, I mean I guess the reason that I did was because I just didn't really know if I was still interested in men. I knew I was interested in women for sure. I just didn't know I was interested in men or not. I just-I just didn't really think about it. And thought- I didn't want to, like, say I was a lesbian and then it turned out I would be with a guy and I'd be like, "This is awkward." Like I said, "I was a lesbian and now I'm with a man." So I thought it was the only reason I kept the door open, was just in case. Cause I didn't really have any, like, sexual feelings for men, but I thought, "Well, I don't know. Things change or something." You know? Maybe I just didn't quite figure it out.

For Sarah, she did not identify as lesbian because she was worried about creating confusion for herself and others. Rather than saying she was lesbian and then later end up being in relationships with men, Sarah chose to instead identify as bisexual. Sarah, rather than fully immersing herself into her lesbian identity, eased into it by learning more about herself and learning that she was not bisexual.

While some participants chose like Sarah to identify as bisexual in order to reduce the confusion for themselves and others, there were other participants who did not think that being in a relationship with the different sex changed their lesbian identity. For instance, Kelly, a 64-year-old who self-identified as lesbian shared with me that she was in two different-sex relationships after she came out as a lesbian. When discussing the two different-sex relationships Kelly said,

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"I have slept with two men since I've been out. And I never stopped thinking of myself as a lesbian." For Kelly, being with men after she came out to herself and others as a lesbian, did not cause her to question or feel as though those experiences changed her identity. Similarly, Grace, a 78-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, also felt that she could be a lesbian and also be in relationships with men. Grace said, "It-it-sexual identification is one thing. I'm a lesbian. Could I have a relationship with a man and be sexual with him? The answer is yes. So then I guess you'd have to say bisexual. But I don't like to be called that. I'm a lesbian." For Grace, she had a very strong lesbian identity that she felt would not have to change if she was in a relationship with a man. While some participants did not believe that different-sex relationships challenged their gay or lesbian identity, some participants did believe that being in a different-sex relationship changed or complicated their identity.

Different-Sex Relationships and Their Role in Identity Formation

For many of my participants, paradoxically, being in the different-sex relationship was an important part of learning more about their own identity as someone in the LGBQ community. Many participants shared that they entered different-sex relationships following the expectation to be heterosexual, but they ultimately ended up further reinforcing their LGBQ identity while in the different-sex relationships. For instance, it was being in the different-sex relationships that many participants began to learn that they were not heterosexual. Matthew, a 57-year-old who self-identified as gay, when discussing what he learned from being in a different-sex relationship said:

Umm, I would say my straight relationship probably- look umm it was a uhh. It was, yeah, I think it had an impact on me. I also think it proved to me that, umm, you know, sort of perhaps, I knew when I was in it, or getting out of it that it probably wasn't the

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future that I was expecting to have. I sort of knew that probably wasn't going-you know, on some deep level I knew that wasn't going to be my life in the future.

Mathew learned while in his different-sex relationships more about himself and his LGBQ identity. Although Matthew entered the different-sex relationships because it was what was expected of him, he learned that different-sex relationships were not the future that he wanted to have.

Likewise, Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when describing what it was like being in different-sex relationships said:

I started to realize that [different-sex attraction] was not really the case. Umm, that I really didn't ever want to have sex with this person and that-that made me kind of feel uncomfortable. And it made me wonder why I was in the relationship in the first place. And I think it was just sort of a sense of, like, feeling like-like loneliness basically[…] But as I sort of grown […] and sort of like you know, experimented and stuff like it's been clear like, no, I just really don't like that [different-sex relationships], you know? And it's also that I don't like being with men as well. And so, like that's kind of what they [different-sex relationships] showed me for sure, yeah.

Sarah explains that while in a different-sex relationship, she learned that she was not attracted to people of a different sex. One of the ways that Sarah learned that she was not interested in different-sex relationships was that she did not want to have sex with people of the different sex and was not physically attracted to men in the same way that she was with women. In fact, the thought of not wanting to have sex with the different sex made Sarah uncomfortable.

Many of my participants entered different-sex relationships not knowing there was any other option or because they felt that being in a different-sex relationship was what was expected

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of them by religion, society, social groups, or family. As a result, while in different-sex relationships, many of my participants discovered that different-sex relationships were contrary to what they truly felt, which, lead many to confirm their LGBQ identity. For instance, Judy, a 51-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing being in different-sex relationships, said:

> It was completely different like once I was in that-that opportunity to kinda date this guy that I wanted to date […] for a couple of years and […] it just kind of felt like umm I don't know if you've ever been in a situation where, like, you were at a party or something and you're just kind of sitting there going, "Why am I here? What the hell am I doing?" That's what it felt like but I didn't know why. I had no clue as to why I was feeling that way. Uhh, I was trying to figure out reasons to get out of this situation not you know, figure out why I was feeling that way but it was just like "Yeah I got into that fight or flight thing," you know, kind of thing. I was definitely ready to flee.

For Judy, being in a different-sex relationship showed her that she was not heterosexual like she had originally thought. Rather, while in the different-sex relationship with a man that she had been attracted to for a while, Judy's instincts while in the relationship were "fight or flight." Furthermore, while in the relationship Judy could not help feeling that it is not where she belonged. Realizing that she wanted to be out of the different-sex relationship as quickly as possible, Judy began the process of identity formation. Similar to the experiences of Judy, many other participants began their identity formation while in different-sex relationships.

The Role of Other LGBQ Individuals

Most participants did not know other LGBQ-identifying individuals while they were growing up. Instead, it usually was not until my participants were in college, or when they were

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older that they started to meet other individuals who identified as LGBQ. For instance, Leah, a 41-year-old who self-identified as bisexual only when pressed by others to identify, when discussing the beginning of her identity formation, said:

And I had one supervisor, the first person I'd ever met who identified as being a lesbian. And that was the first person I ever told. Umm, and I think it was just, I had never been around anybody who had identified any different than straight, even if they lied. I just, you know, didn't have anybody who at least owned it.

For Leah, meeting the first person who openly identified as LGBQ was comforting and created a safe environment. For Leah, this supervisor created a space for her to finally share her identity with someone else and helped her begin the process of identity formation. Furthermore, meeting someone else in the LGBQ community allowed Leah to become more comfortable in her bisexual identity and to start feeling that she could share her identity with others.

Another way that many participants further learned about their LGBQ identity is after falling in love with someone of the same sex. For instance, Susie-Q, an 83-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, while married in a different-sex relationship shared how she fell in love with someone of the same-sex. When describing falling in love with someone of the same sex Susie-Q said:

But it caused me to look inside myself, and I realized I was getting a lot of comfort from a very good friend of mine, and I was actually in love with her. And I realized I wanted more, and I realized it […] actually had a sexual component to it. And that's when I started looking at myself deeply and saying, "Wait a minute. What am I? You know, I know that I'm not a straight person. I know that I'm homosexual." And I mean, I never acted on these feelings, but I did talk to her about them and she was not willing to

reciprocate so […] But it did cause me to look at myself very closely, and that's when I

started coming out.

While in a different-sex marriage, Susie-Q fell in love with a woman. Although this was not the

only reason that Susie-Q knew that she was attracted to women, it made it so she could no longer

disregard her lesbian identity. Susie-Q shared with me later in the interview that she always had

an idea, particularly when she had sexual attractions to another girl in high school that she was

attracted to women. Yet Susie-Q was able to brush aside her attraction in high school because

she thought that her same sex attractions was just a phase. Similarly, Charley, a 71-year-old who

self-identified as bisexual only when pressed, said, "in a formal sense, I came out to a gay friend

of mine when I had fallen in love with that other guy." The first time that Charley formally

began to come out to others, was after falling in love with someone of the same sex.

While some of my participants first began to identify after falling in love with someone

of the same sex, some participants learned about their LGBQ identity from having new

experiences with individuals of the same sex. For instance, Judy, a 51-year-old who self-

identified as lesbian, when discussing the exploration of her identity said:

I kind of got wild when-after I came out with my first lesbian experience […] cause it,

you know, was basically like rediscovering my sexuality. Umm or discovering it for the

first time because then it felt natural. It felt right, it was like, "YES [emphasis added],

this-this has been what's missing" kind of thing.

Judy, after beginning the process of acknowledging and exploring her identity for herself,

instantly felt how natural it was for her to be with a woman. Similarly, many other participants

acknowledged and learned more about their identity after falling in love with someone of the

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same sex or even just generally being with someone of the same-sex in a way that they had not been before.

Conclusion

Identity is complex and multifaceted. Almost all of my participants identified as straight or bisexual before acknowledging and accepting an LGBQ identity. Through experiences such as different-sex relationships, meeting other individuals in the LGBQ community, and learning more about the LGBQ community in general, my participants began to acknowledge and explore their LGBQ identity. As a result of heteronormativity, almost all of my participants' identities were impacted in some way. For many of my participants, the biggest impact that heteronormativity had was that some of them struggled to accept their own identity because it was difficult to view their identity as something that was more than a phase or something that needed to be fixed. For some of my participants, heteronormativity impacted them because they felt that there was an expectation from their family, society, their communities, and religion to be heterosexual.

Almost all of my participants found that while entering into different-sex relationships with the intention to fix their LGBQ identity or do what was expected of them, they ultimately ended up further reinforcing their LGBQ identity. I also found that many of my participants struggled to acknowledge their identity because they often had very little knowledge surrounding the LGBQ community. In coming out, being in different-sex relationships, and meeting and falling in love with people in the LGBQ community my participants engaged in the process of identity definition.

CHAPTER SIX: RELIGION

Sarah, a 28-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, was one of the few participants who was raised religiously and was still religious. When describing the relationship between religion and her sexual orientation said, "there's a tension there that tends to be kind of annoying and difficult to deal with." When further describing the tension she felt between her religious identity as well as her lesbian identity Sarah said, "Umm trying to figure out like if I'm going to be religious, do I still get to be gay? And trying to actually like think through like, 'Is there a way that I could just not be gay while I'm a member of this religion? Is that possible?'" Sarah struggled to manage what seemed to be two conflicting identities. Often times for Sarah, her religion and her lesbian identity are so at odds that she feels as though she almost has to pick between the two. For Sarah, it is difficult to maintain the relationship between her sexuality and her religion. In fact, when describing the struggle that she felt between her religion and being gay, Sarah said, "But it is a battle. I mean, and trying to find a religion that will like accept me, for being out has-has also been a struggle." While not quite wanting to give up either identity, Sarah struggles with the two opposing identities. Because religion was unaccepting of Sarah's lesbian identity she wonders, "Like if my religion had accepted me from the very beginning and I had never had any doubts about that. That I wouldn't be living with this thing [the idea that being gay is wrong] that will never go away, you know?" Sarah was met with unacceptance and was made to feel that there was something wrong with her. As a result of being raised in a religion that was not accepting of homosexuality, Sarah will always have a doubt that being gay is wrong.

Raised Religiously, but No Longer Religious

I found that all of my participants were raised religiously. However, most participants were not still religious. For instance, Matthew, a 57-year-old who self-identified as gay, when discussing religion and the impact that it had on him said:

> Umm I, probably in a sense umm as far as you know it [religion] doesn't have an impact today, but I think it did. I was growing up, I grew up Catholic. We went to church every Sunday. We- I didn't know much different. I mean I knew there were other religions but it certainly isn't something I practice today, umm, from a viewpoint but umm, [religion] certainly had an impact when I was growing up. I would say it has much less of an impact today.

Matthew while raised religiously, does not still practice religion. Furthermore, Matthew, similar to Sarah mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, felt as though being raised religiously had an impact on him when he was younger. However, unlike Sarah, Matthew felt as though religion no longer had an impact on him. Similarly, Leah a 41-year-old who self-identified as lesbian only when pressed by others to choose an identity, when discussing religion said, "Uhh, I was raised Catholic. So, I was raised in a fairly religious household but I think as I had gotten older I'd become more just like spiritual, not necessarily like practice or follow a specific religion." Leah, while raised Catholic, was no longer religious. Similar to Leah, many of my participants also shared with me that while they were no longer religious they had instead become spiritual.

Raised Religiously And Still Religious

Sarah, the participant mentioned at the beginning of my chapter, was one of the few participants who was still religious. Sarah, after having some bad experiences with Christianity began to look to other religions. After searching, Sarah found a new religion that she felt was the

best fit for her. That being said, Sarah's new religion is also not accepting of the LGBQ

community or her sexual orientation. Sarah, when discussing her new religion said:

like it's kind of a universalist religion umm kind of not. And it's kind of not in the sense

that like it, really, it'll like, you know, like get a membership card when you're a member

of the faith and like, they'll take it away if they find out that you're gay. I mean, they

won't like come to your house or steal it or anything, but they'll ask you to send it back.

You know […] if you are, like, openly [homosexual] and like, and will admit that you're

practicing, you know, [and] having sexual relations umm and they'll-they'll take it

[membership] away. Umm if you do so and […] you don't feel bad about it, right? And

so, like they don't mind if you feel bad about being gay but if you feel okay about it and

you're not like gonna-you're not upset about that, they will do that.

While leaving her old religion after having bad experiences, Sarah decided to find a new religion

that fit her better. That being said, Sarah's new religion is one that is also not accepting of

Sarah's lesbian identity. In fact, if Sarah is openly accepting of her identity she will no longer be

able to be a member of that religion. Sarah can keep her membership to the religion and be still

be openly gay but only if she feels bad about being gay.

<center>"How Has the Homosexual Agenda Hurt You?"</center>

Sarah, the participant mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, when discussing her

experiences growing up in the Christian church said:

Yeah, so from like growing up in a church where, like, you know, if someone was gay, it

was clearly wrong and they were asked to leave the church type thing and umm like I

said, no one in my community was out and that it [being homosexual] wasn't a thing you

talked about. And, well, no that's not true, they did talk about it. They would talk about,

like-and I even remember I kept this thing from, like, a Bible study that I went to this little handout that they gave me […] but I remember the handout because I kept it. And it was basically just like they were talking about how you know homosexuality is wrong. How has the homosexual agenda hurt you, you know, like in all these, like, weird, like kind of strange claims and things. And I was like, "This is so odd that like you, on the one hand, you don't even feel comfortable talking about it but then you will talk about it in this way." You know? It was very, very, like, the opposite of accepting right? Clearly-clearly, unaccepting and clearly like this [being homosexual] is not acceptable.

Growing up religiously, Sarah quickly learned that being homosexual was not accepted by the church. Furthermore, she also learned that her religion viewed homosexuality as something that was "wrong." Similar to Sarah, many of my participants shared with me that most religions were not accepting of the LGBQ community. That being said, my participants did acknowledge that there were religions that were accepting of the LGBQ community. Some participants shared that they knew of others who were in religions that weren't accepting in an effort to change the religion to be more accepting of the LGBQ community. However, while many participants acknowledged that people in the LGBQ community could have positive experiences with religion, I found that the experiences that my participants had with religion were often unaccepting. For instance, Jane, a 64-year-old lesbian, when discussing religion and acceptance said:

I've seen both. Um there-there are some organized religions that are very open and accepting um, and then there are some that are very closed. And I have um, lesbian friends who are ministers in organized religion. Um I have many lesbian friends that attend church regularly in organized congregations and then I have people that um-for

example a former partner, when her father died she wanted to speak um at his service and

do a eulogy and because she was a lesbian she was not allowed to do that by her church.

She was not allowed to stand in the pulpit vicinity or anywhere in the church and speak.

From experiences that Jane had, she has learned that religion can be both unaccepting and

accepting of the LGBQ community.

While there are religions that are accepting of the LGBQ community, many of my

participants shared with me negative and unaccepting experiences that they had with religion.

For example, Leah, a 41-year-old who self-identified as bisexual only when pressed by others to

choose an identity, acknowledges the lack of acceptance in religion when she said:

Umm, I mean I think being raised Catholic I think it's [being gay] just historically, it's

frowned upon. Umm or not wildly accepted […] Umm it's like religion wise, it was just

not wildly accepted. I think umm I've never had, I mean outside of going to Pride […]

there's a church […] and they always have people standing outside protesting on Pride.

For Leah, growing up as Catholic, she learned that the LGBQ community was not historically

accepted by her religion. Additionally, Leah shared how when she has gone to Pride in the past

there have been people from a church that protest Pride because they are unaccepting of the

LGBQ community and believe that homosexuality is wrong.

"Homosexuality is a Sin"

For many of my participants, religion was unaccepting of people in the LGBQ

community because of the belief that homosexuality is a sin. For instance, Susie-Q, an 83-year-

old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing acceptance and religion said:

People, um, also the Bible, people take things out of context in the Bible and say, "That's

proof that you're a bad person because you're not behaving like a heterosexual person.

80

You're living an evil lifestyle are immoral." And there's, you know, a sense of

immorality. About what LGBT people, the lifestyle that we-and that's because of religion.

Susie-Q discusses how people use things out of the Bible as a means to prove that being

homosexual is wrong and immoral. Furthermore, Susie-Q addresses the role of heteronormativity

in religion by discussing how people who do not behave heterosexually are viewed as immoral.

Anyone who falls outside of the very strict ideals of heteronormativity are often viewed as

immoral and wrong by religion. Similarly, Grace, a 78-year-old who self-identified as lesbian,

when discussing the acceptance of the LGBQ community by religion said:

> By the time I learned what the Bible said about homosexuals, I was already coming out
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> of the closet, and I knew that that was not true. That the Bible had falsehoods in it. So it
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> wasn't something that bothered me, I knew about it. Actually, it made me stop going to
>
> church because I didn't want to be around in that environment.

Grace discussed how in her opinion, there are falsehoods in the Bible regarding homosexuality.

Grace also said that while she was aware of what the bible had to say about homosexuality, she

was not negatively impacted. That being said, because religion is generally not accepting of the

LGBQ community, Grace did not want to stay in an environment that was not accepting of

herself and the LGBQ community. Similarly, Olivia, a 38-year-old who self-identified as lesbian,

struggled coming out to her mother originally because of the beliefs that her mother's religion

had regarding homosexuality. When discussing her mother's religious beliefs and coming out

Olivia said, "Because she's very open-minded and liberal but she's also very Catholic and I

remember her saying […] 'What if it's true what they say in the Catholic church? Like that,

you're going to go to hell that this is wrong?'" When coming out to her mom, Olivia was asked

if she was going to hell because she was in a relationship with a woman due to the beliefs that her mom's religion had.

Clearly, for many people who are religious, homosexuality is a sin. It is clear from Olivia's experience that not only did my participants face conflicts within themselves of opposing identities, but religion also impacted my participants because of religious beliefs that those close to them held. As a result, many of my participants were constantly faced with the belief that homosexuality is a sin and many also struggled with the belief that they might go to hell. Additionally, Jane, a 64-year-old who self-identified as lesbian, when discussing religion and homosexuality said:

> Well, the organized religion would be um, predominately Christian religion. Um, I have encountered people that have felt that homosexuality is a sin, it's of the devil, it's bad. Um, I've had friends who have undergone shock treatment to try to get them away from who they are. Um so you know, very aware-I'm very aware that religion, many or some religion, is diametrically opposed to people being anything other than male or female and if you're male you're with a women and if you're female you're with a man and that's the way God wants it and that's the end of it […]

Jane, while her experience is not representative of all of my other participants' experience, paints a picture of just how unaccepting religion can be of homosexuality and the LGBQ community. From the experiences that Jane has had, it is clear that for many religions homosexuality is a sin. In fact, some religions and individuals may even go so far as to believe that individuals in the LGBQ community should undergo electroshock therapy in order to "fix" or overcome their sexuality. Heteronormativity, in order to continue presenting itself as the norm, includes such drastic and repulsive measures as electroshock therapy in order to ensure that individuals in

society fall within the strict ideals of heteronormativity that are deemed to be the "natural" as well as the "norm."

<div align="center">"Religion Keeps People Hidden"</div>

For many of my participants, they felt that they or other individuals in the LGBQ community were impacted in the process of coming out because of the lack of acceptance in religion for the LGBQ community. For instance, Matthew, a 57-year-old who self-identified as gay, when discussing religions impact on coming out said:

> But I look at people who are still coming out, and I think the ones that do struggle today, if they're young people, it may be because they come from an extremely traditional family, or they come from a religious background or an ethnic background that is not accepting of it. And it's really how we're educated. If you know, if our parent's beliefs are extremely religious sometimes and the religions that they belong to doesn't accept it [homosexuality] or recognize it, I think it's hard for the parents to take that on. Or if they come from an ethnic or socioeconomic background it doesn't, you know isn't as educated and is extremely traditional in view I think that's very very difficult.

Matthew acknowledges that due to the lack of acceptance of the LGBQ community, that is often found in religion, it was difficult for LGBQ-identifying individuals to come out. As a result, religion impacts people within the LGBQ community by creating an environment for many that make it not safe or comfortable to come out. Additionally, Matthew describes how due to heteronormativity, many LGBQ-identifying individuals have a general lack of information about the LGBQ community. Similarly, Leah, a 41-year-old who only self-identified as bisexual when pressed by others to choose an identity, when discussing coming out and religion said:

I think that it [religion] has a tendency to probably keep people hidden. Uhh people, depending on your religious background and kind of the belief system that your religion supports, your family things like that has a tendency to stifle umm people's preference. Umm, or like honesty about it. Umm I think sometimes it can be shameful and there's still umm you know sadly I think there's still this belief that you can counsel umm or you know pray like that out of someone. So I mean I think it-I do think it's [religion is] impactful.

Leah feels that because of the belief that homosexuality is a sin in many religions, it has an impact on many LGBQ-identifying individuals because it makes them feel as though they have to hide who they are. Furthermore, Leah also acknowledges that because of the unacceptance of homosexuality in religion, many people in the LGBQ community feel as though their sexuality is one that is wrong and one that they should feel shameful of.

Conclusion

Most of my participants were raised religiously and were either no longer religious or identified as spiritual instead. Based on the experiences of many of my participants, I found that religion was not generally accepting of people in the LGBQ community. While my participants did acknowledge that some religions could be accepting of the LGBQ community, the experiences that most of my participants had with religion and their sexual orientation were often negative and unaccepting. As a result, many participants also believed that religion impacted people in the LGBQ community by making them not feel as though they could come out. Additionally, many participants also shared with me that they felt as though religion could impact people by making people in the LGBQ community feel as though their sexuality was a sin and was immoral. Due to the belief that homosexuality is immoral, people in the LGBQ

community may feel as though they need to fix their sexual orientation or even that their sexual orientation is shameful.

The experiences that my participants had with religion were ones that were generally filled with a lack of acceptance. Many participants who were raised religiously were raised with the belief that homosexuality was immoral. As a result, while not all of my participants still felt as though they were still impacted by religion today, many of my participants did acknowledge that they were negatively impacted by religion due to the unacceptance of homosexuality.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

After interviewing 12 people who had been in different-sex relationships, I learned not only about the role that different-sex relationships played in coming out, but also the role that they played in the formation of an individual's identity. I also learned about heteronormativity and the impacts that it had on people who identified as LGBQ. I found that my participants were impacted by heteronormativity in three key areas: the process of coming out, identity, and religion.

Coming out is a process that people in the LGBQ community are expected to do. However, the process of coming out is not expected of heterosexuals. Many individuals who identify as LGBQ feel as though they have to continually come out when they met new people or when they were in new environments. Not only do LGBQ individuals constantly have to come out to others, but they also have to constantly manage when the best time to come out to others is. Some of the biggest decisions that my participants made when deciding if and when to come out, was that they did not want to make the other person uncomfortable or they did not know how the other person was going to react. Coming out to others is extremely stressful. For some participants, they lost sleep because of the stress that they had when they first began coming out to others. Furthermore, for many participants, it was a relief to come out because they felt as though they could finally live as their true selves and no longer had the weight of hiding who they were from others.

While some of my participants had strongly identified with existing with identity labels, others did not feel as though any of the existing identity labels fit them well. That being said, some participants who strongly identified with existing identity labels were still unsure that their identity truly fit them and questioned whether it is an accurate representation of who they were.

For many of my participants, regardless of whether they strongly identified with a current identity label, felt as though the labels did not accurately represent them in a holistic way that reflected all the experiences that they had with their sexuality. In fact, almost all of my participants felt that discussing their identity in regards to the spectrum was a better representation of their own experiences rather than using the labels in the LGBQ community. Overall, I learned that identity for all of my participants was not something that was straightforward.

Additionally, many of my participants identified as something other than their current identity. For instance, almost all of my participants identified as heterosexual before their current LGBQ identity. I found that many of my participants identified as an identity other than their current one as a result of heteronormativity. For instance, many participants shared with me that they identified as heterosexual because they did not know that there was any other identity or because being heterosexual was what was expected of them. Heterosexuality also had an impact on many of my participants in regards to the feelings they had about their sexual orientation. For instance, some participants' when referring to their sexual orientation described it as different, wrong, or as something that needed to be fixed. In fact, many of my participants entered into different-sex relationships in an effort to fit into the norm of heteronormativity but ultimately ended up further reinforcing their LGBQ identity. Because many of my participants did not know much about the LGBQ community growing up, the process of identity formation was one that usually entailed learning more about the LGBQ community and further exploring their own identity.

Finally, religion was extremely important for many of my participants. All of my participants were raised religiously. While most participants were no longer religious, there were

a few participants who were still religious, and some who were spiritual. I found that overall, many of my participants ultimately moved from groups that were not inclusive such as religion, to groups that were often inclusive such as groups in the LGBQ community. Additionally, many of my participants felt that religion could both be accepting and unaccepting of the LGBQ community. That being said, many of the experiences and beliefs that my participants had were ones where religion was not accepting of the LGBQ community. As a result, many of my participants, as well as people they were close to, struggled with the idea of homosexuality being a sin. With their morality called into question, it was often difficult for my participants to acknowledge or even accept their own identity when they were taught that it is a sin. Heteronormativity is deeply embedded into religion and is reinforced by a religious belief that people should only be in heterosexual relationships.

Coming out is an exhausting process. Constantly having to share with others an LGBQ identity, as well as managing when the best time to come out to others is exhausting. Managing when to come out to others is just another example of extra work that people who identify as LGBQ have to do that is not similarly expected of heterosexual individuals. Due to heteronormativity in the United States, many people just assume that everyone is heterosexual. As a result, many individuals find themselves having to constantly correct and disclose their sexual orientation to others. However, while there is the expectation for LGBQ individuals to come out, it is not always safe for individuals to come out.

For many on my participants, work was one of the places that people struggled with knowing whether or not they should come out to others. The reason that work was one of the places that was hardest to come out was that many participants feared losing their jobs. There are still 28 states where it is legal to fire someone from their job from being LGBQ. As a result,

many of my participants did not come out at their work because of a fear that they would lose their job. One of my participants even lost her job although she was not out at work. After an investigation based on a speculation of homosexuality, one of my participants lost her livelihood and was fearful of sharing her sexual orientation with others 15 years after being fired. That being said, many of my participants had to be careful of what they said so as not to share their identity with others. For instance, participants voiced their frustration of not being able to share what they did over the weekend like their heterosexual counterparts because if they did they would share their identity with others.

The older LGBQ generation is largely ignored. While there is very little research on the elder LGBQ generation, there is instead a lot of research about the younger LGBQ generation. With the general assumption that we've come so far in the United States, there was not a lot of difference between the experiences of the elder LGBQ community and the younger LGBQ community. For instance, both the younger and older generation both are continually involved in the ongoing process of coming out and decision-making about when and how to come out to others as a result of heteronormativity. While it seems that the stigma surrounding the LGBQ community must have surely decreased since the older LGBQ generation, I still found that the younger LGBQ generation continued to face just as much stigma as the older LGBQ generation. Another similarity that I found with the younger generation and the older generation is that beginning to identify as LGBQ often comes with learning more about themselves as well as the LGBQ community. It is important to further look at the similarities between the generations because, at a closer look, there is not much of a difference between the elder LGBQ generation and the younger LGBQ generation.

That being said, I believe that there are some differences for the LGBQ youth. Particularly those who are now growing up and have access to the internet. For LGBQ youth that has access to the internet, they will have more access to information surrounding the LGBQ identity and community. For many participants in my study who did not grow up with the internet, they shared with me that they lacked a lot of information about the LGBQ community. I think that the internet has an impact on the access that many LGBQ-identifying individuals have. Additionally, another difference that I think is important for individuals who grow up with the internet is that they have access to more support than individuals who did not grow up with the internet. Not only are there support groups online, but individuals are able to gain more support by finding groups or organizations in their local areas.

From my research, I learned that the impact that heteronormativity has on the LGBQ community is not a positive one. Rather, heteronormativity negatively impacts an individual's identity and how they view their sexual orientation. For instance, due to the stigma that surrounds the LGBQ community as a result of heteronormativity, many participants often described their sexuality as "different," "wrong," or something that was just a phase or needed to be fixed. For some LGBQ-identifying individuals, there may always be a tiny voice in the back of their head telling them that their sexuality is wrong.

Given my research, it is clear that there is still a lot that needs to be done. One policy implication that should be put in place is one that would protect LGBQ individuals from losing their jobs. Making it illegal to fire someone for their sexual orientation is important because there are still 28 states where LGBQ individuals can be fired because of their sexual orientation. LGBQ individuals should not lose their livelihood as a result of their sexual orientation. LGBQ individuals should not have to fear telling their coworkers what they did over the weekend.

Instead, LGBTQ individuals should be able to go to work and not fear losing their job because of their sexual orientation.

In the United States, sex education is often taught from the cis-gendered heterosexual perspective, excluding LGBTQ-identifying individuals (Elia and Eliason 2010). Sex education tends to focus on teaching sex education solely from the perspective of cisgender heterosexual. Ultimately the focus of sex education, "was on 'proper' sexual expression within a heterosexual and marital framework." (Elia and Eliason 2010:31). As a result, many LGBTQ-identifying individuals may feel as though there is something that is wrong or different about their experiences since all they have been taught about "normal" sex is from a cisgendered heterosexual perspective. Additionally, having a sex education that is not inclusive of the people who identify as LGBTQ either pushes LGBTQ issues to the side or erases LGBTQ individuals when teaching an abstinence only-based sex education (Elia and Eliason 2010). Therefore, I think that there needs to be a policy put in place in order to give a more inclusive sex education. Rather than teaching a very limited perspective, individuals deserve to have access to education about their experiences as well. Policy for more inclusive sex education would also help reduce the stigma surrounding LGBQ-identifying individuals. Also, I think that more generally, the LGBTQ studies and queer theory should be a much larger part of the education system in general (Elia and Eliason 2010). For the most part, sexualities and genders are something that are not taught to people before college (Elia and Eliason 2010). Therefore, a more inclusive education system, in general, would help disrupt heteronormativity.

Another policy that is necessary going forward is the Equality Act. 50% of Americans live in a state that have no protections for LGBTQ-identifying individuals (Human Rights Campaign 2019). This means that LGBTQ individuals can be fired from their jobs, be evicted

from their homes, and can even be denied credit (Human Rights Campaign 2019). Additionally, LGBTQ individuals are not protected from being denied service. The Equality Act is important because it would provide federal protection based on an individual's sexual and gender identity (Human Rights Campaign 2019). The Equality Act needs to be enacted in order for LGBQ-identifying individuals to have all of the same protections that heterosexuals have. It is an important policy that needs to be put in place in order to combat the stigma surrounding the LGBTQ community. Without the Equality Act, many LGBTQ individuals are not protected. Furthermore, it tells LGBQ individuals that they do not deserve being protected because of their "different" and "wrong" sexual or gender identity. Without the Equality Act, LGBTQ-identifying individuals are left completely vulnerable with no way to protect themselves.

The biggest limitation of my study is that I only screened for individuals who had been in different-sex relationships when this did not end up being the main topic of my thesis. As a result, all of my participants had been in different-sex relationships. It would have been important to learn about the experiences that people had with coming out, identity, and religion, having not been in different-sex relationships. For instance I think that the formation of an identity for an individual who had not been in a different-sex relationship would have been different. Many of my participants who had been in different-sex relationships ultimately ended up further reinforcing their LGBQ identity from being in different-sex relationships. It was from the experience of different-sex relationships that many of my participants learned that they were not heterosexual. If I had participants who had not been in different-sex relationships, I think that it would've been important to learn some of the ways that identity formation began, since for many of my participants, different-sex relationships were a key part to many people's identity definition.

Another limitation that I faced in my research was my use of snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, it is hard to be confident that my sample is representative of the broader LGBQ community (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). Furthermore, when using snowball sampling I relied on people within the community to know and be willing to share other individuals in the population to participate in my research. As a result of relying on gatekeepers for participants in my study, I found that I ended up having more women than men participate in my study. Overall I had two men and 10 women participate in my study. Another problem that I faced while snowball sampling is that people typically referred others who were similar ages, identities, ethnicities, and had similar religious beliefs. In my sample, I ended up having the vast majority of people being about 50 years or older. While there was a diverse age range for people above the age of 50, I wish that I had gotten a couple more people who were younger than 50 to learn more about the differences or similarities between the different generations of LGBQ-identifying individuals. That being said, from what I learned, the difference between the younger and the older LGBQ community did not seem to be that different from one another. However, I do think in future research it would be important to look at the similarities and the differences between the generations of LGBQ-identifying individuals to learn if there is as much of a difference between the two as many people might believe. While my study was not particularly diverse in ages below the age of 50, it was diverse in ages above the age of 50 which was important since there seemed to be a lack of information surrounding elder LGBQ identifying individuals in other literature.

Another limitation that I faced was that my sample was not diverse in terms of race or gender. I did not have a racially diverse group of interviewees. Rather, almost all of my participants identified themselves as white. With future research, I think it would be important to

look at the experiences of a more racially diverse group of participants. I do not think that the experience of white LGBQ-identifying individuals is representative of the experiences that LGBQ-identifying people of color have. Therefore, in future research it is important to look at impact that heteronormativity has for people who find themselves at the intersection of two marginalized identities. My study was not diverse in terms of gender because I did not interview as many men as I did women. In my research, I ended up interviewing 2 men and 10 women. While I did not find many gender differences in my study, I think that it would have been important to talk to more men in order to see if there were differences for men and women. Therefore, in future research, I think that it would be impactful to learn if the impact that heteronormativity has on men and women is different and if so how it is different.

Another limitation that I had in my study was the use of in-person interviewing. Using an in-person interviewing style, I impacted the participants with my own identity as a white cis-gendered heterosexual woman. My identity impacted my participants when discussing their sexuality. I think that the in-person interviewing impacted how much some of my participants shared with me. However, I did not directly tell my participants that I was not a part of the LGBQ community. I did have a couple of participants who did assume that I was heterosexual. I think that if I was part of the LGBQ community and had told my participants before the interview that I was in the LGBQ community that they would have felt more comfortable discussing their sexuality with me and would have been more open about some of the experiences that they had. That being said, not all of my interviews were in-person. As a result, about half of my participants did not know what I looked like. While I did not notice that people were more or less comfortable sharing information with me with over the phone interviews, I do

think that it did help some participants feel more comfortable sharing information as it was their preferred method of interviewing.

In my study, another limitation that I faced was the questions that I asked. For instance, when I first starting conducting interviews with participants, I was not asking enough questions about religion. Usually, I would ask participants about religion that they would answer quickly. Later in the interview I would have participants bring religion back up unprompted to discuss their experiences with religion more in-depth. Religion ultimately ended up being a topic that was more important than I had anticipated within my interviews. Once I added more questions regarding religion, I found that it did have a significant impact on my participants in the answers that they were giving. I found that adding more questions about religion allowed my participants to elaborate more about their experiences and beliefs surrounding religion. However, because I changed the questions that I was asking, not all of my participants were asked the same questions. Therefore, some participants were not asked questions that allowed them to elaborate on subjects such as religion. Had I asked more questions about religion, coming out, and identity I would have gained a better understanding of the experiences and beliefs that my participants had surrounding such subjects. That being said, I did not know what my themes were going to be before I interviewed people. In the future, I would ask more questions in depth about coming out, identity, and religion.

A final limitation that I faced in my study was that all of my participants were raised religiously. As a result, I was only able to learn about the impact that religion had on individuals who were raised religiously. Because none of my participants were not raised without a religion, I would like to see if LGBQ individuals who were not raised religiously faced some of the same difficulties with the acceptance and acknowledgment of their sexual orientation. Therefore, I

think in future research looking at participants who were not raised religiously and were still not religious, would be important to learn about the differences or similarities that they shared with LGBQ individuals who were raised religiously.

While there is a general understanding that heteronormativity has an impact on individuals who identify as LGBQ, there seems to be a lack of understanding of just how ingrained and widespread heteronormativity is in U.S. society. While I examined just a few ways that heteronormativity impacts LGBQ-identifying individuals, there is a variety of ways that heteronormativity impacts the lives of LGBQ-identifying individuals. In my study, I learned that early life experiences of LGBQ-identifying individuals such as coming out, identity formation, and experiences with religion impacted an individual decades later, further strengthening the impact of heteronormativity.

In the future, I predict that as there will be a continuation of the disruption of heteronormativity. As a result, I think that the stigma surrounding the LGBQ community will eventually decrease. Also, I hope that with the disruption of heteronormativity, people will have more support, face less stigma, and processes such as coming out and managing when and how to come out to others will no longer be necessary for individuals who identify as LGBQ. Additionally, I think that there will be a continuation of the access to the information surrounding the LGBQ community. I predict that as people who identify as heterosexual and non-heterosexual gain more information about the LGBQ community, there will become a wider acceptance of identities that are not heterosexual.

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