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“Whoever I Find Myself To Be”: Past, Present, and Future Selves of Bisexual Emerging  
Adult Men and Trans Masculine Individuals

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**Abstract**

“Whoever I Find Myself To Be”: Past, Present, and Future Selves of Bisexual Emerging Adult Men and Trans Masculine Individuals

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The Institute of Medicine (2011) has recognized LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) adults as an understudied and underserved population at-risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes, such as high rates of psychological distress and cardiovascular disease risk. Meta-analyses have shown higher rates of depression, substance use, suicidality, intimate partner violence, and STI's/HIV risk in young gay and bisexual men, who have historically been aggregated in health research. When bisexual men are studied apart from other cisgender men, bisexual men experience worse health outcomes than their exclusively heterosexual or gay counterparts; however, the mechanisms whereby that disparity is conveyed have not been examined. Research on trans masculine individuals is also scant. That which does exist suggests higher rates of violence victimization, alcohol use, and suicidality than among cisgender peers. Furthermore, associated stress effects of these disparities can perpetuate across the life course and intergenerationally, particularly given the biological and social vulnerability to stress that characterizes emerging adulthood.

Bisexuality is the most prevalent sexual minority identity in the United States, and recent estimates suggest that emerging adults have the highest prevalence of bisexually identified people. Given the aforementioned research highlighting the unique issues

associated with bisexuality, its association with various health decrements, and its increasing prevalence in the population, it is imperative to public health and social welfare that we increase our understanding of bisexuality as an identity, to ultimately increase health and well-being for bisexual, masculine people.

This research intends to address this gap by integrating elements of critical race, queer, and symbolic interactionist theories within a feminist, poststructuralist epistemological and theoretical framework, employing theoretical pluralism and a future-forming orientation towards inquiry. Using critical feminist, narrative, and arts-based and somatic methodologies, I conducted multiple interviews with 15 non-monosexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals. The participants discussed their personal experiences as interactions with two primary themes from the study: “Cishetero/cishomonormativity: reproduction, resistance, and dissonance” (including gendered socialization through relationships across the social ecology) and “Finding Myself: who I was, who I am, and who I am becoming.” These co-constructions represent interpretations of the *meaning* that participants made from their life experiences and the ways they conceptualize “who they are becoming” as they move into adulthood.

The dissertation findings complicate critical research, which has often taken an uncomplicated social constructionist approach to identity categories, such as sexuality and gender. This approach can diminish the importance of biology or fail to acknowledge the changing nature of masculinity norms or treat identity (identities) as discrete. This study acknowledges and highlights the dissonance and complexity that exists for those young adult men who continually critique normative constructions of gender and sexuality, while simultaneously longing for the sense of certainty and

connection that “fitting in” could (possibly) offer. Also, the study findings challenge the assumption that liminality is singularly isolating by highlighting participants’ experiences of pushing against and expanding norms into the transformative possibilities of living in “the in-between,” particularly when held in supportive relationships. This research offers both a methodologically innovative model for social scientists, as well as a critical first step toward better understanding how bisexuality and experiences related to this sexuality identity may influence emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals throughout the life course. The larger study goal is to inform future research, practice, and pedagogy to promote health and well-being of this understudied population.

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devoted group of people to have in my life.

## **DEDICATION**

To all of those who feel like they exist in-between; it is  
brave and hard to be who you are.

and

To my parents.



Image of a “supportive sexual culture,” created by a study participant.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes—James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work*

### **Statement of Research Problem and Major Questions**

The Institute of Medicine (2011) has recognized LGBTQAI2 (generally conceived of as including queer, questioning, asexual, intersex and two-spirit identities) adults as an understudied and underserved population at-risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes such as high rates of anxiety and nicotine use (Conran, Mimiaga, & Landers, 2014; Graham et al., 2011). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) cite improving LGBT health as a primary goal for their Healthy People 20/20 initiative (CDC, 2014).

The acronyms “LGBT” and “LGBTQAI2” are frequently used to define this population, implying a common identity or experience; this results in critical subgroup differences often being overlooked within the empirical literature (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). In particular, research focusing on bisexual men (those sexually and/or romantically interested in partners of more than one sex or gender is limited (Eisner, 2013; Ochs, 1996; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; McDonald, 1981; Du Plessis, 1996; Rust, 2000). This dissertation, based upon primary interview data collected from September through December 2017, aims to shed light on the lives of young (18 to 30 years old) bi/pansexual/gay/queer, cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender

queer people to better understand distinct aspects of their experiences of sexuality and gender in this particular epoch.

It is important to have a common working definition of bisexuality for this project. While many have proposed definitions of bisexuality, my aim is that it can be understood here beyond the medicalized or binaried conceptualizations that have limited our understanding of, and imagination around, sexuality. As bisexual activist Sheri Eisner suggests, bisexuality can be “defined and politicized on all or any of three axes...desire, community, and politics” (Eisner, 2013, p. 21). This project operationalizes bisexuality in the same way that famed bisexual activist Robyn Ochs did when she said, “I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted-romantically and/or sexually-to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily in the same degree” (Ochs, 1996 as cited in Eisner, 2013, p. 21). Thus, I will use the conceptual terms asexual and bisexual (instead of the common scientific term, non-monosexual or the more recent term pansexual) to refer to a sexuality identity that includes “more than one.” When referring directly to participants’ experiences, I will use the terms that they used for characterizing their own sexuality: bi/pansexual/gay/queer. One participant referred to his sexuality alternatively as “bisexual/pansexual/gay,” with gay therefore included to recognize that definitional fluidity. Similarly, when referring conceptually to gender, I will use the terms that participants used to describe their gender, which included cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer.

Scant research has explored the experiences of bisexual individuals separately from those of lesbians and gay men (Kaestle & Ivory, 2012). This is an oversight that

reflects the relative invisibility of bisexual individuals' social position both within LGBTQAI2 communities and in the broader population (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Rust, 2000). When separate analyses or comparison studies are conducted with bisexual research participants, important distinctions have been found, revealing unique social, psychological, and health-related experiences. Bisexual men experience worse health outcomes such as higher rates of depression and partner violence, than do their monosexual counterparts; however, the mechanisms whereby that disparity is conveyed are not well understood (Bostwick, 2012; Meyer, 2003; Conran et al., 2010).

Thus, the lives and identities of bisexual people vary, both theoretically and empirically, as compared to people with exclusively same-sex, sexual partners. As well, men/masculine bisexual individuals' experiences differ from those of women/femme people. This dissertation seeks to shift the current focus of the LGBTQAI2 research to better understand the lives of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals, whose experiences of bisexuality are distinct from those of bisexual women and femme people and both similar and different based upon gender identity (where in the universe of gender a person identifies themselves).

Sexuality has distinct but related elements organized into myriad domains. Those most commonly discussed in research are behavior, orientation, and identity (Diamond, 2000; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Sexual behavior refers to what someone *does* sexually. Sexual orientation refers to a general predisposition to experience attraction to a person of a particular sex or multiple sexes (or non-conforming individuals). And sexuality identity refers to an individual's self-concept around their sexual orientation or how they relate to their own sexuality (Cass, 1984; Diamond, 2000, 2006). In American culture, these identities are typically conceptualized as inclusive of and consistent across

behavior, orientation, and identity, unchanging over time, and are labeled heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In fact, one's own identity need never be made public for it to be "real" and embodied (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). For the purposes of this study, bisexual emerging adult men will refer to people between the ages of 18 and 30 who identify, at the time of the study as bisexual/pansexual/and/or queer (non-monosexual) and cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer, regardless of gender assigned at birth.

Through phenomenological interviews infused with somatic and arts-based methodologies, I examine the ways emerging adult bisexual men and trans masculine individuals construct and make sense and/or meaning of their bisexual identities on individual, social, and political levels by drawing on discourses on a macro scale and specific linguistic tools that participants use in the micro sphere. This research draws on Gergen's (2015) call for orienting research towards future-forming. Aligned with this orientation, participants create art and describe their vision for a supportive sexual culture and the ways in which they place themselves in that world: an innovative method, implying agency and possibility.

The goal of this study is to learn about the lived experiences of bisexual men and trans masculine individuals in this particular epoch and how they make meaning of those experiences in the context of shifting conceptions of masculinity in contemporary American culture. I will discuss the relevant history and theoretical, methodological, and substantive background literature that informed the studies' conceptualization. I will detail the methodology used in the study, including unique recruitment strategies and innovative methods. I will then continue with the study's findings, gleaned from primarily narrative data. Finally, I will close with a discussion of the implications for

future research, including the limitations of this study. I see this project as a methodological model for researchers as well as a crucial first step toward better understanding of how both gender identity and/or expression and bisexuality, and experiences related to these identities may influence the health and well-being of emerging adult men and trans masculine people throughout the life course.

Below is a list of gender and sexuality related terms. It is critical to dis-aggregate all of these, and they are often conflated in research, adding to erasure and incomplete understandings of people's experiences. As with all elements of identity, these definitions should be interpreted as context-dependent and flexible.

### **Sexual Orientation Identity**

(for a more comprehensive glossary of terms, see Barker et al., 2012)

- Asexual — not experiencing sexual attraction to others or not wishing to act upon it if it is felt (Barker et al., 2012).
- Bisexual — experiencing sexual attraction to more than one gender (Ochs, 1996; Eisner, 2013). Biromantic is a term that is often correlated with bisexuality and refers to experiencing romantic attraction to more than one gender (Ochs, 1996; Eisner, 2013; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015). Biromanticism is included here because one participant described himself as asexual and biromantic.
- Monosexual — a stated attraction to only one gender, encompassing the identities of gay, lesbian, heterosexual (Barker et al., 2012).
- Pansexual — experiencing attraction to more than one gender (Barker et al., 2012).

- Bisexual — a stated attraction to more than one gender, encompassing the identities bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid, i.e., essentially anything other than asexual or monosexual. The term non-monosexual has been used in previous literature to name bisexuality (Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Barker et al., 2012).

### **Gender Identity**

(for a primer on gender and language, see <https://outshinenw.org/language/>)

- AFAB — assigned female at birth (<https://outshinenw.org/language/>).
- Cisgender — someone whose gender matches the gender that they were assigned at birth (Aultman, 2014; <https://outshinenw.org/language/>).
- Transgender (or trans) — an umbrella term for someone whose gender and/or gender expression does not match the gender that they were assigned at birth (Grant et al., 2011; Lowell, 2017). The ways that people identify with this term depend on their relationship to their gender at that particular moment.
- Demigender — someone who identifies with a specific gender on some level, but not completely (for example, a “demiguy” might identify with elements of masculinity or maleness, but not all elements) (<https://outshinenw.org/language/>).
- Queer —in the context of sexuality and gender, queer is a reclaimed umbrella term referring to sexuality and gender identities that don’t ascribe to the dominant norms prescribed by cisheteronormativity

(Halberstam, 2005). I use queer in a number of ways, including the aforementioned. Queer is also used to refer to a singular queer identity, separate from other non-cis non-heterosexual and non-two-spirit identities. Finally, queer is used as both a theoretical and analytical tool for disrupting social, political, and cultural norms (Hudson, 2012).

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Aims**

Given the aforementioned research highlighting the unique issues associated with bisexuality, its association with various health decrements, and its increasing prevalence in the population, it is imperative to public health and social welfare that both researchers and practitioners increase their understanding of bisexuality as an identity, to ultimately improve health and well-being for bisexual men and trans masculine people. This exploratory study intends to address this gap by centering their stories using a feminist, narrative approach to better understand the concepts of identity in relationship to sexuality and gender and how they unfold within a feminist, poststructuralist, epistemological and theoretical framework.

### **Research Questions**

This exploratory study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do bisexual, emerging adult men construct/deconstruct/remake and narrate their sexuality identity?
2. How are the experiences of cisgender and trans masculine participants the same and how are they different?

3. In what ways do emerging adult bisexual men construct and deconstruct bisexuality at individual, social, and political levels?

### **Definition of Common Terms Used in This Study**

Throughout this study, I use terminology that has multiple meanings and could be understood and/or interpreted in various ways. The study concepts are not meant to misrepresent, diminish, or essentialize any of the myriad ways people identify and describe themselves. Instead, the following terms are used within the text at different prioritizing appropriateness of the context. When discussing non-monosexuality generally, I will use the term bisexual, while the topic of gender generally will alternatively be described using cisgender (cis) or transgender (trans) or trans masculine (when specifically referencing trans masculine individuals). If study participants *as a whole* are being referenced, then I will use the terms that they used to describe themselves. For example, if when discussing sexuality in the context of the study participants, I will use “bisexual/gay/queer” since those are the terms that participants used to describe themselves; however, when referring to gender I will use cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer as those are the various ways that participants described themselves.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I provide the background and context for this study. Chapter 3 describes some key assumptions informed by the epistemological and theoretical frameworks that guide the study. I then detail those frameworks, namely a critical theoretical lens influenced by queer theory, women of color feminisms, white

feminism, poststructuralist epistemology, and constructivists theories of development and sexuality and gender. In that chapter, I also disentangle the intersectional, complicated, queer context that emerges from deploying this kind of theoretical pluralism. Chapter 4 details my methodological approach in the context of my epistemological and theoretical orientation, including specific methods used in both data collection and analysis. This chapter also includes a sample description, including unique elements of this particular sample. Chapter 5 contains an overview of the study results, which are then further explicated in two subsequent chapters based upon major themes constructed from participant narratives. Chapter 6 centers on cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity, as a regulating structure that organizes our world, and by extension, functions as the context for this study. Then Chapter 7 focuses on the ways in which participants negotiate and make meaning of their intersectional identities and experiences. Chapter 8 discusses implications for future research and for social welfare and public health practice and education.

## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

*Which me will survive all of these liberations--Audre Lorde, Land Where  
Other People Live*

The purpose of this chapter is to frame the historical and social context in which this study is situated, as well as to discuss the relevant substantive literature that informs the study and explicates its importance.

### **Identity and Normativity**

Institutional discrimination, as a product and vehicle of colonialism, racism, sexism, and late market capitalism has been extensively explored (Esping-Anderson, 2009; Harding, 1987; Kitzinger, 1987; Silvanandan, 1990). Consistent with critical race and feminist scholars, the concepts of cisheteronormativity structures interactions and relationships via its ubiquitous, pernicious power. Its influence manifests across the social ecology, by prescribing a limited scope of one's possible (read: socially acceptable) "self," via interpersonal relationships, through cultural norms and representation, and the state to produce and "normalize" cisgenderism and heterosexuality (Cohen, 1997; Ward & Schneider, 2009). Cisheteronormativity operates and retains its power because it is invisible as a political institution (Diamond, 2006). It is important to note, as feminist Cathy Cohen (1997) has suggested, cisheteronormativity is a system, rather than a commentary on individuals, and it is critical to a liberatory politics that discourse not essentialize all heterosexual experience as uniform.

Many of the roots of cisheteronormativity are in white supremacist attempts to regulate and enforce Puritanical ideologies of sexuality, which have disproportionately

been used to stigmatize and control “black bodies like my own” (Cohen, 1997, p. 40). Relatedly, homonormative whiteness is a (re)production of the U.S. socio-political discourse organized around mythical cultural standards described by Audre Lorde as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual-acting, Christian, financially secure” (1984, p. 116), the hegemonic gay. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term homonormativity refers to the regulating norms that constitute the dominant queer body as white and cisgender, male, and privilege static and binary notions of whiteness and masculinity as normal. Judith “Jack” Halberstam (2005) has defined normativity as the following: “conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification” (p. 4). Examining white normativity, critical race scholars assert that the cultural practices that perpetuate the notion that white is the natural human condition (or “default,” devoid of “race”) also serve to enhance other forms of normativity (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2004; Frankenberg, 1993; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Muñoz, 1999; Ward, 2008; Alcoff, 2017). For instance, whiteness enhances and supports the privileging of middle-class status, able-bodied status, and the heterosexual gender binary of masculine/male and feminine/female (Duggan 2003; Halberstam, 2005; Ward, 2008; Smith, 2010). White normativity naturalizes hierarchy. As Smith has asserted (2010), settler colonialism imposed a hierarchical structure (in the form of the gender binary) necessary for domination of indigenous people who did not have a pre-existing hierarchy. White normativity enhances, normalizes, and centers binary assumptions that undergird homophobia and homonormativity and work synergistically as powerful systems of oppression to marginalize queer peoples, limiting political and social power and prescribing narrow expressions of gender and sexuality, which is damaging for everyone, especially subjugated queer people (Smith, 2010).

It is important, however, to not mistake whiteness as (a) a lack of identity (b) solely created and oriented from racism (c) immutable, monolithic, and unchanging. These assumptions exist in both racist and anti-racist orientations of white exceptionalism. The racist version (described above) was the basis of anti-miscegenation laws from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century up until 1967 (whiteness “needs to remain pure”) (Alcoff, 2005; Alcoff, 2015). As critical race scholar Linda Alcoff has asserted, empirically, myriad variables went into the development of white identity (racism was an important central feature), experience of European immigration, and experience of ethnic amalgamation (2005; 2015). Thus, white normativity is an incredibly powerful organizing force that has real material consequences and is played out in all kinds of social milieu. And also, to think that whiteness does not interact with other identity categories and experiences is false, or that it was born from a discrete moment, solely of powerful and entrenched racism and will be forever embedded regardless of the fabric of United States makes it exceptional. Such a conceptualization provides white supremacy with more power and discredits and disempowers the ever shifting and dynamic nature of the social world, diminishing the possibility for a future egalitarian world (Alcoff, 2017). This framing of white normativity provides the reader with a grounding that holds a both/and of whiteness, which has been used as a powerful tool to oppress, and it is constructed like any category.

Feminit(ies), similar to the racialized identities of “non-whiteness,” have been constructed and denigrated systematically through millennia, operating across all levels of the social ecology as misogyny (Crenshaw, 2018; Manne, 2017). Misogyny is best understood as “a property of social environments in which women {and anyone approximating femininity} are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and

policing of patriarchal norms and expectations-often...insofar as they violate law and order” (Manne, 2017, p. 19). This rendering recognizes as the social structure that it is, doing political meaningful political work to uphold binaried notions of gender, which positions men and masculine people in positions of dominance over women/femme people (Connell, 2014; Manne, 2017). Feminist philosopher Kate Manne helps to distinguish between sexism and misogyny by suggesting that sexism justifies a cisheteropatriarchy, whereas misogyny polices, enforces, and regulates gendered norms and expectations (2017). These dual structures of oppression inform the anti-femininity imperative of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005)

Regarding what we call identity, the dominant conception of what is normative (within white normativity) extends both epistemologically and ontologically and has political implications. Epistemology generally refers to the nature, status, or production of knowledge (Harding, 1987; Bernal, 2002). However, as Ladson-Billings (2000) suggested, it is more accurately conceptualized as a “system of knowing” that is linked to worldviews based upon the context and conditions in which people grow, learn, and live. There are well-developed epistemologies that challenge the dominant “normative” Euro-American epistemologies, such as feminist, critical race, and indigenous epistemologies. These raced and race-gendered epistemologies are increasingly being used to challenge dominant research paradigms, drawing on a more expansive experience of history, and social and cultural life (Stanfield, 1994; Bernal, 2002).

Identity and “the self,” have been taken up in various scientific disciplines. Essentializing philosophical perspectives of identity suggest that it is immutable, static, and unchanging. Ontologically, normative paradigms of positivism suggest that there is

an objective reality (or “truth”) that exists and that “truth” is real, knowable, and the same regardless of the identities that we embody or how we are perceived by others (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Harding, 1987). The very concept of naming “identity” could imply that it is static and singular; whereas, many have suggested that it is instead dynamic, layered, and represented by multiple parts all at once (or “identities”). As Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang note “the grids used to define the intersection for identity are already in ruins” (2017). And most know the line from Walt Whitman’s famous poem on the self (specifically himself): “do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes” (in Miller, 1959, *Song of Myself*, section 51). It is my hope that, consistent with the critical poststructuralist theoretical orientation of this research, the reader understands that my orientation to identity is that it is produced via discourse and also an embodied sense of self, and that it is dynamic, shifting, layered, multifaceted, and context-dependent, intersecting with myriad environmental and social variables influencing experience (Butler, J., 1990; Foucault, 1980; Appadurai, 1996).

Furthermore, our identities shape what we know and what can be known, impacting our experiences of our reality (or said “truth” of experience) and having real consequences in the world. Thus, identities shift and change over time based upon layered contexts, *and* also there are real, material consequences to the identities we embody and how we are read by others—we are differentially situated vis a vis our social experiences, and that situatedness shapes our realities, or the stories that we tell ourselves, about ourselves, stories that integrate past, present, and future (Alcoff, 2005; Pasupathi, Brubaker, & Mansour, 2007; Mclean & Syed, 2015). This intersectional lens towards identity informs this research project (Hill-Collins, 2000; Mehrotra, 2010).

## **Extending Critical Theories on Masculinity and Health**

Most of the critical race and feminist scholarship has been appropriately centered in the oppression of women, people of color, and sexual and gender minorities and has demonstrated the myriad material and social benefits conferred via maleness and whiteness (Harding, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989). However, such research can be extended via insights from ecofeminists and social scientists who have suggested that performing masculinity contributes to men's greater morbidity and that the power that masculine socialization entails is detrimental to men's health and well-being (Courtenay, 2000; Gaard, 1997; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Salleh, 2017).

In a patriarchal society, men/masculine people hold power; however, in general men/masculine people are more constrained by gender norms and risk greater social consequences should they deviate from idealized masculinity, which is constituted performatively and must be continually proven (Evans, Frank, Oliffe, & Gregory, 2010; Messner, 1998; Berger, Wallis, & Watson, 1995; Connell, 1996; Parrott, 2009). This "proving" of gender occurs across social contexts including work (Connell, 2005), crime (Messerschmidt, 1993), sex (Vance, 1995), and health-related beliefs and behaviors (Courtenay, 2000). As Saltonstall suggested in her study of gender and health, "health acts are social acts...the doing of health is a form of doing gender" (1993, p. 12).

Public health and medical research has suggested that, compared to women, men have greater morbidity and mortality, controlling for other social determinants like race and income (Evans, Frank, Oliffe, & Gregory, 2010; Courtenay, 2000). In addition, men experience higher rates of suicidality and substance use (Kendler, Prescott, Myers, & Neal, 2003; Sullivan, Anest, Luo, Simon, & Dahlberg, 2013; Evans, Frank, Oliffe, & Gregory, 2010; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Courtenay, 2000). Traditionally, critical

feminist theories provide little to explain these health decrements experienced by men, other than important but cursory nods to the limitations of gender roles. It is important to integrate other literatures to better understand men's health decrements and connect these theories to the study at hand.

Negative health outcomes are experienced often by men who adhere to hegemonic masculinity norms via processes operationalized as masculine gender role stress, masculine gender role strain, and hypermasculinity (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015; David & Brannon, 1976; Copenhaver & Eisler, 1996). To explain various health problems experienced by men (trans masculine people were not included in this research), Copenhaver and Eisler (1996) developed the theory of masculine gender role stress (MGRS) by combining insights from various other social science theories. They integrated Bem's work (1981), which suggested that gender role schemas predispose men to viewing the world through their (privileged) male lens, Pleck's (1995) proposition that socially and culturally imposed masculinity norms precipitate gender role strain, and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) research on the crucial role of cognitive appraisals driving stress reactions (and thus later health outcomes).

Masculine gender role stress is defined as experiencing distress in perceiving a threat to one's masculine identity. Combining research on MGRS and the related construct of hypermasculinity, or an exaggerated form of hegemonic masculinity, adhering to these constructs has been linked to depression (Magovcevic & Addis, 2008), increased risk behaviors (e.g., larger numbers of sexual partners, higher substance use) (Burk et al., 2004; Mosher, 1991; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984), alexithymia (e.g., lack of affect), poor coping skills (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2004; Martino, 2000), violence perpetration (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015; Parrot & Zeichner, 2008; Parrot, 2009),

cardiovascular impacts, and low rates of help seeking (Copenhaver & Eisler, 1996; Copenhaver, Lash, & Eisler, 2000; Corprew, Matthews, & Mitchell, 2014; Baugher & Gazmarian, 2015; Courtenay, 2000).

Previous research centering on men's internalization and performance of masculinity (and rejection of femininity) find that these behaviors are counterproductive to health and well-being. Courtenay (2000) provided a useful example of this in his discussion of sunscreen application to prevent skin cancer. Men may have to reject a variety of socially constructed notions of masculinity in order to apply sunscreen; men are unconcerned with health; men are invulnerable to harm; men don't use lotion; men don't "fuss" over their bodies; a tan is masculine (i.e., "rugged good looks"). Thus, as Courtenay puts it "in not applying sunscreen, men may be simultaneously demonstrating gender and an unhealthy practice," and higher morbidity and mortality rates for men collude this assertion (2000, p. 1389; CDC, 2018). This social constructionist perspective is helpful in identifying the systematic and pervasive ways that social norms become implicated in health beliefs and behaviors, and is extended with new insights from neuropsychological research on chronic stress.

Research on masculine gender role stress and hypermasculinity, coupled with psychoneurological research on toxic stress processes and subsequent chronic health impacts can illuminate how the power and dominance implicit in hegemonic masculinity is wounding to cisgender men and possibly trans masculine individuals at a cellular level (see Hurtado, 2013 for more on this, which she calls "enfleshment"). Hegemonic masculinity involves a negation of the fullness of self in denying all things attributed to femininity (intuition, perception, relationality, empathy, emotional expression); in short, it institutionalizes misogyny (Connell, 1995; Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005; Gallagher & Parrot, 2011; Bauer & Gazmararian, 2015; Mann, 2017; Thompson & Pleck, 1986; Parrott, Peterson, & Bakeman, 2011).

Feminist theories of embodiment and ecofeminism support the notion that ascribing to hegemonic masculinity entails self-repression and emotional repression (via self-monitoring and hypervigilance), thereby cutting one off from one's own, full experience (embodied experience of sensations, cognitions, emotions), as well as preventing genuine intimacy in relationships with others and the natural world, both of which are antithetical to human needs for connection and belonging and fundamentally stressful to the human organism. That is, hegemonic masculinity reinforces a gender hierarchy that ascribes dominance to men/masculinity. This can have negative social, behavioral, and biological consequences for men, as it is antithetical to humans' need for closeness, belonging, and connection to self and others. Enacting dominance is only possible if you objectify and dehumanize others, which depends on a "dualized structure of otherness and negation" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 42). This duality is a social construction endemic to Western philosophical orientations of separateness, which undergird institutions and structures, including gender norms (that are also, always raced), and it is antithetical to our nature as humans who thrive on connection (Gaard, 1997; O'Laughlin, 1993; Fromme, 2010; Weeks, 1991). Cultivating protective and health promoting intimacy requires relationship skills such as empathy, comfort with vulnerability, emotional expressiveness, ability to ask for help, non-sexual physical touch and affection, and other traits that are antithetical to Eurocentric masculine ideals (David & Brannon, 1976; Corprew, Matthews, & Mitchell, 2014; Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015). Thus, in addition to socially constructed masculinity norms guiding health beliefs and behaviors, many authors have hypothesized that these health

decrements can be attributed to profound isolation and loneliness that hegemonic masculine norms necessitate and which has been associated with stress-related, negative health outcomes throughout the life course (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Klein, 1963; McEwen & Gianaros, 2010; Reichmann, 1959; Weiss, 1973).

Thus, the gender hierarchy, with its “always, already” (Heidegger, 1996) racialized masculinity norms are detrimental to everyone. This is important to point out given the intersectional lens of this project. Thus, although whiteness and the ability to pass as straight, for example, confers power and social benefits, this research adds to other recent literature showing that people who have those privileges also may experience greater loneliness, lack of connection, distress, and feelings of non-belonging (Hudson, 2013, 2015) . This research will add an important nuance to critical race and feminist critiques of power within white supremacist, cisheteronormative contexts.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

This section includes the following subsections: normativity and identity in sexuality and gender research; decrease in stigma in recent years; sexuality identity; gender identity; sexual and gender minorities and health disparities; sexual and gender minorities, religion, and health disparities; and explaining the focus on bisexual emerging adult men/trans masculine individuals.

#### **Normativity and Identity in Sexuality and Gender Research**

U.S. cultural norms valorize chastity and denigrate the body and its attendant urges, desires, sensuality, emotion, “leakiness,” and thusly sex and sexuality (Shildrick, 2015; Longhurst, 2004). This ubiquitous, dominant cultural overlay around sex and the

body is important to keep in mind in “setting the stage” for this study; as Wanda Pillow (2007) has stated, “bodies are dangerous” (p. 145).

Contemporary conceptions of sexuality, which are often expressed and reified through research, are rooted in cisnormative, heteronormative, and mononormative assumptions, erasing and perpetuating discrimination for those who don't ascribe to those characterizations (Galupo et al., 2017; Paul, 1984; Rich, 1980). Adrienne Rich's seminal work on compulsory heterosexuality troubled prevailing feminist theorizing on gender, which had historically rested on men's oppression of women via heterosexual pairings (both assuming a gender binary and heterosexuality). These norms, reified in myriad social spaces, including within research, assume that to be cisgender (identify with your sex assigned at birth [Stryker, 2008]), heterosexual (attracted to “the opposite sex” defined in a binary system of gender), and monosexual (sexual interest in one gender, again defined in a binary understanding), are the natural defaults (read: idealized sexuality) (Dean, 2010; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Rich, 1980).

Additionally, scholars have called for the study of gender and sexuality to be undertaken in a way that does not conflate the two and regards them as distinct elements of a person's sense of self, which are deeply interrelated with one another (Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015). Further, sexuality research rarely considers the importance of relational identity and number of partners along with sexuality and gender. These are critical variables in understanding the complexity of sexuality related experiences across the life course (Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2015; van Anders, 2015).

Normative assumptions manifest in comparisons between heterosexuals and broad categorizations of “sexual minorities,” or “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender,” erasing their unique characteristics and experiences (and continuing to conflate sexuality and gender). The presumed lumping into a larger LGBTQAI2 umbrella could theoretically be based upon a shared experience of gender non-conformity; however, it still rests on binary interpretations of gender and sexuality and assumes that identities are fixed, rather than dynamic and fluid.

Conceptualizing LGBTQAI2 people as a monolithic group is additionally problematic, in that it assumes shared solidarity, an “LGBTQAI2 community.” However, this can obfuscate the distinct strengths and challenges that these groups face and the social and political change that they seek (van Anders, 2015). Important to this dissertation, it fails to allow space for an intersectional orientation or analysis of lived lives.

Bisexual people often feel alienated from LGBTQAI2 spaces (Rust, 1995; Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Serano, 2013), experience bi-invisibility or erasure (Nutter-Pridgen, 2015; Yoshino, 1999; Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014), and are the target of unique prejudices and discrimination from within and beyond the LGBTQAI2 individuals and spaces (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Anderson, McCormick, & Ripley, 2016). These stressors are likely further exacerbated by the social and political conflict that exists between/within sexual minority groups and is worse still for trans people (Dodge & Sandfort, 2007; Anderson, McCormick, & Ripley, 2014; Serano, 2013; Weiss, 2004)

Bisexual men experience stigmatization and exclusion from monosexual people in a range of settings (Barrios, Corbitt, Estes, & Topping, 1976; Herek, 2002; Ochs, 1996;

Dodge & Sandfort, 2007; Serano, 2013) and tend to experience worse health outcomes than those of their monosexual peers (Gonzales, Przedworski, & Henning-Smith, 2016). The increased abjection of bisexual people occurs at all levels of the social ecology. Anderson, McCormick, and Ripley (2014) described these collective social stressors as “bisexual burden.” Historical sexuality research has excluded and dismissed the experiences of bisexual people and/or treated them as uncomplicated (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014). In 1981, McDonald noted that researchers commonly treated bisexual people as homosexual, even when samples included sizable numbers of bisexual people, ostensibly erasing bisexuality as a legitimate sexuality. Contrary to the ways that monosexual people characterize their own sexuality (Rust, 2000; Callis, 2014; Morandini, Blaszyński, & Dar-Nimrod, 2017; Galupo et al., 2014), bisexuality is often conceptualized as a nebulous middle ground between homo and heterosexuality, with a few exceptions (Callis, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, Gryniewicz, & Davis, 2014). Making visible the lack of academic focus on bisexuality is useful in highlighting how bisexual people have “come to be unthought, made invisible, trivial, insubstantial, and irrelevant” (Du Plessis, 1996, p. 21).

Regarding trans identities, historical research on trans people has been pathologizing, has relied on binary structures of gender, has commonly aggregated transgender people into one group, has often focused on sexual behavior surveillance (which includes larger populations of trans women), and lacks an intersectional analysis, all of which contribute to an inadequate, biomedically focused understanding of the experiences of trans masculine people (Boehmer, 2002; Borenstein, 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Given the inextricable and complicated links between biology, social learning (including gendered socializing practices), gender identity,

sexuality, sexual behavior, and overall well-being, it is imperative that gender and sexuality be researched alongside one another, as distinct, but inter-related processes (Galupo, Mitchell, Gryniewicz, & Davis, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015; Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2015; van Anders, 2015).

This gap in knowledge around bisexuality, and the inattention to, or conflation of gender runs through the sexuality research (see critiques by Paul, 1984/2014; Rust, 2000), sexuality development models (e.g., Cass, 1979, Troiden, 1989), gender research (Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015), queer theory (Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Gurevich, Bailey, & Bower, 2009; Barker, 2007), and up until recently, the LGBTQAI2 health literature (Graham et al., 2011). This erasure is a mechanism by which cisheteronormative notions of gender and sexuality are applied to research, resulting in further discrimination and a lack of understanding about bisexual people's unique experiences.

### **Decrease in Stigma in Recent Years**

Research findings have suggested that attitudes towards sex and sexuality are liberalizing towards increased acceptance of non-heteronormative ideals, especially amongst younger people (Anderson et al., 2012; Curtice & Ormston, 2012; McCormack, 2011; Mustanski et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 2006; Lea, de Wit, & Reynolds, 2014; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). For LGBTQAI2 people, these changes have occurred simultaneously with expanded social and political rights and opportunities, also mirrored through increased research attention (Boehmer, 2002; Graham et al., 2011). Recent research findings have indicated that youth are espousing greater social acceptance for LGBTQAI2 peers (Anderson, 2009; Ripley et al., 2012; Anderson, 2011)

as well as condemning homophobic practices as unacceptable and archaic (McCormack, 2012a; McCormack, 2012b). This coupled with the increase in emerging adults identifying as bisexual, begs the question: has this potential decrease in homophobic stigma resulted in meaningful change in the lives of young bisexual men? Given the multiplicative effects of trans phobia, has that decreased homophobia extended to trans identities and trans masculine people? And if it has, then what does that change “look like”? The answers are yet unknown, underscoring the importance of this research.

### **Sexuality Identity**

Frankel has suggested that sexual identity is “an organized set of perceptions that an individual has about the meaning of his sexual attractions and desires, directed toward forming a sense of self within existing social categories” (2004, p. 2). Tolman, (2002) has advocated for the importance of conceptually expanding what has traditionally been called “sexual development,” into the broader, more comprehensive construct, “sexuality development,” a term that I will use for this dissertation. This shift has been made possible, in part, by the expanded approach to sexuality itself. The emergence of the more expanded “sexuality development” reflects the theoretical and empirical evolutions of the past few decades in sexuality research (Tolman, 2002; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Originally used to document the development of physiological stages, recent research recognizes and centers the intertwining physiological and psychological processes involved in developing as a sexual person over the life course (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Developing a sense of sexuality identity is an integral part of development for adolescents and emerging adults (Erikson, 1984; Arnett, 2000; Diamond, 2006). According to the World Health Organization, and

aligned with the theoretical frameworks undergirding this project, sexuality is a central aspect of being human that incorporates eroticism, intimacy, pleasure, reproduction, and one's own gender identity and expression, and sexuality is context dependent and shifts across the life course. Sexuality identity is an important and normative aspect of identity development generally (Diamond, 2006; Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Aspects of sexuality are distinct and related and are most often organized and discussed in three primary domains: behavior, orientation and identity (Diamond, 2000; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Sexual behavior refers to what someone *does* sexually. Sexual orientation refers to a general predisposition to experience attraction to a person of a particular sex or multiple sexes (or non-conforming individuals). And sexuality identity refers to an individual's self-concept around their sexual orientation or how they relate to their own sexuality (Cass, 1984; Diamond, 2000, 2006). Cultural conceptions in the United States typically align these three elements and assume that they are static, labeling people as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In fact, one's own identity need never be made public for it to be "real" and embodied (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). Sexuality identity typically begins to develop in adolescence or emerging adulthood and can be informed by and shifts via various biological, social, historical, and cultural circumstances (Kitzinger, 1987; Rust, 1993; Weinberg et al., 1994; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2005; Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Very little is known about how emerging adults go about creating and maintaining and shifting and re-organizing sexuality identity. I have not located any research that discusses how this process occurs for and across bisexual emerging adult men or trans masculine

individuals specifically (see Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017 for recent scholarship including bisexual adults' identity development).

## **Gender Identity**

When researching sexuality, it is critical to acknowledge and account for the fact that not all sexual minorities are cisgender. Often, in sexual minority literature, cisgenderism is assumed and when researching gender identity, heterosexuality and monosexuality are often assumed (Galupo et al., 2014; Galupo, Davis, & Mitchell, 2015; van Anders, 2015). Consistent with the theoretical framing of this dissertation, identity should not be understood as defined by the binaries of heterosexuality, monosexuality, and cisgenderism (Galupo, et al., 2014; Paul, 2014; van Anders, 2015). Accordingly, researchers call for an exploration of sexual minority experiences that explicitly acknowledge cis and trans gender identities, as well as the universe of gender identities and experiences that one could endorse at any given time (Galupo et al., 2015; van Anders, 2015; Diamond, 2006; Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2015).

Much early literature on LGBTQAI2 developmental models focused on sexual identities. While many early models acknowledged the importance of intersecting identities in the process of identity formation, they still held as paramount and normativized<sup>1</sup> *particular steps* within that process. Concepts such as coming out were viewed as imperative, discrete events, and expected to be experienced and responded to with particular affects: conflict or liberation (Mallon, 2017; Lev, 2004). Similarly, they assumed a binary conception of gender, which is not how gender operates. While this project assumes that people have multiple identities, fundamental to one's conception of

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<sup>1</sup> The suffix -ized speaks to the critical understanding of the term in question. Normitimized speaks to the social process that reifies what is the norm, in this case the social expectation, compulsion and even perceived obligation to come out. (Mallon, 2017, p. 80).

themselves is their gender identity (Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013).

Gender is different than sexuality. Gender is a set of social practices that are inherently relational and hold symbolic meaning based upon a binary conception that positions masculinity in opposition to femininity (Connell, 2005). Gender refers to the extent that one experiences themselves as like others of a socially constructed gender (“I am female”), which is similar, but different from one’s perceived sense of masculinity or femininity (“I am feminine;” Steensma, et al., 2013). Gender identity is complex and can be understood via the social cognitive theories of development that suggest gender is constructed through a combination of personal and sociocultural factors. Generally, people are born and assigned a gender based upon a number of biomedical markers, which often match their gender identity in the case of cisgender people and sometimes don’t in the case of trans individuals (while a discussion of intersex individuals is important, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation). People are then socialized via a range of influences across the social ecology (parents, peers, media, cultural practices, laws, and policies) and work with those variables (conform, resist, augment, circumvent, transgress) to construct their self-conception of gender. Gender identity, like sexuality identity is fluid and can shift and change throughout the life course (Connell, 2005; Mallon, 2017; Steensma, et al., 2013; van Anders, 2015).

Theories of gender identity development will be expanded upon in the theory section of this dissertation, but an important consideration implicit in models of the emergence of trans identities is a medicalized perspective on gender and its nonconformity to both dominant views on gender (cisgenderism) and mental health. Clinical models of working with trans people rest on binary assumptions of gender

(Aultman, 2014; Dentato, 2017). The current iteration of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013) foregrounds a “spectrum” paradigm to mental disorders and privileges a brain-based approach to understanding the etiology of included disorders. Regardless of the utility or progressiveness of this current version, the power to name and classify, the impacts of placement in an espoused category (e.g., diagnosis and diagnostic codes), and the sociocultural effects of such a system of categorization is indisputable. This pathologizing of trans identities (the DSM while materially powerful, simply reflects cultural norms) contributes to the stigmatization of trans individuals, including the trans masculine people in this study.

In regards to both sexuality and gender identity and expression, this dissertation takes a “universe” approach, suggesting that gender and sexuality could land anywhere in the universe of possibilities (rather than “spectrum,” which suggests linearity) (Savin-Williams, 2014).

### **Sexual and Gender Minorities and Health Disparities**

Health disparities experienced by LGBTQAI2-identified people are well documented. Disparities include increased rates of chronic health and mental health conditions, poorer health outcomes compared with heterosexual counterparts, as well as significant barriers to health care, including discrimination and lower rates of insurance coverage (Daniel & Butkus, 2015; Kates, Ranji, Beamesderfer, & Dawson, 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco, & Hoy-Ellis, 2013; Northridge & Meyer, 2007). The dominant conceptual framework used to explain these disparities is the minority stress model, which suggests that social

stressors of discrimination and prejudice experienced by sexual minorities results are additive and lead to worse health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). While useful, Meyer himself has acknowledged that this framework fails to differentiate between sexual minorities and that bisexuals may have unique experiences that provide particular health risks, adding to the importance of this research (Bostwick et al., 2014).

Cisgender gay and bisexual men (typically aggregated in research) experience health disparities that tend to arise in young adulthood and manifest across the life course (Mustanski et al., 2014; Purcell, et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2018). For example, meta-analyses and systematic reviews have shown higher rates of depression, substance use, suicidality, and STIs and HIV sex risk in young cis gay and bisexual men compared to cis heterosexual men (King et al., 2008; Marshal, Friedman, & Stall, 2008; Marshal, Dietz, & Friedman, 2011; Ross et al., 2018). When bisexual cis men's experiences are examined on their own, research suggests that they experience worse health outcomes than their exclusively monosexual counterparts. However, the mechanisms through which that disparity is conveyed are not understood (Paul, 1984, 2014; Meyer, 2003). Literature has also suggested that emerging adult cis bisexual men report higher rates of substance use, depression, and anxiety than do their monosexual peers (Marshall et al. 2008; Ross et al., 2018). None of the identified literature included trans masculine bisexual individuals.

Additionally, sexual minority men tend to experience greater incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Houston & McKirnan, 2007). Of the limited literature on sexual minority, emerging adults and IPV, most aggregate gay and bisexual men into a single

category of “gay.” In addition, family and gender-based violence research traditionally subsumes all abusive behavior under the rubric of domestic or intimate violence, limiting our understanding of different forms of IPV and how predictive variables operate in IPV among sexual minority men. Furthermore, many men who report having same-sex sexual experiences, do not identify as bisexual (or non-monosexual); thus, most literature that *does exist* only captures a limited scope of men who have had/continue to have same sex sexual experiences and indicate as such to researchers (Schrimshaw, Seigal, Downing, & Parsons, 2013; Dodge et al., 2013; Zule, Bobashev, Wechsbert, Costenbader, & Coomes, 2009). Even so, prevalence estimates of IPV with sexual minority men are high and discrepant. For example, perpetration rates of psychological aggression have varied between 21% (Houston & McKirnan, 2007) and 96% (Bartholemew et al., 2008); discrepancies are likely explained by the inadequacy of current assessment measures (Follingstad, 2009; Buller, Devries, Howard, & Bacchus, 2014). Gay and bisexual men who perpetrate IPV also have increased risk of STIs and HIV (Craft & Serovich, 2005; Finneran & Stephenson, 2013).

In addition, trans masculine individuals experience greater instances of sexual and physical violence than do their cisgender peers and also report higher rates of suicide and alcohol use (Testa et al., 2012; Goldblum et al., 2012). And both inpatient and outpatient trans youth report increased rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, or self-harm without lethal intent compared to cisgender matched controls (Reisner et al., 2015). Again, no identified literature assessed these health outcomes in relationship to sexuality.

## **Sexual and Gender Minorities, Religion, and Health Disparities**

Formalized Christian religious traditions represent a critical regulating feature of U.S. culture that has historically structured political and social institutions as well as norms of interpersonal interactions, and continues to do so (Talcott, 2013). The stigma of homophobia has been theorized to contribute to health disparities in sexual and gender minorities (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Frabel, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997; Meyer, 1995; Miranda & Storms, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1990; Wagner, Brondolo, & Rabkin, 1997; Walters & Simoni, 1993; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). The mechanisms whereby that stigma conveys mental and physical health decrements are not precisely known, but the outcomes are the result of a “hostile and stressful social environment” (Meyer, 1995, p. 674). Sexual identity distress, or the internalization of those stigmatizing beliefs, has been associated with a number of negative physical and mental health outcomes (French, Story, Remafedi, Resnick, & Blum, 1996; Meyer & Dean, 1998; Rosario, Hunter, & Gwadz, 1997; Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, Reid, & Koopman, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990), including increased substance use and mental illness in queer youth (Wright & Perry, 2006). Research has found a positive association between homophobic messaging from religious sources and experiences of shame, depression, emotional distress and internalized homonegativity, and psychological distress (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski, 2003; Sherry et al., 2010; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Key to this research, LGB identity development is challenged when LGB youth are exposed to rejecting and invalidating messaging (Meyer & Dean, 1998; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010), resulting in difficulty developing a positive sense of self (Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). One of the few studies to directly

address the conflict between religious identity and sexual orientation in young people focused on a sample of 393 adolescents identifying as Christian. Those participants who experienced a conflict and resolved it by rejecting their religious affiliation reported higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). Another such study found that religiosity had no effect on sexual identity distress or any of the substance use and mental health related indicators studied with a sample of gay, lesbian, and bisexual 13 to 21 year olds (Wright & Perry, 2014). Further, some research has suggested that religion and religiosity can play a positive role in youth identity development; however, such research did not focus on the experiences of sexual and gender minorities (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999).

A different, but related body of research on religion and health disparities connects parental nurturance and acceptance to youth health outcomes. Extensive research has centered the role of nurturance within families and feeling connection to family as protective against major health risk behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2014). Research has suggested that LGB youth who experienced more parental rejection reported increased substance use, and attempted suicide, depression, and sexual health risk (Ryan, Heubner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009); also, childhood religiosity has been associated with low levels of family acceptance in a sample of LGB emerging adults (Ryan et al., 2014). As another example, Schope (2002) found that LGB adolescents with religious parents were less likely to disclose their sexual orientation to others, suggesting less comfort with their LGB identity (see also, Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013). Thus, research on religion and sexual and gender minorities overall seems to suggest that religious affiliation contributes to negative affect, mental health decrements, and substance use (Ryan et al., 2009; 2014; Rosario,

Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski, 2003; Sherry et al., 2010; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009; Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013). This is important to note given the historical and contemporary sociopolitical context privileging Christianity (interpreted in disparate ways) and the current study's participants' individual lived experiences with Christian-based religions (all of which will be detailed in subsequent chapters).

### **Explaining the Focus on Bisexual Emerging Adult Men/Trans Masculine Individuals**

This study focuses on bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals for several, important reasons. Emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental stage described as “the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities” (Arnett, 2014, p. xii). Emerging adulthood is a *critical* developmental period, characterized by (a) increased brain plasticity and stress reactivity; (b) physical, social, and psychological development (e.g., higher potential to impact biological and social outcomes later in life); and (c) significant life changes (Arnett, 2000, 2014; Schwartz, Côtè, & Arnett, 2005). This increases vulnerability to both stress and associated outcomes and development of behavioral norms, both of which could persist throughout the life course and have lasting effects on individuals and communities (Andersen & Teicher, 2008; Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, & Heim, 2009; Arnett, 2000; Romeo & McEwen, 2006; Romeo, 2013; Shern, Blanch, & Steverman, 2014). It has also been suggested that these effects work synergistically with minority stress experiences to exacerbate negative health impacts, which could be even worse for bisexual people given the multiple stressors of bisexual burden; however, this is difficult to know for sure since limited

research exists (McEwen, 1998; Krieger, Smith, Naishadham, Hartman, & Barbeau, 2005; Meyer, 2003; Walters et al., 2011; Anderson, McCormack, & Ripley, 2014). As well, identifying as bisexual is associated with myriad health disparities across the life course (Mustanski et al., 2014; Paul, 1984; Purcell, Patterson, Spikes, Wolitski, Stall, & Valdiserri, 2007). Identity development has been implicated in minority stress experiences particularly during emerging adulthood (Luyckx et al., 2007; Luyckx et al., 2008). Understanding the ways bisexual men construct, shift, and negotiate their sexuality identity and how this process interacts with gender identity and expression is a critical gap in the literature. Furthermore, it is unknown how these elements of their identities influence sexual and relational beliefs and behaviors, and overall health and well-being during this significant developmental stage.

Adding to the importance of this research, adults worldwide are endorsing bisexual behavior or orientations (bisexuality) (Chandran, Copen, & Mosher, 2013; Gates, 2011; San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2012). People who identify as bisexual are the largest sexual minority group in the United States, double the amount who identify as lesbian or gay according to recent statistics from the General Social Survey (GSS, 2017) and Gallup (2017). Increases have been similarly reflected in adolescents and emerging adults in the United States, with those ages 18 to 34 showing more bisexual identifying people than any other age cohort (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; GSS, 2017; Gallup, 2017).

### CHAPTER 3: THEORY

*An infinite time has run its course before my birth; what was I throughout all that time? Metaphysically, the answer might perhaps be: I was always I; that is, all who during that time said I, were in fact I...I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved; all the cities that I have visited, all my ancestors...*

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Nothingness of Personality*

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Much philosophical and social science has explored questions of identity formation and change. Given that all research rests on various assumptions, this chapter will begin by presenting the critical assumptions informing this work. Second, I will present some identity-related theorizing, and importantly, my conceptualization of identity. Third, I will discuss theoretical pluralism. Fourth, I will detail my own theoretical and epistemological assumptions and review relevant theoretical frameworks that informed the study; namely a critical theoretical orientation informed by critical race, white feminisms, women of color feminisms, queer theory, and various indigenous and neuropsychological theories of interconnectivity and interdependence. Next, I connect them via theoretical pluralism to further develop a framework of bisexual identity embedded within post-structuralism and a symbolic interactionist tradition. This chapter will then conclude by detailing the ways that those orientations connect to the substantive theories used to guide this research, extending through specific theoretical concepts that serve as analytical tools in this exploratory study. It will conclude with a section explicitly connecting theory to the methodology of this study.

## **Critical Assumptions of This Research**

This research used a critical theoretical lens influenced by queer theory, women of color feminisms, white feminism, and poststructuralist epistemology, and social constructivist theories of development, sexuality, and gender. This critical approach involves four underlying assumptions.

First, all knowledge of reality is socially produced and based upon standpoint, or social location, including mine as a researcher (Harding, 2004).

Second, given the above, my position (and by extension what gets documented in this dissertation) is not value-neutral, nor does it claim to be. Thus, my task was to constantly use my own critical reflexivity, as well as collaboration with others, to explore and unearth my own assumptions, histories, and experiences, so that they can be acknowledged and attended to, and explore how they interact with the data, in the context of the research questions. This critically reflexive stance is not intended as simply a step to eliminate “my stuff” from the work; that is impossible within the assumptions of a critical epistemological orientation. Rather, it is to explore and explain how the data can be interpreted given my positionality.

Third, this project theoretically assumes that a full consideration of gender and sexuality identity includes race/ethnicity, sex assigned at birth (and subsequent gendered socializing practices), social class, culture that one identifies with, possible spiritual or religious practices one grew up around, and the myriad ways in which those subjectivities are both read by others and shift over time.

Finally, there is also no “real” way that I as a researcher can access the embodied experience of the participants, nor is there an algorithm to calculate expected experiences based upon a given identity; experiences are not universal nor monolithic

and to assume so would be reductive and would limit the deep understanding that is provided by the phenomenological data. However, we know that the ways in which people *experience* their bodies and are *read* by others impact their lived experiences; for example, anti-black racism is real and has real material consequences. Given the context of a cisheteropatriarchy, which privileges certain identities over others, we can assume that participants' experiences have also been influenced by the social world that they are a part of and are actively making and re-making. That is, the participants in this study are not only *being acted upon* by myriad social, cultural, and political forces, but also *have agency* to subvert, push against, move around, challenge, and conform in response to those forces that shape the worlds that they move in.

### **Theoretical Pluralism**

Given the theoretical assertion that identity is a liminal notion – constantly being constructed – as well as the high level of variance within experiences of gender and sexuality, the epistemological and theoretical frameworks were a critical component of this project. As well, these frameworks align with my personal worldview, positionality, and standpoint, which have informed all aspects of this study. Recently, particularly with the development of intersectional theorizing, several scholars have noted the utility and often the necessity of theoretical pluralism (Borden, 2010; Mehrotra, 2010; Hudson, 2012). Coming from women of color feminisms and a social constructionist perspective, theoretical pluralism and the related concept of *bricolage* suggest the need to make pragmatic and creative use of theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Hill-Collins, 1990; Hurtado, 2003; Kincheloe, 2001). While bricolage, meaning using the tools necessary to complete the task, is most often used as a

methodological approach, I use it here applied to theory. At the heart of this work, I rely on a poststructuralist feminist framework, as an umbrella for the theoretical pluralism and bricolage that argues for *using the theoretical tool you need when you need it* to most effectively understand and contribute to individual lives, support communities, and influence practice, education, and policy; key commitments of social welfare scholarship (Hudson, 2013). Although the utility of theoretical pluralism is undeniable, it can be a contentious and precarious practice for multiple reasons. Scholars have been criticized for taking it up in a way that only superficially attends to interdisciplinarity (Kincheloe, 2001). However, it is a vital addition to critical research given its very nature in bringing together multiple paradigms with differing epistemological and/or ontological bases. As well, theoretical pluralism often challenges and/or bridges well-maintained disciplinary boundaries. And it is also for this reason that it is well-suited for feminist social work research, given that social work research often brings together multiple theoretical perspectives from different disciplines, intended to communicate across diverse audiences in the aim of social work's explicit commitments to applied work in the name of equity and social justice (Gringeri, Wahab, & Anderson-Nathe, 2010; Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, & Wahab, 2013; Wahab, Anderson-Nathe, & Gringeri, 2014).

### **Theorizing Identity**

The purpose of this study was to explore sexuality and gender identity development and change in a sample of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine people. Specifically, I wanted to understand the similarities, divergences, and shifts between their collective narrative and their individual histories and experiences.

As detailed in the introduction of this project, bisexual people have been excluded from or subsumed into the larger body of “LGBT” scholarship, which has primarily focused on cisgender lesbians and gay men (see critiques by Paul, 1984/2014; Rust, 2000). Further, given the exclusion of trans people from academic and public discourse, woefully little is known about trans bisexual people’s experiences of bisexuality.

These inadequacies show up in social work scholarship as well. In social work, the bodies of literature in which bisexual people are included are generally oriented towards either (a) the growing recognition and concern for LGBTQAI2-specific issues and resources and the field’s capacity to competently address them (Mallon, 2017) or (b) a “risk” paradigm centered on sexual behavioral risks with moderate attention to issues such as substance use, partner abuse, and mental health (McPhail, 2004; Marshall et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2018; Schrimshaw, Seigal, Downing, & Parsons, 2013; Dodge et al., 2013; Marshal, Dietz, & Friedman, 2011; Zule, Bobashev, Wechsbert, Costenbader, & Coomes, 2009). Scholarship on trans identities and experiences is growing in many disciplines, including in social work. Much of the literature has been criticized for its pathologization of “gender non-conformity” (inherently assuming “gender conformity” exists and mistakenly positioning such conformity as an individual orientation rather than a societal construction). Given social work’s explicit ethical commitments to align with trans clients, students, and communities, including supporting relevant policy issues, it is imperative that social work researchers continue to add to this body of literature as an important platform for equity (Burdge, 2007; Kenagy, Moses, & Ornstein, 2006; Markman, 2011; Mallon, 2017).

## **Liminality and Identity**

Recently, relational and socioecological models have been introduced that are intended to capture the fluid, dynamic, non-linear nature of identity, and that explore identity intersectionally (Choi, Harachi, Gillmore, & Catalano, 2006; Hall, 2005; Jackson, 2010; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1999; Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). However, these approaches tend to focus exclusively on identity (and center identity on the present perception of oneself), which is certainly important, but not necessarily the most useful analytic for exploring intersectional experiences of gender and sexuality and also only constitutes part of one's meaning-making and sense of self (Hudson, 2013).

As various theorists have asserted the concept of identity is an ineffective heuristic to understand the “contradictory, located, and positional aspect of constructions of belonging and otherness” (Anthias, 2002, p.511; 2012; Hudson, 2013; 2015). Aligned with my theoretical orientation, rather than viewing gender and sexuality and identity as things that one “has” or “is” or “possesses,” I see them as relational, context-dependent, contested, and fluid. As Deleuze suggested (1994); any identity is laden with assumptions, contradictions, processes, and forces that *exceed* identity and often focus on difference. Given that this way of understanding identity is really identity plus excesses, if we try to discretely study identity, we are limiting our understanding of it. Thus, this dissertation seeks to couple the complimentary notions of identity as (a) a malleable amalgamation of context-dependent relationships with inherited meanings, and (b) these meanings are not fixed or static if we open to the possibilities offered in the fluid spaces in-between.

Anthias (2002) suggested that we look towards the borderlands of these experiences, or the in-between, to explore how they are embraced, resisted, and negotiated (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hudson, 2012). It is on those margins, the liminal spaces, that possibility and expansiveness exists. Drawing on the work of Deleuze, new materialist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2001) centers liminality in stating, “the space of the in-between is the locus for social, cultural, and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for movements and realignments but in fact is the only place—the place around identities, between identities—where becoming, openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity” (p. 92). The desire to “retain cohesion and unity” is born of the need for power (constituted via dominant structures) to resist the fundamental nature of life as ever-changing by “...freezing, arresting, or containing the futures in its own image and according to its own interests” (Grosz, 2001, p. 103). And thus, power (and its commitment to fixed, binary notions of identity) lives in opposition to the in-between. The in-between, as Grosz asserts, represents possibility and futurity, which is inherently insecure given the dynamic nature of reality. Thus, power and futurity are paradoxical; in order for power to proliferate it must anticipate a future, which, by definition is insecure. Therefore, aligned with Afrofuturist traditions, the in-between is uncertain and in that uncertainty exists the possibility of expansiveness and futurity that can transform traditional power structures (Butler, O., 1993; Grosz, 2001; hooks, 2014). “This is not the abolition of history or a refusal to recognize the past and the historical debt the present owes to it, but simply to refuse to grant even the past the status of fixity and givenness. The past is always contingent on what the future makes of it” (Grosz, 2001, p. 103).

As various theorists assert, to exist in this liminal space requires resistance (Anzaldúa, 1987). It is a personal and political struggle, and for most getting to the in-between and staying there “requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination” (hooks, 2014, p. 223). In moving into that uncertain space of shifting identities (or parts of our identities) and implicit power relations, hooks suggests that we can stand up to or collude with (or respond with both or on a continuum between the two) oppressive structures. This is the critical moment of *making culture* to confront the realities and possibilities of *choice* and location and where transformation is possible (hooks, 2014). This aspect of agency (manifesting as discourse, identities, movements) is crucial as it informs our responses to existing social, cultural, and political practices and our capacities to envision new, oppositional, expansive, supportive ways of being in the world. Thus “making culture” comes from a commitment to existing and moving from the in-between to “...open up as new, to facilitate transformations in the identities that constitute it” (Grosz, 2001, p. 93).

As such, identities, both in daily life and in this dissertation are continually explored, and it should be understood first, by their *breadth* of meaning, that conceptually, they are large, and contain multitudes (nod to Whitman, Miller, 1959), rather than by their topical relationship to collective and individual bodies. And that those meanings are ever-changing and constructed, and thus, can be intentionally constructed to form the *kinds of meanings* that we make, via discourse, to future-form the social and material world that we are living into.

## **History of Critical Inquiry in Sexuality Research**

Historical debates in sexuality research centered on the tensions between fundamentally different epistemologies: essentialism and constructionism. Essentialists believed in the primacy of biology, i.e., “anatomy is destiny.” As such, an essentialist view suggests that sexuality is preordained and can be explained by gendered, programmed biological drives and behaviors. This has been refuted not only by voluminous data exploring variation across cultures and historical time periods, but also by psychological research focusing on the processes through which individuals make meaning of specific sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). In contrast, social constructionists assert that sexual experiences, identities, desires, and expressions are constituted through meaning-making informed by sociocultural processes. Social constructionism assumes the political importance of social scripts and discourses that coalesce to maintain specific notions of sexuality across contexts (Charmaz, 2000; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Tolman & Diamond, 2014).

In their unadulterated forms, both of these historical schools of thought are inadequate to explain the complex alchemy that produces “sexuality.” Responding to these limited frameworks, interactionist, conjoint, biosocial, and biocultural approaches have been proposed by many scholars (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Ehrhardt, 1996; McClintock & Herdt, 1996; Udry, Talbert, & Morris, 1986; Tolman & Diamond, 2014); however, substantively little has changed.

Social constructionism continues to dominate social science, humanities, and critical feminist research, but has had little impact on other disciplines, particularly clinical sexology, medicine, and numerous psychological specialties, especially as practiced in the United States (Plummer, 2007; Tolman & Diamond, 2014). Some

recent models using multiple and/or mixed methods have contributed to greater integration of the social and biological, refusing a dualistic (read: limiting) approach to sexuality and gender (McClelland, 2011; Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009; van Anders, 2015). This dissertation relies on these integrative approaches, combined with critical narrative inquiry, which situates this research in a social context of inequity across interpersonal relationships and structures, so as to best understand the data (Souto-Manning, 2014).

### **The Importance of Discourse**

Among social constructionist epistemologies sits critical and poststructuralist theories of sexuality, originating with Foucault (1969; 1978; 1980) who radically reconceptualized sexuality not as a “possession,” but as constituted by the historical time and location in which individuals and social institutions are situated. He asserted that sexuality is produced via dynamic and iterative relationships between sexual bodies, sexual practices, institutional power, and knowledge (1969; 1980). This production of sexual subjects always coming into being is reliant on the pernicious nature of discourses or “systems of meaning and language that create, control, enable, regulate, and surveil sexual experience and expression” (Tolman & Diamond, 2014, p. 14).

Discourse can be understood as historically and contextually situated systems of representation, including language, symbols, practices, and customs. Discourse serves to produce knowledge, prescribes the bounds by which topics can be meaningfully considered, and influences the ways in which concepts are actualized in practice and used to “regulate the conduct of others” (Hall, 1997, p. 72; Dean, 2002; 1980). Given

that assumption, i.e., that words are meaningful and “work” in the world, all discourse can be considered critical; all language has political, ethical, social implications (Gee, 2011). In this way, power and knowledge are enmeshed within the functioning of discourse, which is always productive, or said another way, it always “does” something (Foucault, 1980).

Discourse operates repressively across all levels of the social ecology to regulate what is important and intelligible, privileging one set of practices, while marginalizing others (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Hall, 1997). Foucault expands on this to assert that “through repressive forces, power not only subjugated knowledge, but “exploded” sexual discourse through institutional practices (e.g., the confessional), technologies (e.g., architecture), and language” (Self, 2010, p. 21). However, discourse (power) also *produces* action; if power “only said no,” it would not be obeyed (Ferguson, 2008, p. 158). Power can be promising for its capacity to produce knowledge, discourse, pleasure, and change within discursive systems (Foucault, 1980).

Discourse is constituted via texts, actions, and practices across and within all levels of the social ecology. Discursive formations refer to these practices that are all about the same topic, ideology, or political pattern, or that share similar styles and discipline the ways in which topics can be thought about (Hall, 1997). In doing so, these discursive formations work to further fortify particular privileged epistemologies and ontologies and both control and *actively construct* the ways in which concepts can be approached, considered, and known (Self, 2010).

Discursive formations are directly connected to this present study, given the context of cisheteronormative and cishomonormative whiteness dominant in U.S. sociopolitical discourses. These same discourses governing what is appropriate and

knowable, prescribe and reify practices deployed within and across social spaces as regulatory power. As a result, discursive formations privileging dominant U.S. norms such as whiteness, middle/upper class status, monosexuality, monogamous partnership, so on, are “working” on participants even in social spaces that claim to not ascribe to dominant norms (“LGBTQ friendly”) (Duggan, 2002; Foucault, 1980). Judith Butler (2004) asserts in her commentary on discourse and gender that discourse can topically be “about” gender, but that it also *actively produces* gendered polarity, or the gender binary. “If gender is a norm, it is not the same as a model that individuals seek to approximate. On the contrary, it is a form of social power that produces the intelligible fields of subjects, an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted” (p. 48).

However, discourse can also be used to expand possibilities and to liberate. Thus, we could respond to Butler’s assertions that discourse produces binaries, by saying that it then can also produce new space, new affects, new identities, and new forms of liberation. If discourse can re-ify the power of the gender binary, it can also disrupt and de-construct that same binary and construct a more emancipatory sexual and gender future (Foucault, 1980).

### **Poststructuralism**

Poststructuralism is plural; it does not have one fixed meaning, but generally references a range of theoretical orientations derived from the work of Derrida (1973, 1976), Lacan (1977), Kristeva (1987), Althusser (1971), and Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980, 1986). Although poststructuralisms vary both in their practice and their political implications, they share certain assumptions about language, meaning, and subjectivity.

As Weedon (1987) suggests “...the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power, and individual consciousness is language” (p. 21).

Poststructuralism affirms the realness of discursive power, on individual and collective bodies, and also allows space for resistance to those discourses (Derrida, 1976; Weedon, 1997). It troubles the notion of singular, stable sources of knowledge production. As such, knowledge is thought of in its myriad forms; emotion as knowledge, storytelling as knowledge, sensation and using the body as a source of information are all assumptions of poststructuralist thought. As well, it acknowledges the importance of *standpoint* in the practice of inquiry; that the researchers involved in such a study and the participants themselves are coming from a particular social location and continue to explore aspects of sexuality that continue to be marginalized within the larger population (Smith, 1987, 1990, 2005; Tolman & Diamond, 2014; Weedon, 1997).

Further, given that all discourse is constructed, it is thus, vulnerable and unstable; all discourse can be called into question (Butler, J., 2004; Derrida, 1976). The sexual subject(s) (Foucault, 1980) can challenge its (their) own construction via their capacity for agency. Individuals can and do resist, circumvent, manipulate, subvert, and otherwise transgress these discourses, which manifest in social practices and norms (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012; Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2011). This constant and iterative process is the ever-shifting dance of what this dissertation understands as identity-making: the shifting, re-making, and/or deployment of certain parts of the “self” in different contexts in order to strategically meet material and emotional human needs. It is within and between these shifts and ruptures that

possibility for both a better understanding of bisexuality and a more liberatory social culture exists.

### **Social Constructionist Theories of Identity**

Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge regarding the basis for socially shared assumptions about reality, which become reified through practices and language (Charmaz, 2000; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). In qualitative research in particular, social constructionism is primarily concerned with *what* and *how* questions and has been used by many researchers to explore questions of self and identity (Charmaz, 2000; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959). Psychologist Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, a commonly used social constructionist theory, suggests that one's knowledge and subsequent behaviors can be learned through social interactions, experiences, and observations within one's environment (1962). Bandura posited that, in addition to this, behaviors are also produced of a person's own interpretation of those learned behaviors formed into cognitive schema (or ways of being) (Bandura, 1962). That cognitive schema informs beliefs, desires, and behaviors around, in this case, sexual and gendered norms and "ways of being." Several other successive theories inform interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cultural sexual scripts formation and enactment, and are related to Bandura's theory, including symbolic interactionism.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionist theories rest in social constructionist notions of self-processes and posit that "cognition, agency, and meaning construction occur between labeling and identify formation processes" (Anderson, 1989, p.1815; Bem 1978; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1981). Anderson (1990) suggested that the

conception of the self is a product of interactions with others and the actors' structural location as defined by an individual's network of affiliations, and shaped by the messages these associates impart about what is possible, desirable, and to be avoided (Stryker, 1981). Thus, people construct their identity through interactions with others and are rewarded or punished for those constructions of identity (or even others' *perception* of identity), as per cultural norms, which are shaped by structural factors as well as personal interactions. Thus, according to Mead (1934), "symbolic interactionists, mechanisms of identity formation include, cognitive processes, human agency, and creativity" (quoted in Giordano, Longmore, Manning, & Northcutt, 2009, p. 1818). Accordingly, the individual is an active participant in identity construction through affect, language, and behavior; and by filtering and reacting to these interactions that engage with conceptions of the self to construct, re-shape, and maintain identity (Anderson, 1989). Thus, people actively construct their worldview and sense of self in relationship and via interactions with others. This process of identity construction requires a sense of continuity over time, integrating experiences from the past and present with the idea of a possible future (Vann Ward, Morse, & Charmaz, 2017).

Labeling theories, in the symbolic interaction tradition, have been used to study several "deviant" behaviors, including "non-normative" sexualities (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). These theories suggest that labels are durable and are productive in that they can discursively carry material consequences. Deviance as a label carries with it a number of undesirable traits (for example real or perceived behaviors and/or identities that don't align with the narrow conceptions of acceptability within cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity) (Goffman, 2017). Once a label has been applied, it results in a number of self and social dynamics that are important for shaping

one's subsequent actions (Giordano et al., 2009; Stryker, 1981). Central to this idea is the notion that reflected appraisals of others foster the label, but “the application of the label in and of itself, influences the subsequent reactions of others, social opportunities and constraints and self-reflections” (Giordano et al., 2009, p. 1820).

Symbolic interactionist theories are relevant to this dissertation in that bisexual people experience stigma, born of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and that stigma produces discourse and actions that have material consequences. Further application of this theory to those with privileged social identities (cisgender, white) suggests that proper “performance” of that dominant label that people are socialized into (via white supremacy and cisheteronormativity) informs beliefs and behaviors that align with those labels (dominance) and is detrimental to both those who embody subordinated identities (femme people, trans people, people of color) and those who embody dominant identities as well (Stryker, 1981). To adequately understand the nature of stigma working on bisexual men and trans masculine people, it is imperative to understand hegemonic constructions of masculinity, as detailed in the following section and on which this dissertation rests (Coles, 2009; Lemert, 1972; Connell, 1997; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Thompson & Pleck, 1986).

### **Symbolic Interaction and Gendered Discourses**

Connell's theory of gender and power, grounded in both feminist and social ecological theory, details three social structures that shape the gender hierarchy: (a) the sexual division of labor, (b) the sexual division of power, and (c) cathexis, the sexualization of social relationships (Basow, 2006; Smith, White, & Moracco, 2009; Connell, 2014).

The sexual division of labor suggests that the organization of labor, both paid and unpaid, is highly gendered and both prescribes what roles are available to males and females throughout the life course, as well as dictates the “production, consumption, and distribution of resources across those roles” (Smith, White, & Moracco, 2009, p. 26). Wealth disproportionality accrues to males, and masculinity itself becomes an economic benefit. The sexual division of power asserts that across all spheres of public and private life (relationships, the workplace, domestic life) there exists gendered imbalances that enable resources, benefits, and value to disproportionately accrue to men, thereby ascribing power and authority to men and masculinity. Cathexis (or the sexualization of social relationships) refers to a socialization process that prohibits or endorses certain types of sexual relationships, policing these through social norms governing sexuality, sexual expression, and emotion in sexual relationships. Heterosexual married relationships are romanticized while others are demonized (same-sex for example), and asymmetrical dichotomy is established between masculine and feminine (Connell, 2014; Smith, White, & Moracco, 2009).

These structures are susceptible to shifts as individuals and groups resist and are indeed variable across a population. Individual women in many situations are able to accrue more status and wealth than their male counterparts, and certainly not all men are able to access the power and resources of the idealized heterosexual male (white, cisgender). However, these norms remain durable for the majority (normative) and restrict behavior and choices, reinforcing the gender binary (with attendant prescriptive social norms) and encouraging adversarial gender roles, sexual risk taking, and aggression, and thus are harmful to everyone (Connell, 2014, 2014; Eckes & Trautner,

2000; Smith, White, & Moracco, 2009; Connell, 2002; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Flood & Please, 2009).

Hegemonic masculinity in a Eurocentric/U.S. context assumes cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and thus degrades any identities, orientations, or behaviors outside those prescribed norms. The ubiquity of hegemonic masculinity, with its imperatives of toughness, individualism, professional success, and, primarily, anti-femininity operate as powerful discursive regulators of social control (Connell, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This policing rests on misogyny, which, like white supremacy, is pernicious and structures interactions across the social ecology (Manne, 2017; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017).

Adherence to hegemonic masculine scripts not only perpetuates normative hierarchical structures, but also has real material impacts. Research has suggested that adherence to hegemonic masculinity, including traits such as hostility towards women and hostile sexism, is associated with increased violence victimization for women and gay men (Gallagher & Parrot, 2011; Bauer & Gazmararian, 2015). In addition, social structures and institutional and governmental policies that reify traditional gender norms and/or reduce participation by women in power are also associated with increased victimization for women and sexual and gender minorities (Hutzenbuehler et al., 2014; Whitaker, 2015). Well-established feminist critiques warn not to universalize gender narratives; therefore, it should be noted, that heterogeneity exists within individual conceptions of masculinity, even if embedded within masculine hegemony.

Implicit in these macro masculinity discourses are sexual scripts that prescribe sexual ways of being (Simon & Gagnon, 1973; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). Sexual scripts are cognitive schemas that influence individual and cultural understandings of

how to behave in sexual situations. They operate on varied levels, whereby each level informs and interacts with the others (cultural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal). All three levels are important determinants of sexual beliefs and behaviors, and potentially decisions and outcomes (Gagnon, 1990; Parker & Gagnon 1995; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

In Eurocentric cultures like that of the United States, the traditional sexual script is strongly gendered. It assumes a binary orientation to sexuality and gender, and implies heterosexuality and a cis orientation to gender, and prescribes particular, roles, responsibilities, and expectations of and for men and women (Gavey, 2005; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Tolman, 2002). Scripts are not composed specifically of prescribed behaviors, but are instead a set of “cognitive frameworks” (Byers, 1996, p. 8), which include norms that frame behavior and individual conceptions of “ways of being” culturally, or within the realm of one’s own desire (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005). Cultural-level scripts can, as suggested, inform individual beliefs and behaviors; however, there can be disjunctures between a culturally constructed, gendered sexual script and individual or dyadic beliefs, behaviors, and sexual enactment (Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2012).

Aligned with the poststructuralist theoretical framing of this present study, participants can at various times both reproduce and resist these scripts. These norms of gender and sexuality are further complicated given that six of the fifteen study participants were socialized as female/femme; thus, there has possibly always existed fluctuating levels of incongruence between the sexual expectancies of the social world and that of their own internal world. This is important for a number of reasons, particularly given the fundamental human need to feel belonging and connection, which

inherently implies being in relationship with others and feeling a shared understanding or experience. That capacity to connect could be very difficult and confusing when one's internal reality does not match the ways in which one is socialized (i.e., how others "read" and treat one). This all becomes even more complicated in the U.S. cultural context, one which normalizes misogyny as an expectation of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, a narrative could look like this: "how am I supposed to fit in when doing so means that I need to 'pick' a gender and then act like that gender, and then the gender that I am supposed to 'pick' is both denigrated *and* doesn't feel like it fits me, but if I 'pick' what feels more authentic, everyone will think I am weird, and also then I am expected to enact misogyny as well...that is what being a boy/man is. And why do I have to pick in the first place?!"

### **Possible Shifts in Gendered Discourses**

However, hegemonic gender norms seem to be losing their adherents (Anderson, 2010; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Historical accounts posit that masculinities are dynamic and shifting, like all identities (Kimmel, 1996; Segal, 1990). However, the extent to which they are changing and the meaning that we can make of contemporary shifts in men/masculinity norms is still up for debate. The theory of hybrid masculinities has been used to explain contemporary shifts, with many researchers positing that they represent widespread social shifts supporting gender and sexual equity (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012). Others say that they represent shifts in the expression of systems of inequity, but fall short of challenging them directly (Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2001). Bridges and Pascoe (2014) have suggested that a theory of hybrid masculinities can illuminate recent shifts in behaviors, performance,

opinions, appearance, and so on, but caution against seeing hybrid masculinities as a panacea for gender equity.

Hybrid masculinities refer to men's selective incorporation of identity elements traditionally associated with marginalized masculinities and femininities (Arxer, 2011; Demetriou, 2001; Messerschmidt, 2010; Messner, 2007). This body of scholarship has typically centered on young, white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgender men, and is focused on how those men incorporate elements of various "Others" into their identity. Some have explored this more flexible masculine construction as possibly liberatory and promoting of racial, gender, and sexuality equity (Arxer, 2011; Heasley, 2005; Hughey, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2010; Ward, 2009).

While expanding conceptions of gender is a primary aim of my scholarship, aligned with scholarship by, among others, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) and Ryalls (2013), I would suggest that the ways in which hybrid masculinities become operationalized in contemporary settings are detrimental to social justice projects for two important reasons. First, they reproduce systems of inequity and second, they obscure that that reproduction is happening. Hybrid masculinities (in the essentialized "rejection of hegemonic masculinity is nothing but good" way that it is often applied) achieves the aim of maintaining social and symbolic inequities, while it creates discursive (but not meaningful) distance between men (white men) and hegemonic masculinity and appears to position white masculinity as less meaningful (i.e., the default) than other masculinities (and femininities). "The idealized notion of masculinity operates both as an ideology and a set of normative constraints" (Kimmel, 2012, p. 98, in Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Although those normative constraints are shifting, they are shifting in a larger context of racial and gendered hierarchies. Thus,

those shifts have operated to maintain systems of gendered, sexed, and racialized inequity, and can simply be the modern iteration of white supremacy and misogyny packaged in a “woke” box intended to serve cisheteronormative ends (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Ryalls, 2013).

Appropriately for this dissertation, hybrid masculinities can be applied with a both/and brush—participants can discursively distance themselves from hegemonic norms in myriad ways, including embracing or taking up/on feminized masculinities, which can both serve to expand normative constructions of gender and also perpetuate those normative structures while occluding their presence. This conception of hybrid masculinities provides a useful framing for this dissertation. It is aligned with my theoretical framing that people want to feel belonging and have many “parts of the self” that constitute identity, and that they strategically deploy these parts based upon context. This is particularly relevant given the context of Seattle (which will be further discussed in the methods chapter); Seattle is heavily white, politically liberal (i.e., having stated social justice commitments provides social capital), and also deeply committed to and dependent upon capitalist economic ideals. In this context, the practice of deploying certain marginalized masculinities and femininities is common, confers social capital (as more highly valued than dominant gender norms), and provides the cultural backdrop that sets the stage for this study and a lens through which to examine the data that is produced.

### **Feminist, Queer, and Transgender Theories**

Feminist theories of sexuality and gender are myriad. This dissertation most closely aligns with a socialist feminist lineage within a poststructuralist framing.

Socialist feminist examinations of gender and sexuality take into account biology and see its meaning as socially and historically (re) produced (Weedon, 1987). Socialist feminisms emphasize the psychic dimension of gender, critical to this and all other gender and/or sexuality scholarship, and look to the abolition of the gender binary (Weedon, 1987).

Early socialist feminist analysis centered on women; however, it did not see women as being only sexual or procreative (as opposed to radical feminism), but rather as two aspects that constitute women (and by extension offer the same non-essentialized view to men). This orientation prioritizes historical and contextual specificity, as gender is always being constructed, and thus, social power ascribed and exercised within a particular time and place (Weedon, 1987). Many feminist scholars have built off of Foucault's (1980) accounts highlighting the ways in which typical conceptualizations of sexuality reproduce and perpetuate reductive, binary, and power-discrepant gender hierarchies (Bartky, 1990; Duggan, 1990; Rich, 1980; Tolman & Diamond, 2014). Further, feminist scholarship has illuminated how gendered socialization extends beyond the sexual realm. As long as men and women have differential access to social goods and cultural power, differences between them are likely to be not merely neutral variations, but linked to inequities (Connell, 2002).

Adrienne Rich's seminal work on "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980) and Gayle Rubin's "obligatory heterosexuality" (1975) troubled prevailing feminist theorizing on gender, which had historically rested on men's oppression of women via heterosexual pairings (both assuming a gender binary and heterosexuality). Connell (1995) asserts that these theories are useful to men and masculinities studies as well. These feminist scholars emphasize that the ubiquity of gendered socialization produces particular

norms that are (re)produced in myriad social spaces via discursive regulatory practices and that have material consequences. These norms assume that to be cisgender, heterosexual and monosexual are the natural defaults (read: idealized sexuality) (Dean, 2010; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Rich, 1980). The participants in this present study are violating any number of these norms as they claim their bisexuality (and, for many, their trans identity).

Queer theory seeks to illuminate and interrogate assumed, taken for granted, and insisted upon power structures, and can be understood as a direct descendant of and partner with feminist theories (Burrill, 2009; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Jagose, 1996; Sedgwick, 1991). While applied more broadly in social science today, queer theory originally (and will be used in this study) challenged the imperatives of cisheteronormativity (and by extension, cishomonormativity), including the inherent binaries that create and maintain "...systems of bodily, social, and political privilege, as well as marginalization" (Tolman & Diamond, 2014, p. 16).

Feminist sexuality research, particularly LGBTQAI2 research, has enthusiastically taken up queer theory to explore topics such as identity and community within the context of regulatory discourses. Much of that literature rests in poststructuralist assumptions of discourse constituting real, material power, which can also be manipulated and transgressed. Newer extensions of queer theory center on trans bodies (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Stryker (2004) describes transgender theory as a generative theory that "willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) over the gender categories (like man and woman) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim" (p. 212). Taken together, queer and transgender theories have usefully destabilized the binaries, "naturalness,"

and inevitabilities of sex/gender categories, which had reproduced discourse and associated harm in scientific research on sexuality (as critiqued by Jordan-Young, 2010), making it a useful contribution to this project.

Feminist theories of embodiment have informed the design of this current study, and they helped guide the data collection methods. Embodiment refers to the experience of experiencing and perceiving the world through corporeality (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014). This generative social constructionist theory disrupts the historical tensions between critiquing binaries of mind/body, male/female, normal/pathological, and so on. These binaries, are a reflection of social constructions, have historically plagued sexuality research (Lorde, 1997; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Tolman & Diamond, 2014; Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014). Williams and Bendelow (1998, p. 154) have argued that “the sensual experience of our bodies [can provide] an expanded understanding of the place of bodily agency in society,” and other theorists have claimed the body as agentic (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010, 2012).

Embodiment in this context can be seen in two dimensions that can organize independently: i.e., both *being embodied* or experiencing sensation, perception, and feelings, and also *embodying the social*, or how social and historical categories become inscribed to and enmeshed with one’s body (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lorde, 1997; Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). In this study, embodiment theory is useful in both interpretations. The first concept of *being embodied* is aligned with the organicity principal from Hakomi therapy, which suggests that all organisms have inherent, inborn wisdom that can become highlighted and brought forth via working with, seeking to notice, understand, and value the somatic, sensate experiences of the

whole organism and using them to both make meaning and heal (Johanson, 2009; Weiss, Johanson, & Monda, 2015). This dissertation draws on embodiment theories in its “whole person” orientation, which is specifically manifested in the interviews. The second interpretation of embodiment, or *embodying the social* is an inherent assumption of the critical race, feminist, and intersectional theories of gender and sexuality on which this dissertation rests.

### **Intersectionality**

Aligned with poststructuralist and feminist, queer, and transgender theories, intersectional theories necessitate inclusion of the complexities that shape individual and collective lives. Intersectional theories are grounded in women of color feminisms and underscore the importance of myriad levels of social and political location based upon intersecting and overlapping and subjective identities. Those structural locations then influence experience, practices, knowledge, opportunities, choices, and possibilities in relationship to dominant (read: white cisheteronormative) culture’s conceptualization of what is real, acceptable, and even possible for particular bodies and communities (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Nielsen, 1990; Tolman & Diamond, 2014). The historical and contemporary discourses around those constructed social locations or *standpoints* then shape reality (Hill Collins, 1989, 2002; Harding, 1998; Aguilar, 2012; Roth, 2004).

Intersecting identities are another major factor affecting the development of and changes around sexuality and gender orientation and experiences. Race/ethnicity, social class, age, religion, gender and being cis or trans/gender non-binary, religion, physical and intellectual ability, mental illness, nationality, citizenship status, and other dimensions of identity alchemize, influencing sexuality identity development.

Race/ethnicity, gender, and social class are all intimately linked for people of many sexual orientations (Collins, 2004).

Guided by Gordon and Silva's theory of interpreting sexuality identity development, this present study conceptualizes intersectionality as affecting sexuality in the following five key ways: "the landmarks with which we come into contact; how we feel when we come into contact with them; the physical, emotional, and psychological happenings we notice upon contact; how we interpret these internal phenomena; and how we express them" (2015, p. 19). This theory builds on Paula Rust's (1996) concept of a sexual landscape and seeks to cohere a model that recognizes the complex, multidimensional, and shifting influences of sexuality and identity, including institutional structures, changing social context, and environmental factors, and the role of biology. Gordon and Silva's model is grounded in the insights of three compatible and related theoretical perspectives: social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and scripting theory (Blumer, 1986; Stryker, 1980; Gagnon, 1990; Parker & Gagnon 1995; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Masters et al., 2012).

Intersectionality interacts with individual experiences in five specific ways. First, it may affect experience by influencing the landmarks with which we are most likely to come into contact. People of different race/ethnicities, religions, social classes, genders, gender orientations, abilities, ages, may meet and associate with different people, participate in different activities, access different social spaces, tune in to different (increasingly polarizing) media and media formats, worship in different ways, live in different neighborhoods (including with different physical and social environments), attend different schools or work in different occupations, and so on. These differences confer benefits and constraints on individuals in myriad ways. Thus, "our identities

affect where and how we move on the landscape and the landmarks we are most likely to encounter on it” (Gordon & Silva, 2015, p. 19).

Second, intersecting identities may impact interpretation of the salience of some landmarks in relationship to others. While the same landmarks exist for others, we may *interpret them as more or less meaningful* dependent on our intersecting identities (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Rust, 1996).

Third, intersectionality may influence experience by affecting not only the landmarks that are (a) encountered and (b) noticed and labeled as important, but also (c) which physical, emotional, and psychological happenings are attended to. New landmarks are constantly being encountered along the sexual landscape as we move through the world, and with each new landmark, we have a combined physical, emotional, and psychological response that varies in intensity and perceived importance. We notice and attend to landmarks that have relevance to our identities (or are shaped by our identities in some way) (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Rust, 1996). For example, consider a middle-class, cisgender, Catholic man who identifies as heterosexual. He notices that he experiences both same and other sex attraction, which is inconsistent with the norms of his identities, and thus which troubles him. Although he feels shame and tries to dismiss his same sex attractions, the very fact that he is troubled by them, renders them more noticeable. As a result, every time he feels attracted to another man, he is hyperaware of his feelings. This illustrates the ways in which his identities influence what *happenings* he notices in himself.

Fourth, intersectionality will not only affect the internal happenings that we notice, but will also affect how we *interpret* them. Even for those who encounter the *same* landmark and experience the *same* feeling in response, their identities may affect the

way they *interpret* this feeling. Race/ethnicity, class, gender, gender orientation, age, ability, and other non-sexuality-related identities can have a significant influence on how we *interpret* our internal happenings.

Finally, intersectionality influences how we *express ourselves* based upon these interpretations. If individuals notice their same and other sex attraction, but see those feelings as incompatible with the race/ethnicity, religious community, social class, or other identity that they ascribe to, they may not express that part of themselves or do so only clandestinely. Alternatively, we may choose to openly express the parts, or strategically express them to particular others with the hopes that we will change hearts and minds or explicitly reject teachings or people within our other identity communities. This strategic deployment of different parts-of-the-self is critical to understanding the ways in which participants in this study move through the world and the social meaning ascribed to those ways of being (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Rust, 1996; 2000).

Thus, while sexual orientation is the constellation of sexual attractions, thoughts, feelings, desires, behaviors, and interpretations of those things, sexual identity is the available label that people choose to identify themselves to themselves and others, which may or may not precisely conform to how or who people take themselves to be (Diamond, 2006; Gordon & Silva, 2015; Rust, 1996).

### **Connecting Substantive Sexuality, Gender, and Identity Theories**

Theorist Erik Erikson suggested that defining one's identity is the primary work of adolescence and involves myriad activities, including sexual satisfaction and sex roles expression, and building affiliative relationships that lay the foundation for future

relational intimacy. Defining one's identity is both an intrapsychic and a social task, involving both self-reflection and actively evolving relationships with peers and adults (Erikson, 1994a, 1994b). Identity formation is so important that, as Wells suggests "failing to achieve identities in adolescence could result to delay or missteps in embarking on the tasks of adulthood, and failing to achieve identity in one area may interfere with achievement of other identities" (2012, p. 69). Although pubertal development is often an indicator of sexuality and inspires questions related to sexuality, sexuality identity development has received less attention than have other elements of development (Wells, 2012).

Understanding how people think about and experience their sexuality as a normative and important part of identity as a whole is fundamental to developing and implementing good health policy, research, and practice (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). A number of theorists and scholars have taken up the question of sexuality development. Frankel suggests that sexual identity is "an organized set of perceptions that an individual has about the meaning of his sexual attractions and desires, directed toward forming a sense of self within existing social categories" (2004, p. 2). However, acknowledging these elements of sexuality also requires us to trouble the notion of sexuality within a patriarchal society like that of the United States. For women and femme people, and for many who don't ascribe to norms of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity (the participants in this study namely), sexuality implies danger alongside pleasure (Vance, 1984). The tension is complicated, differentially experienced across participants and across specific contexts *within each* participant's life, and is demonstrated in myriad ways within this project's data. Both holding this tension and also not seeing it as polarized contradictions but as fluid

elements of sexuality with different meanings in different contexts is a necessary discomfort for intersectional feminist theorizing around sexuality (Tolman, 2006). Moving within this in-between or both/and-ness opens up the real, necessary space to view experiences related to sexuality as expansive and recognizes the profound historical and social inequities that continue to regulate certain bodies, identities, and desires (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2004; Tolman, 2006).

Yet despite both several decades of focus on sexual identity within health research (which this dissertation conceptualizes as *sexuality* identity) and also on bisexuality as a vastly growing proportion of the population (more than that of lesbians and gay men combined in recent estimates), bisexual men as a category are overlooked and/or treated in an uncomplicated way (Monro, Hines, & Osborne, 2017; Gates, 2015; GSS, 2017; Gallup, 2017). Drawing on the work of Shiri Eisner (2013), I will consider bisexuality as a complex identity that shapes one's interpersonal, health-related, and psychological experiences throughout the life course and across the social ecology. In particular, Eisner advocates a radical reclaiming and reexamination of bisexuality as a political identity. This framing is consistent with a critical feminist perspective, which also considers personal life experiences to be political in nature (Ray, 2006). Based on poststructuralist identity theories, in this project I examined bisexuality as an individual, social, and political identity as informed by broader conversations or discourses embedded within the surrounding sociopolitical/historical context as analyzed in relation to specific linguistic tools in use.

Research on sexuality identity formation generally is scant, and has typically focused on smaller sexual minority samples (Troiden, 1989; Craig, 2014; Eliason, 1996). Historical notions of sexual orientation (distinct yet related to sexuality identity

development) focused on theories of biological determinism, “sexuality as choice,” and environmental explanations (including psychoanalytic explanations). More recently sexuality identity has been suggested as an expanded concept, intended to reflect theoretical and empirical developments of the past few decades in sexuality research (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Sexual development was originally used to document physiological stages; however, more recent research (including this project) has focused on addressed the enmeshed nature of physiological and psychological processes involved in developing as a sexual person (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Models of sexuality identity development often exclude how sexual orientation itself develops and often operate under three assumptions: (1) that sexual orientation is static and unchanging throughout the life course. (2) that sexuality identity development has an “end point,” and (3) that development is simply the logical step to “discovering” ones true orientation, particularly for those who are not exclusively mono-heterosexual (Gordon & Silva, 2015). Historical literature describes stage model approaches, which assumes that there are distinct stages of sexuality identity formation that one “progresses” through to get to a non-heterosexual identification (Minton & McDonald, 1984). Many of these models, including the commonly used Cass Model (1979), rely on the concept of coming out, which as suggested above, is only part of sexual minority identity development and is also not a distinct nor linear event (Cass, 1979; Craig, 2014). These stage-based models have predominated sexuality identity research and have been critiqued for their individual-level focus, failing to acknowledge the socio-cultural context of cisheteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Researchers have suggested that people are increasingly accepting of LGBTQAI<sup>2</sup> identities and adopting bisexual identities, adding to the importance of exploring sexual and gender minorities in this particular epoch (Meyer, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014; GSS, 2017; Gallup, 2017). Given that most historical models were developed and based upon an entirely offline life, and that now many tend to explore their sexuality and gender identity online, these historical models have lost relevance (Craig, 2014; Gray, 2009). In addition, scant research has focused on cisgender, heterosexual sexuality identity formation, further revealing a cisheteronormative bias in scholarship (Saewyc, 2011; Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Understanding sexuality development is essential because this developmental process overlaps with other factors and processes to produce salient health-related outcomes (Halpern, 2010). However, sexuality development is one important and neglected aspect of development as a whole (Diamond, 2000; Wells, 2012; Tolman, 1994; Fine, 1988; Halpern, 2010; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Most research on sexuality development has been focused on specific populations or has not disaggregated bisexual youth from the larger “sexual minority” umbrella (17- to 19-year-old lesbian and bisexual women enrolled in a leadership program for example), likely obscuring important influences on and consequences of sexuality identity formation more broadly for youth, and specifically for bisexual men (Diamond, 2006; see Rosario et al., 2008; 2006; Galupo et al., 2014; Galupo et al., 2015; Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017 for exceptions). Particularly given the literature on health disparities, it would suggest that bisexual men’s process of identity formation is distinct from that of their monosexual peers.

Furthermore, increased societal awareness and acceptance of same-sex sexuality may grant contemporary emerging adults increased freedom to reflect on and explore their sexuality identity than in previous generations. However, that said, anti-LGBTQAI2 legislation and violence has been increasing in recent years (Waters & Yacka-Bible, 2017; Movement Advancement Project, 2017). Also, all of this theorizing and the related empirics relies largely on data that is only the LG of the LGBTQAI2 world, thus bisexual emerging adult men/trans masculine people continue to be left out of this research (Weiss, 2004).

Theorists have suggested that women/femme people are more likely than men/masculine people to self-identify as bisexual and that women/femme are more “fluid” in their sexuality and gender expressions (Rust, 1993; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Peplau, 2003); others have disputed these claims, considering the research as yet inconclusive (Barber, 2000; Diamond, 2006). The evidence for gender differences in sexuality identity development is mixed as well, and the evidence remains unexamined at a comprehensive level, given the dearth of longitudinal research, mixed gender groups, and lack of literature on trans youth (Diamond, 2000; Diamond, 2006; Rosario et al., 2006; Galupo et al., 2014). The research presented here was undertaken to evaluate the degree of fluidity both as a part of sexuality identity development, as well as gender identity development, expression, and experiences.

What is clear in the limited literature that does center their experiences, bisexual people tend to experience worse health outcomes than their monosexual peers (Paul, 1984; 2014). The minority stress model, which suggests that social stressors of discrimination and prejudice experienced by sexual minorities are additive and result in worse health outcomes, is helpful, but fails to capture the particular experiences of

bisexual people, thus can't fully explain these discrepancies, adding to the importance of this current research (Bostwick et al., 2014; Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Institute of Medicine, 2011). Expanding upon the minority stress model, Bostwick and Hequembourg (2013) suggested that "...bisexual people may face a 'double stigma' related to their sexual identities (Israel & Mohr, 2004) wherein their very existence is often questioned or, perhaps worse, denied (Bower et al., 2002; Rust, 1995; San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2011), including by those who, at least nominally, are considered part of a shared community" (p. 659). These authors built off of the critical law work of Kenji Yoshino (1999), whose concept of epistemic injustice posits that the conditions of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity provide the cultural, social, and political context for heterosexual and homosexual monosexual people to discriminate against bisexual people. He suggested that bisexuality subverts one's capacity to differentiate between hetero and homosexual people, thus robs them of the ability to privilege certain identities over others (recall hierarchy as a necessity of neoliberal ideologies). This leads both hetero and homosexual monosexual people to engage in an epistemic contract to erase bisexuality and thus ameliorate the interpsychic uncertainty and disorientation that this causes. The interests of the epistemic contract are threefold: (a) solidify sexual orientation as a binary category, (b) retain sex as an important and essentially diacritical axis, and (c) retain and protect the cisheteronormative/cishomonormative requirement of monogamy (Yoshino, 1999). Bostwick and Hoquembourg's recent scholarship with emerging adult bisexual women (2014) has suggested that participants experienced bisexual specific micro aggressions such as hostility, unintelligibility, pressure to change, dating exclusion, assumptions of

hypersexuality, and legitimating discourses of monosexual sexualities. These exclusionary practices of epistemic injustice could contribute to feelings of disconnection and lack of belonging empirically and theoretically implicated in poor health outcomes, and could help explain health disparities disproportionately experienced by bisexual people, however more research is necessary. This dissertation research is designed to hopefully fill in some of those gaps.

### **Putting It All Together**

Aligned with the theoretical assumptions of this research, sexuality identity development and maintenance is an iterative process that can change over the life course and “look” different within and across people at different points in time (Stryker, 1981). It is, in fact a sense-making and meaning-making process of the constellation of sexual attractions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and behaviors that become reduced into a commonly understood label. In short, sexuality identity is a heuristic for representing who we are sexually to the world and can be deployed discursively as a political identity. An increasing number of sexual identities are available to claim on the universe of sexualities (Gordon & Silva, 2015). The sexualities landscape itself and one’s particular location on it will affect which identities are available to be claimed both privately and publicly. Additionally, we all make interpretations of those identities, interpretations that ultimately affect *our experience* of our sexuality. Thus, it is the meaning-making that participants, who, at this moment in time identify as bisexual/gay/queer and cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer that the results of this dissertation represent.



## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

*Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me. If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom.*

—David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*

“The universe is made of stories, not atoms,” poet Muriel Rukeyser memorably asserted, and Harvard sociobiologist E. O. Wilson recently pointed to the similarity between innovators in art and science, both of whom he called “dreamers and storytellers” (Wilson, 2013, p. 74). Stories aren’t merely important to how we understand the world — they *are* how we understand the world (Popova, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes related to identity, sexuality, and gender in a group of emerging adult bisexual men and trans masculine individuals. This work is critical to advancing community-based health and well-being for the growing number of bisexual emerging adults (General Social Survey, 2017; Gallup, 2017). As well, this project advances social welfare education to complicate the multiplicity of meaning that people ascribe to “identity categories” and forwards a critical, intersectional theory of sexuality and gender, bringing in innovative, emergent literatures with relevance to social welfare practice and scholarship, such as neuropsychology and philosophical understandings of identity and connection.

This chapter describes the study’s methodology and includes the following: (a) my positionality within the research process, (b) the history and rationale for the research approach, (c) an overview of the research design, (d) the description of the study location, (e) the sampling approach, (f) methods of data collection, (g) analysis and

synthesis of data, and (h) issues of trustworthiness. The chapter closes with a description of the sample of participants and a brief concluding summary.

This research is embedded within U.S. socio-political structures and discourse organized around specific constructed and privileged identities, specifically whiteness, middle/upper class status, cisheteronormativity, and adjacent to cisheteronormativity, the imperatives of hegemonic masculinity, all described in more detail in Chapter 1.

### **Positionality**

This section proceeds by my detailing of various identity categories that I inhabit and experiences that I have embodied, and the ways in which those confer various privileges, illuminating spaces of access, bias, or occlusion. In addition, consistent with my critical intersectional theoretical lens, which explicitly seeks to complicate essentialized understandings of identity, I will also describe the more nuanced, symbolic and affective ways in which I move through and am read by others in the world. I will explicate how all of these various subjectivities could engage with and be implicated in this research.

I identify and am read via the culturally constructed (but materially beneficial) spaces of white, highly educated, cisgender, young, raised middle-class, and currently able-bodied. In addition, I ascribe to a queer politic, an activist scholarly stance, and commitment to exploring the discomfort of the spaces in-between, which illuminate and construct the “identities” themselves (the very material “things” that constitute the in-between), but also imply possibilities for a new, non-binary world. As new materialist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz has suggested, “[t]he space of the in-between is the locus for social, cultural, and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for

movements and realignments but in fact is the only place—the place around identities, between identities—where becoming, openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity” (2001, p. 92). I see the in-between as a space that both the study participants and myself occupy in various ways. It is critical to reveal these positionalities in order to explicate my social location within this dissertation (and the material benefits that that social location implies) and the discourses that it seeks to interrogate. And through critical reflexivity, I understand my own positionalities as intersectional, multidimensional, fluid, and dynamic. It is within and between these different identities that possibility for greater intellectual, somatic, and affective understanding exists. And it is through that kind of opening to the possibilities beyond a static binary in which a new, more flexible, expansive, supportive sexual and gender culture exists.

I am white and am read as such. Further, I have attributes that are considered conventionally attractive within a Eurocentric context such as blue eyes, a “fit” body, and (dyed) blonde-ish hair. I have access to the middle class (although have struggled financially while in the doctoral program, working as many as five jobs to try to make ends meet). I have access to a moderate level of accumulated wealth should I need (which largely came from generations of white family members being able to accumulate that wealth and thusly secure opportunities for enrichment such as schooling and access to more highly paid professions). This access allows me to care for myself (eat fresh produce, attend yoga classes, and critically, pay out of pocket for health insurance for the past fifteen months) in a way that supports my mental and physical health and vanity. I note these things as illustrative examples of the ways whiteness and social class

operate—throughout time and space, “always already” happening (Heidegger, 1996) and enhancing my access to health and well-being promoting resources.

Given the ubiquity and pervasiveness of whiteness, it is impossible to tease apart the ways in which my whiteness influenced the study, it’s like trying to discern how gravity is influencing your experience right now as a reader. However, I can name some ways in which I think that whiteness, as a critical element of my positionality, specifically impacted this study (this will be discussed further in Chapter 8). My whiteness allowed me access to the variety of experiences that get privileged within higher education spaces (imagining the possibility of getting a PhD, getting in to the PhD program in and of itself was impacted by my whiteness). Enabled by external funding, I conducted my own study (which often takes more time, thus more potential loss of income), this was possible because of my whiteness (and relatedly, social class). Further, nearly all of the interviews were conducted on the UW campus by me, a white cisgender woman. My whiteness, my age (older than the participants), my status as a hyper-educated “professor” (which more than one participant called me upon first meeting), and my affiliation with UW all confer power that invariably impacted our interactions throughout the interviews. Aligned with the theoretical orientations of this research, our interactions were subject to the same raced and sexed social forces that exist beyond the space of the interviews, and both mine and the participants’ words were socially situated and strategically used within that space. Knowing that all of these social forces are “working” all of the time via verbal and non-verbal messaging, in my attempts to decrease the power gap between myself and the participants and build rapport, I distanced myself from whiteness (inherently a renunciation of white supremacist power structures...essentially trying to say “I get it, white people are the

worst”). This discursive tool is unconscious (like whiteness itself), assumes a monolithic WHITE, constructs that WHITE as synonymous with oppression, and positions me as “the good white person.” I want to acknowledge that none of this is “true” (I can and do re-ify the structures of white supremacy in many unconscious ways), or helpful (it is my opinion that the most dangerous white person is the one who thinks that they are “woke” and thus doesn’t need to do their own reflexive “work” around racial equity), but it is the truth of how I viscerally experienced my whiteness within this project.

I identify and am read as a cisgender woman. This means a number of things in the context of this study. The impacts of growing up in a sexist world are pervasive and embodied. My nervous system holds the years of unconscious vigilance of living in a world that socializes violence as normal, natural, and inevitable (Sanday, 1981; Kolakowski & Falla, 1978). This violence happens at all levels of the social ecology and varies based upon alchemy of social conditions and intersecting identities. Interpsychic violence occurs via systems of scarcity that socialize people to think that they are not enough and that to be “acceptable” to others, they need to cut themselves off from parts of themselves. People assigned female at birth (AFAB) and/or femme people are taught that their fundamental worth is connected to their capacity to be “conventionally” physically attractive (ergo to be simultaneously sexy yet not sexual and eventually “land a man” and give birth, all the while maintaining their attractiveness). Furthermore, women and femme people are expected to prioritize others both liking them and “being comfortable.” For male assigned at birth (MAB) and masculine people, gendered expectations have already been explicated; fundamentally men are required to be invulnerable and unemotional, a result of the imperatives of anti-femininity that hegemonic masculinity entails (Connell, 1984; Connell & Messerschmit, 2005). These

gendered socialization processes involve interpsychic violence that cuts people off from the fullness of their own experience and their capacity to be truly held in those experiences with others (connection to self and others).

Interpersonally, violence perpetrated by cisgender males has been constructed as natural and expected and is even constructed as symbolic of sexual interest (Vance, 1984; Connell, 2014; Pringle & Watson, 1998). And the structural violence that is systemically perpetrated across structures by people in power is almost always done by cisgender men (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002; Black et al., 2011), but their gender is not the critical point. The masculinized structures of domination and oppression endemic to settler colonialism and capitalism is exhausting, wounding, and inherently disconnecting in that they necessitate hierarchy, presuming a dominant and subordinate position (Smith, 2010; Cohen, 1997; Pringle & Watson, 1998).

Given that we are all harmed by rigid hegemonic gender norms, my wounds are a part of me and thus part of this work. On top of the pervasive structural implications of living in a patriarchy, already detailed above, this section will provide a bit of personal history that brought me to this work. It is not hyperbolic to say that I don't know a person who has not been wounded by notions of hegemonic masculinity—it is the ocean we swim in, and it is not natural or inevitable. My own clinical history of working within HIV for several years informed this work. I worked almost exclusively with self-identified gay men and men who had sex with men, who have been told by the ideals of cisheteronormativity, that a fundamental part of their being (same sex desire, attraction, orientation, behavior, and so on) was not OK. The remainder of those whom I worked with were cis women and trans feminine people and people who injected drugs. Many of those that I worked with experienced violence related to homophobia and

transphobia and/or had experienced trauma as a result of structural, state-sanctioned (military), and/or interpersonal violence. Again, while interpersonal violence has historically and continues to be primarily perpetrated by cisgender men, it is not *individual* cisgender men that are “the problem.” Violence is the result of constructing, maintaining, and valorizing the binary of dominance/subordination through systems of gendered policing, as a way to maintain systems of power (Connell, 2014; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Risman, 1998, 2004).

I also have several femme and AFAB loved ones who have been victimized, yes, by individual cis men/masculine people, but more critically, by a system that enables control, coercion, and aggression via its systems of gendered socialization. So, to be clear, I am not saying that individual cis men/masc people are to blame, rather, that we are all victims of a system that prescribes norms that assume and encourage binary structures of domination/subordination and tie those to gendered power, precluding real connection, interdependence and intimacy and sense of belonging, fundamental parts of a human experience.

I am also not saying that cisgender men are not to blame. Nor is it to say that trans masculine people can't and don't enact gender-based violence. To assume so would be perpetrating violence by diminishing the fullness of their humanity. Aligned with the theoretical orientation of this research, all humans in this society (cisgender men and trans masculine people included) have the capacity to engage with structures and socialization and choose a different response. These beliefs, paired my faith in the transformative power of relationality, coupled with literature from diverse fields, including various Eastern and Western philosophical traditions and technologies,

neuroanatomy, neuropsychology, public health, psychology, gender and sexuality studies, sociology, and social work inform this work.

It is also important for me as a scholar/activist/student and practitioner to be clear; I needed to do this work to focus on something other than suffering perpetrated by cis men against female/femme people and/or gender and sexual minorities. I am committed to a compassionate stance towards our *collective suffering* under the gender hierarchy, and that commitment was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain given my relentless feelings of anger and sadness towards cis men coupled with the stress and hypervigilance of being a femme person and loving other femme people at this particular time in history, and being isolated and immersed in violence related literature. My being has experienced the effects of that chronic stress, and I needed to be able to tell myself new stories about men/masculine people through connecting, engaged, lived experiences with them. As well, I knew that I could explore questions of masculine socialization while approaching it from research questions that supported my own well-being and my philosophical commitments.

Given this project's focus on sexuality, this is the part where I am supposed to say that I am straight or gay or bi or asexual or monogamously partnered or practice "ethical non-monogamy" or some moniker that allows the reader to conceptualize and distill my experiences of desire, attraction, orientation, approach to sexual and/or romantic relationships and so on—who *I am* in relationship to sex. And, given this study's subject matter and population, appropriately, it is useful to provide the reader with a sense of who I am in relationship to the *possibility* of sex and sexuality with/about/around/related to the study participants. But as detailed in Chapter 1, identity is fluid and dynamic. My philosophical commitments are queer; queer in the

ways that they interrogate and seek to dismantle social and cultural norms. Also, queer in that they interrogate the categories or labels in any way—even within this section of the dissertation. I am often read as straight; but my experiences of my body and sexuality are different than frankly anyone (straight or not) whom I have read about, talked with, or seen depicted in media, which is rife with its conceptions of heterosexual experience. The ways in which I think about intimacy, connection, and the kind of future-self that I will be are incongruent with cisheteronormativity—even though, on “my face,” I check many cisheteronormative boxes. I am alternatively read as queer or not-queer, a member of the LGBTQAI2 community (to the extent that a “community” exists, which will be interrogated further within subsequent chapters of this dissertation), or possibly “just” an ally. Note, the identity politics that police who “gets to be queer” is a part of a neoliberal ideology that mandates hierarchy and prescribes certain ways of being (i.e., “only these kinds of people *get* to claim queerness”). This policing is often ascribed to the behavior of gay men and lesbians, particularly in early “LGBT” movements and will be discussed further in this dissertation (Weiss, 2004).

Further complicating my experiences of gender and sexuality, I grew up in a family with cisheterosexual parents and gendered models that I deliberately do not call “traditional.” “Traditional” gender roles as they tend to be conceptualized now, a more 1950s model (Cootz, 2006), are actually a result of a much deeper history, namely domestication of oxen, which enabled modern agrarianism, and subsequent results of the Industrial Revolution, which segregated men and women (Lorber, 2000; Rothman, 2015; Mies & Shiva, 1993). Before I talk about my particular family, it is imperative to understand its members, consistent with the theoretical orientation to this research, as all interdependent and embedded within their own individual and collective histories,

lineages, experiences, and identities, which were always already happening within larger chronological and biological time and sociopolitical contexts. As many theorists assert, to have children is to know that they will suffer, and parents are always implicated in some way in that suffering (and often the healing from that suffering). Further, people are doing the best that they can, given all of the tools and capacities that they have and the members of my family are no exception to that.

In terms of gender roles, the mid-century versions of gender roles (Mom stayed home and was paid for all of her labor “in fulfillment” and Dad worked outside of the home and was paid in actual currency) fits with my experience. However, many of the other trappings of that social structure did not fit. I experienced my Mom as holding the bulk of power in our family. Dad went to work, came home, and did not rock the boat in any way. My Mom’s dominant personality and Dad’s passivity felt contradictory to cultural notions of gender. I have two sisters, and both of my parents were very involved in our scholastic and extra-curricular lives. Upon critical reflection, we were actually raised in a masculinized way (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Thompson & Pleck, 1986; Gaard, 1997; O’Laughlin, 1993; Fromme, 2010; Weeks, 1991). Consistent with research on individualistic societies, attributes that were emphasized were independence, competition, self-reliance, humility, perfection, “competence,” invulnerability, and “toughness.” More feminized traits such as empathy, nurturance, communality, and care, including the nourishing power of touch, were not expressed, and were instead diminished and/or shamed.

This approach to relationality is mirrored in the neoliberal ideals endemic to colonialism emphasized in late market capitalism and re-ified via my parents’ childhoods, ideals that laud the masculine and diminish the feminine. This emphasis on

individualism, competition, and toughness is one pernicious manifestation of sexism (and its relatives transphobia and homophobia), and it manifests regardless of the gender of the individuals involved. And like sexism and colonialism, the privileging of individualism over collectivism is unnatural to our own humanity, and in capitalistic terms, diminishes our capacities to produce in that it assumes that we are separate selves, not intimately interdependent on one another and our natural world. So, while we grew up in a home that “on its face” looked like a mid-century notion of nuclear family life, and in some ways it was, the binary gender roles that I grew up with were not wholly consistent with cultural representations.

I talk about this because these relational experiences have significantly informed my own identity and philosophical commitments and my personal “work,” which, by extension has informed all aspects of this study, including its theoretical frameworks guiding the research questions and my approach to them. Further, in many ways, I can relate to the participants’ wrestling with gender in deliberate ways (and in the ubiquitous context of sexism).

The middle-class status of my upbringing reinforced these ideals—our family “fit” with what social models of family “should” be. This confers privileges across the social ecology—namely access to education and professional resources via social capital. The real, material benefits of this upbringing cannot be overstated. And, for the past six years, I have been earning at various points, between \$64 to \$2,100/month (I have not received any funding from UW since June 2017). The past four years, I have been living in a geographic neighborhood of great wealth, and for the past year, have been earning a total \$64/month teaching yoga to people with disabilities. Again, I name these experiences, because they matter in relation to the liminality, and possibility for

empathy and also deep sense of separateness (and hopefully the possibility for liberation) that can come with living in the in-between. I am broke, not poor. I continue to have access to enormous social capital and mobility upon graduation, and yet, relative to highly educated others, I have very little wealth currently and an embodied sense of vulnerability. This is important not because of its uniqueness, but for two important things that it illustrates, which could have impacts for this research or the ways in which it is read: (a) the sense of the in-between that I occupy at this time and the philosophical assumptions of this project that suggest, and (b) all of our experiences are constituted not from the empirics of our lives, but from the ways in which our bodies and minds make meaning from them; our visceral, corporeal, realities, which we narrate in order to make sense of our experiences.

My life is filled with loving, intimate individual and communal relationships. I am not currently involved with a romantic and/or sexual partner (monogamous or not). Not having that kind of relationship in a world that socially and materially privileges monogamous coupledness, and heterosexuality as an idealized version, provides me with an empathic lens from which to view their experiences (as a “not normal” [Grimsby, 2018] and also specifically as a “single” person, the same relational identity as most participants). Regardless of their relationship status, nearly all participants described wanting to have a meaningful sexual and/or romantic relationship in their lives, and at the same time, most were critical of social constructions privileging both being coupled and prescribing “acceptable” notions of what that coupling would/should look like. Further, many participants distanced themselves from masculinity and maleness—thus felt leary, suspicious, and/or ambivalent about engaging in relationships with cis men. Opening to my own vulnerabilities, I found myself colluding with all of these feelings,

particularly ambivalence: “I think that I want a meaningful sexual/romantic relationship, but I know that I don’t want the sexist, conformist, emotionally laborious version that is idealized.” The longing and resistance that is present as ambivalence is a form of in-betweenness and both/and...it is the desire that motivates the construction of something new, consistent with (my) feminist ethics, affirming, expansive, and possibly transformative.

Connected with that desire/aversion of connection/hegemonic coupledness dynamic is the social meaning that is ascribed to “being coupled” (and further re-ified if you have kids). Traditional gendered expectations of “good” femininity, values “finding a man” and parenting children (preferably biological). While most of my friends and peers don’t personally espouse those values, their lives align with them; most are married and/or in long term partnerships, and/or have children. They are embodying social expectations of successful adulthood; they are “in the club,” and I am not. Thus, regardless of my desire for partnership or children, I feel a sense of separateness in not being able to relate to the lives that they have (which society has told me in myriad ways, is “the right way” to be an adult). I feel antagonistic towards limiting cultural messaging (“there is one way to be an acceptable adult woman”). I feel alternatively ambivalent and antagonistic towards the symbols of that messaging (“and it is by getting married to a man and having kids, and in your demographic, working a full time job, and still maintaining a thin body and a tidy home”). And I feel longing towards the legibility, legitimacy, and (possible) sense of inclusion that having that life could bring. The push/pull of these emotions is similar to the in-between, both/and tone of participants on a range of topics, and specifically around the norms imposed by cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity.

In addition, I have been diagnosed with an “invisible” not-well-understood “disability” (ADHD) that enables a greater capacity for some things and more difficulty in others, but has to exist in a neurotypical world that “fits” (or in my case doesn’t fit) with the systems and structures that are in place (colonial, white, neoliberal orientation towards productivity, linearity, and conformity). For six years, the round peg that is my mind, has been asked to fit into the squarest of square holes, the bastion of neoliberal hierarchical, self-improvement projects, and academia. Given my educational attainment (and the fact that my disability is not visible), I am not read as “someone with a disability”; thus, the ways that I am treated by others is often very different from my inner experience and understanding of myself. Given that we always constitute our sense of self in relationship to others, this incongruence creates a ruptures in a coherent narrative of “who I am” (for both myself and others...I can’t be “figured out”). This illegibility again can be read as a kind of liminality...the in-between of belonging and not belonging; of “getting it” and “not getting it;” and performing “getting it.” I am also in a discipline that explicitly values and centers marginalized identities (and names disability as such), but who “counts” to be centered and who regulates that “counting?” Do I “count” as someone with marginalized identities? And if I do, what does that “get” me? How am I treated differently or not? These questions I note here because they dance around key elements of this dissertation, namely, the in-betweenness and ambivalence that myself and the participants embody, the policing and regulating of specific bodies “even” in spaces where they would expect to experience care and belonging, and the material and social implications for our identities as we make sense of them and as they are subjectively read by others.

So in many ways I “fit” into the privileged cultural narrative of “who I am supposed to be,” namely cisgender, white, raised middle class, highly educated, being often read as heterosexual, phenotypically female, and currently able bodied. And in other ways, I do not fit, namely embodying a lot of masculine energy and attributes, not being coupled in a monogamous partnership, sometimes “belonging” to queerness and sometimes not, and being neuroatypical. And those are important and have real material impacts. But my experience of my life and the ways in which I make sense of it are, and this is critical, impacted by the ways in which I experience *those* identities and *differing* locations. And *that experience* is partially the empirical realities of those identities (I am white and read as white and there are tangible benefits to that), but also the ways in which I am *read* by others, and the experience of in-between-ness or separateness, which is often born when ones embodied reality, is not congruent with both discrete categories and/or the ways in which they are placed in the social world. In this way, myself and the participants in this study are not unique. We are never “just one thing”: marriage is neither normative nor subversive, lives are never “fitting in” or “not fitting in.” Thus, as humans, we make meaning (stories) via those felt experiences within and between our relationships with others. To revisit the quote at the beginning of this section, the world (our individual worlds and the collective world) is based upon the stories that we tell. And most importantly, those stories are never “just one thing.” As Nelson (2015) notes “...it’s the binary of normative/transgressive that is unsustainable, along with the demand that anyone live a life that’s all one thing” (Nelson, 2015, p. 22). The challenge then is to resist the separateness of these binaries (or even dualistic approach to binaries as “always bad”) and embrace the complexity and fluidity and possibilities for freedom in-between (Memmi, 1965/1991; Hudson, 2015).

This is the part that I think is critical to any genuine discussion of positionality—it is this multi-dimensional liminality, this possibility that both motivates my research *and* connects me more deeply to the utterances of the participants—not any specific identity category. As individuals and culturally, an embrace of the in-between could provide for more expansive gender norms, enabling more authentic, deliberate expressions of self, supporting rich relationships, and a sense of meaning and belongingness, which could ultimately improve proximal and distal health outcomes, particularly for bisexual men/trans masculine people. Throughout this project, I am seeking to demonstrate how complex social positions (or the shifting nature of identity and the way that it is deployed within the context of the research) occur within the dynamic between myself and the study participants. This belief in the expansive and transformative possibilities of the spaces in-between and the love ethic that can change individuals and systems beyond the desire for domination and ultimately back into consciousness and felt connection with ourselves and the pains of others (hooks, 2000; Song & Parker, 1995).

This project is motivated by my critical feminist ethics, which value richness and a deep desire for understanding that comes from this personal connection to the work. I come to this work motivated by a deeply held belief in the transformative social justice possibilities of resistance to hegemonic gender norms, themselves social constructions of a misogynistic, white supremacist system, which wounds us all, in whatever position(s) along the social hierarchy that we land and move between. Within this project and beyond its bounds, I am a scholar/activist and practitioner. As well, I recognize myself also implicated in the discourse of multiculturalism, identity politics, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. I approach this work with humility and trust and am grateful to the participants for co-constructing this knowledge with me. I also

recognize that what ultimately gets documented is through the hermeneutics of the researcher, and that regardless of the research design or practices therein, the power dynamic between researcher and researched is always present and should be read with that lens. My commitment to critical reflexivity is imperative to this project and to doing the kind of messy, uncomfortable work of engaging difference in a way that is ultimately generative. And this project will be a persistent effort to examine and interrogate my own discursive practices that resist and (re)produce the very structures that they seek to challenge.

## **Analytic Frameworks and Techniques**

### **Rationale for Feminist Approach**

This study rests squarely on the assumptions and commitments of feminist methodological approaches (for overview of feminist social work research, see Gringeri, Wahab, & Anderson-Nathe, 2010). These features include (a) a critique of hierarchical, deductive approaches to knowledge building (Hesse-Biber, 2007); (b) attention to power and authority as they manifest in research design, implementation, dissemination, ownership of the research, and what happens as a result of the research; (c) an “ethic of care” relative to issues of representation, risk of harm, and the researcher-participant relationship (Preissle & Han, 2007; Edwards & Mauthner, 2002); and (d) recognizing the “complexities of multiple, competing, fluid, and intersecting identities” (Gringeri et al., 2010, p. 394).

Feminist approaches are particularly suited to social welfare research, given their shared characteristics of (a) the development of all beings through service, (b) the intrinsic worth and dignity of all humans, (c) the fundamental human longing for and

importance in active participation in the social environment, and (d) the prevention and amelioration of discrimination, prejudice, and oppression across the social ecology for full human flourishing (Swigonski, 1994; Wetzel, 1986).

B.G Collins (1986) has asserted that feminist methods ascribe to the belief that “the personal is political,” implying that we are always implicated in the work, and is consistent with the “person in environment” ethos that guides social work/welfare practitioners, activists, and researchers. As well, both feminist methods and social welfare research, ascribe to an action orientation, aiming to make the work explicitly applied (Wetzel, 1986). Additionally, through the critique of dominant “value-free” approaches to research, feminist approaches explicitly name the ways in which the particular standpoint (identities, history, lineage(s)) could impact the research process (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002; Maynard, 1994; Smith, 1987) . This is critical in the reading of this project and the primary reason for my detailed positionality statement above.

As a social work practitioner, I have been interviewing people for several years. Intake and assessments and well as the therapeutic process can in some ways all be used to examine “where someone is” or how they are feeling/thinking in that moment in time. However, without formal training in feminist methods of engagement or the interview as research method, this kind of interaction has the potential to negatively impact the interviewee (Warren, 2002). It is imperative that the researcher see the interview process as intimately connected to both their own experience and the other person’s experience; it is after all the privileged interpretation of the interviewer’s perception of what was said that gets documented and acknowledged.

As well, I think that being both a social worker (by training) and former clinician has informed the ways in which I approach interviews. I aim to be aware that people and are embedded (and are talking to me) from a particular context in their lives, in the day, from a particular social position; they may have had any number of experiences even within the previous 10 minutes that could influence their experiences of me and with me in our time together. Similarly, I am coming to an interview from my own context, positionality, and life experiences. The things that come out of that interview are products of our interactions with one another and the social identities and perceptions of those social identities that shape our interactions. I think that my social work training and practice experiences are useful in facilitating interviews that are comfortable for participants and effective at eliciting comprehensive responses.

### **Rationale for Narrative Approach**

Situated within a qualitative, feminist, poststructuralist framework, this study uses a critical narrative methodological approach to explore participants' lived experiences of gender and sexuality. Using an exploratory, phenomenological approach, infused with somatic practices and arts-based methods, participants described their experiences of gender and sexuality as those things related to a number of other a priori salient variables.

There are many other approaches that have been used to study identity development and change. This study used narrative methodologies for several reasons. First, storytelling is common and widespread across social and cultural contexts (Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986; Thorne, Koroboc, & Morgan, 2007). Second, individuals use narrative as a way to make sense of the self, make sense of experiences beyond the

self, and connect to others and build affinity (Bluck & Alea, 2009; Sarbin, 1986; Roth, 2014). Third, narrative methodologies assume the importance of storytelling as a way of knowing and focus on stories as constituted from past experiences, deliberately told, and “connected to the flow of the power in the wider world” (Reissman, 2008, p. 8, as cited in Pitre, Kushner, Rained, & Hegadoren, 2013; Berger & Quinney, 2005; Brodkey, 1987). Narrative is “the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11).

Narrative approaches focus on how people *make sense and meaning* of their experiences through deliberately deployed language (Souto-Manning, 2014). Stories are conceptualized as narrators’ opportunity to create and re-make alternative representations of reality as they engage in social action (Reissman, 2008; Somers, 1994). “Master narratives” are culturally shared stories that organize social relations (Mclean & Seyd, 2015). Individuals construct their personal narratives in the broader context of these master narratives. Personal narratives shared via stories can be sites to alternatively reproduce and/or challenge master narratives (creating alternative narratives confronting and shifting stereotypes and/or building solidarity, [Mclean & Seyd, 2015]). Shared stories are fundamental to individual meanings, knowledge, and identity; providing a lens through which to connect with the narrators reality in a broader social context (Pitre et al., 2013; Frank, 2010; Reissman, 2008).

Given the theoretical orientation of this project, which assumes identity is made and re-made via interactions with the social world, narrative approaches offer key elements missing in other approaches intended to connect the self with the social world: time and sequencing. As Mclean and Syed (2015) note, narrative inherently assumes a temporal and sequential order, and brings the dynamic interplay between time and

sequence to similar concepts meaningful to this project, such as stereotypes.

Stereotypes are expectations or schemas for “typical” behaviors, affects, beliefs, and values of a given social group (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). Stereotypes (such as bisexual people are promiscuous) show up in research on master narratives, and some have used narrative methodologies to explore the ways in which individuals negotiate their own experiences within the context of which they live, connecting the ways that the societal and the self interact (Way & Rogers, 2015).

Given the fluidity of identities and how they shift within context and social relationships, identities are constructed and re-conceptualized over and over through narratives. Because the experiences of bisexual people and in some cases in this study masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer individuals fall outside cisheteronormative conceptions of sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression, they are frequently pathologized (Butler, J., 2004). Critical narrative approaches “confirm or challenge the status quo...when someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience, and reality” (Chase, 2000, p. 657). Affixing a critical lens towards narrative inquiry helps to create the conditions by which participants can construct their identities and lived experiences in ways that are more authentic to them and more reflective of social work values (Keddell, 2009).

In addition, theoretically linking a critical feminist worldview to narrative approaches purposively compels an analysis of the narrators’ (as social actor) interactions with the symbolic, structural, and ideological world (Pitre et al., 2013). The rationale for this theoretical triangulation is threefold: (a) to find sources of power and exclusion (Sprague, 2016), (b) to identify expressions of resistance and freedom (Kushner & Morrow, 2003), and (c) to highlight invisible, silenced, or taken-for-granted

historical, structural, or ideological forces and conditions (Peters, Jackson, & Rudge, 2007). This approach to interviewing is explicitly aligned with the philosophical commitments of social welfare, namely providing a platform for which participants' lived experience is valued and their own agency, identities, and voices are able to live via what and how their stories are told. And those stories are understood and analyzed within the ever-shifting multiple social conditions and contexts in which they are embedded (Pitre et al., 2013).

### **Connecting Narrative Approaches to Interview Methodology**

Meaningful elements across the social ecology were illuminated through this project's use of thematic networks analysis of narrative data gleaned through phenomenological interviewing methods. I chose phenomenological interviews which seek to understand and describe the unique contexts and meaning that individuals give to their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Within phenomenology, researcher and participants "co-construct" meaning through an iterative process of reflection and interpretation. Phenomenological interviewing is an approach aims to describe the unique experience as close to the participants' words and actions as possible using an inductive approach. Phenomenological methods have been used widely and are appropriate for exploring questions of gender and sexuality, and particularly useful given participants' developmental age and widely varying degrees of experiences (2013). As an approach to gathering narrative data, phenomenology is particularly useful in social welfare research as social welfare has specific commitments to the individual in context of their environment.

### **Connecting Narrative Approaches to Thematic Networks Analysis**

This project uses a narrative form of data, not as an analytic approach. Driven by my research questions, I chose to conduct a thematic networks analysis (described later in this chapter) of narrative data in order to construct an understanding of gender and sexuality identity development from the perspective of the collective participant voice, rather than investigate the complexities, inconsistencies, and discontinuities in individual narratives. I used narrative as meaning making units of discourse to understand the ways in which participants made sense and meaning of their experiences of sexuality and gender in the context of cisheteronormativity.

Critical narrative inquiry situates this research in a social context of inequity across interpersonal relationships and structures (Souto-Manning, 2014). It enables us to learn how people construct, de-construct, re-make, iterate, and strategically deploy different parts of their identities and selves within ever-present and ever-shifting social interactions. These interactions are dynamic and impact one another from the interpersonal to the institutional. Exploring these individual discourses provides a better understanding of the lived experiences of bi/pansexual/gay/queer cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer individuals, and are also essential given that they are always situated within social and institutional worlds. Thus, they can provide for an analysis that brings together the personal (micro) with the social and instructional (macro) (Forgas, 2002; Souto-Manning, 2014; Mclean & Syed, 2015).

### **Connecting Narrative Approaches to Critical Reflexivity**

Additionally, this approach makes space for multiple voices, including my own (Pitre, et al., 2013; Reissman, 2008). In fact, it provides a framework of accountability for my own positionality and relationship to the research process through reflexive practices which will be detailed later in this chapter (Madison, 2005). This critical reflexivity was imperative in this section (as with others), given the dual recognition that my history, experiences, lineage, and context give rise to the meaning that I make from participants' utterances, and that that interpretation itself is just an expression of the hermeneutic nature of the data; or as Foster asserts, "we do not *give* voice but we do *hear* voices that we record and interpret" (as cited in Gringeri et al., 2010, p. 401). Further, my own reflexivity is critical given my commitment to co-construction; if I were not using reflexive practices, it would be easy to invalidate or diminish the stories of the participants in favor of my own narrative. We have a responsibility to know "our own stuff" and how it gets implicated in research relationships, thus affecting others and written into published documents which are discursively productive. This is particularly important given that I gathered my own data and also because of the power that I have and how my own knowledges are occluded.

### **Rationale for Future Forming Orientation**

This research draws on Gergen's (2015) call for orienting research away from strict inquiry into why and how things are and towards future-forming orientation of "research as world-making." Gergen asserts that science has moved closer to a spirit of pluralism-away from the epistemological and ontological dogma of the past which privileged empirics and assumed that "reality" was static and knowable and the ultimate

aim of research was to discover that objective “Truth.” Given that research practices can now be more accurately assessed and legitimated on their own terms, Gergen asks researchers to critically question the general contributions of research to the world. Adjacent to concern and questions whose answers rest on fundamental assumptions of ideology; for whom are the outcomes useful, who benefits, who is harmed, how do we know that they benefit and are harmed, who decides, who is excluded from the discussion altogether, and so on. Gergen describes this as “pragmatism with a social conscience” (Gergen, 2015, p. 4). He suggests that the basic structure of inquiry, the “ocularcentric conception of knowledge,” which assumes a dualistic premise, with the world on one side and the researcher on the other, remains unchallenged (Levin, 1993; Kavanagh, 2004). This is evident in that the vast share of research today continues to be “devoted to ‘revealing,’ ‘illuminating,’ ‘understanding’ or ‘reflecting’ a phenomena, which limits the capacities of the social sciences” (Gergen, 2015, p. 4).

In J.L. Austin’s *How to do things with words*, Austin drew a distinction between constative and performative utterances (1962). The former refers to things that are essentially statements of fact (e.g., the bowl is on the table), while the latter refers to statements that on their own, bring about changes in the current state (e.g., “run for your life!”). These categories are not discrete, and many theorists and philosophers have since expanded on this, but importantly, even Austen himself notes that, at least by implication, all constatives can be understood as performative. It is in the *naming* itself that then has consequences for subsequent action; similar to the theories that undergirded early labeling theories described in previous sections of this project (Gove, 1975), and implicit in methods such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013). For example, as researchers designate terms like “mental illness” or “aggression”, in so

doing, they are inviting actions towards them-*preventing* aggression, *treating* mental illness and so on. Gergen suggests that this concept creation and reification can possibly reinforce the very structures that social scientists want to dismantle, normalizing constructs such as “illness” and “wellness” in mental illness for example. And further perniciously, creating and systematizing that conception within capitalism which results in a “mental illness” industrial complex of sorts with more “people with mental illness,” which then increases the amount of therapists and hospital systems, which increases profits for pharmaceutical companies, and so on. Thus, “to study something is to “create what we are studying, so let’s create the world that we want to have” (Gergen, 2016).

Qualitative methodologies are an important political movement in science. In this vein of paradigmatically shifting our orientation for research towards the future forming, Gergen asserts that methods such as critical discourse analysis can provide an analytic to understand and begin to upend cultural conditions which structure a particular construct (such as conceptions of hegemonic masculinity for example, Connell, 1984). Similarly, he says “words will chop up the world,” and suggests arts-based and performative research to challenge the eminence of words as the only way to know and to engage populations that might connect more deeply with expressing themselves in another way. Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls language “the male discourse” (p. 1023). Engaging sensation, emotion, artistic expression epistemologically is aligned with critical and feminist traditions, and also expands collective capacities to both create and appreciate more complex forms of data and by extension more complicated ways of knowing and being in the world. As well, sometimes when studying social phenomena, verbal question and answers can feel reductive to participants, for example, when someone with an illness is asked “how are

you?” that illness can become an identity-diminishing the fullness of who they are, and who they are seen to be. Performative or arts-based research could empower and spark creativity by allowing people to be seen in the fullness of their experience and signify to participants, that we, as researchers, are concerned with the totality of people’s lives. This could include asking questions such as “what makes you light up?” “what do you care about?” and for the purposes of this study, “what would a supportive sexual culture look like and where do you see yourself in that” (Gergen, 2016). Imperative to actualizing this improved possible future, is an unbounded *imagination* for that future; a future free of hierarchy and domination (not unlike the possibilities imagined by Octavia Butler and others in the Afrofuturist tradition). Artist, activist, and co-founder of Black Lives Matter (BLM) Patrisse Cullors illustrates this imagination in a conversation with, among others Dr. Robert Ross about reconceptualizing health in terms of human wholeness in the context of BLM. She says:

...someone imagined handcuffs, someone imagined guns, someone imagined a jail cell... Let’s imagine something different  
(*On Being* episode, Feb 18, 2016).

However, before we imagine this new future, we need to have an understanding of the way the world is now, and how it is experienced by bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals specifically. To accurately do this, I will briefly revisit cisheteronormative/cishomonormative discourse and its power in shaping the social world specifically how it relates to the methods of this study.

### **The Importance of Discourse**

Before understanding the methods of data collection and analysis, which are based upon narrative data (words in context), it is critical to understand the importance of

*discourse* to the meaning-making process (i.e., narratives are understood as nested in layers of historical and social context, and those words are what are both uttered and analyzed in this study).

As detailed in Chapter 3, discourse can be understood as historically and contextually situated systems of representation which include symbols, practices, language, and customs. Discourse serves to prescribe the bounds of what can topics can be meaningfully considered and how they are considered, produces knowledge, and influence the ways in which concepts are actualized in practice and used to “regulate the conduct of others” (Hall, 1997, p. 72; Dean, 2002; 1980). Discourse can also be used for more expansive, emancipatory means. Given that assumption, that words are meaningful and “work” in the world, all discourse can be considered critical; all language has political, ethical, social implications (Gee, 2011). Thus, discourse is always laden with power and “works” to be productive (Foucault, 1980). In this study, participants discursively reproduce, resist, negotiate with and around and expand the bounds of normative sexuality and gender.

### **Research Design and Methods**

This study applied thematic networks analysis as a methodological approach to qualitative analysis of data from phenomenological interviews, researcher notes and memo-writing: additionally multiple strategies were used for ensuring credibility and rigor. With the help of three paid research assistants (two for data analysis), I conducted all data collection, analysis and interpretation for this project, including assuring that all IRB requirements and approvals are attained before data collection began. The list

below summarized the procedures used to carry out this research, followed by a more in-depth discussion of each step:

1. Following the proposal defense, I acquired approval from the IRB to proceed with the research. The IRB approval process involved detailing all procedures and processes needed to ensure compliance to standards put forth for the study of human subjects, including participants' confidentiality and informed consent.
2. Conducted formative research with multiple professional contacts.
3. Hired a designer to create a website and flyers for recruitment.
4. Distributed flyers and posted online advertising via a host of venues to recruit study participants.
5. Potential participants contacted the study team and were screened to assure they met the study sample criteria.
6. Participants were purposively selected to ensure a diversity of perspectives.
7. Fifteen participants were chosen and completed either two or three phenomenological interviews.
8. Interview transcripts and researcher notes/memos were analyzed.

### **IRB Approval and Ethical Considerations**

This study was approved by the University of Washington's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Several considerations were made for the protection of human subjects and outlined in full detail in the IRB application. Efforts to protect potential (those calling or connecting via the study website expressing interest in the study) and actual

participants include but were not limited to using a “burner phone” for the study, informed consent procedures, confidentiality practices, and secure data storage. All interviews were coded with a unique identifier to ensure confidentiality. I kept the consent forms, code book and any contact information separate from the data collected. All study related materials were kept in a locked file cabinet or were saved in secure online files, consistent with IRB requirements. In all write-ups of the study, I de-identified any information that could be linked to participants. These study methods were submitted to and approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division prior to the commencement of any study activities.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Possible sources of risk for participants included emotional distress as a result of disclosing sensitive information to the researcher. Participants were notified of potential risk during the initial screening interview and then again via the consent process before they began the interviews, as well as upon completion of the interview. Drawing on my nine years of clinical experience, primarily working with sexual minority men, I used my clinical skills to help participants process any difficult emotions that arose during or after the interviews. I also made available to all participants, a list of local LGBTQAI<sup>2</sup>, mental health, and social service resources providing support, counseling and crisis management. The magnitude of this type of risk is minimal and reversible, and was not expected to endure for more than a few hours following the interviews. Previous research suggests that young people experience therapeutic benefits from the opportunity to talk about their sexuality and other related and/or important issues

within research contexts (Martin, 1996; Tolman & Tolman, 2009; Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Murray, 2003; Rossetto, 2014).

Additionally, the arts-based and somatic techniques used within the interview have been suggested to provide therapeutic benefits and also support researcher reflexivity (van der Kolk, 2014; Levine, 2010; Ogden & Minton, 2006; Knowles & Cole, 2012; Bhattacharya & Cochrane, 2017). Some participants reported benefit from contributing to a study that was relevant to their personal lives, identities and political-social commitments (e.g., LGBTQAI2 issues) and with the potential to influence social policy, supportive services and interventions for bisexual emerging adult men and/or trans masculine individuals. Participants were also asked if they would like to be notified regarding the research outcomes and all said that they would and many mentioned that a direct benefit of participation in this project was the opportunity to learn more about their own experiences and possibly connect to other emerging adult men and trans masculine people. Participants were paid \$30 per interview.

### **Formative Research**

I conducted formative research within and outside of my network of professional contacts mostly from my previous clinical and policy work in HIV/AIDS. This included attending two LGBTQAI2 community health fairs (at UW and a local community college), meeting with students and higher education professionals who interact specifically with LGBTQAI2 communities and those who do not, meeting with multiple community based health and social service organizations and individual clinician's, meeting with local business and social club employees or establishments/organizations who engage emerging adults and men/masc populations. Consistent with the feminist

framing and applied commitments of this research, this step was intended to establish community partnerships to (a) nurture existent relationships with community stakeholders (b) let community stakeholders know about this research and assure them that I could be a resource (d) ask for their help in recruiting potential participants and (e) get feedback on my interview guide (and when possible include questions that could be beneficial to the aims of that community organization) and (f) inquire if they would be interested in hosting a community discussion after analysis.

### **Research Site and Participants**

Although centering bisexual emerging adult men/trans masculine experiences, this study is not intended to be a population study nor is it intended to imply “community” or the kind of common experience which that suggests. However, because our experiences are shaped by context, including geographic, political, cultural, and social norms, *place* becomes an important characteristic of this study. The particular global and national contexts, as well as the nuance and complexity of various identities as they relate to Seattle as a particular political, social, economic, demographic, and historical location, shape participants’ lives in distinct and meaningful ways.

### **National Context**

It is important to note the national (and in many countries international) conversation about cisheterosexism and by extension hegemonic masculinity that, in its current iteration, coincided with the beginning of data collection for this project. Pervasive sexism, a hallmark of cisheteropatriarchy, has existed in the United States since colonization. However, a number of factors have brought the wounds of hegemonic (or “toxic”) masculinity into popular discourse.

The #MeToo and associated #TimesUp movements have been powerful for bringing masculinity norms to the fore. While the Me Too campaign was initiated in 1997 by black activist Tarana Burke (NYTimes, 2017), for many reasons, important but beyond the scope of this dissertation (racism; internet was in its nascence; historical point in time), it was not until the #MeToo movement ignited in 2017 that more widespread discussion and possible cultural shifts began related to gender equity began to occur. This conversation was no doubt facilitated by decades of increasing public awareness of sexual abuse, sexual assault, and rape allegations within powerful institutions like the military and the Catholic church. Coupled with collective anger at the lack of empathy, emotional skills, and pernicious dominant imperative that characterizes both hypermasculinity and the behavior and policy positions of the current 45<sup>th</sup> presidency have been important contributors to popular discourse and action around “toxic masculinity” and the ubiquity of misogyny. As well, the growing and increasingly visible white supremacist and men’s rights movements, and gun violence in schools, almost always perpetrated by cis, straight, white males, have contributed to increased attention to male/masculine socialization and its intersection with white supremacist ideology (Kimmel, 2018). It is in this political and social context that this study takes place.

### **Local Context**

Seattle has a rich gay history. Of that that is documented, spaces for gay men in the Seattle area date back to the 1930s (Pettis, 2002). Seattle has positioned itself as uniquely fertile grounds for queer-focused resources and community. Young LGBTQAI2 people from all over the country migrate to Seattle for its reputation as a

generally queer-friendly, queer-affirming city (Pettis, 2002). The Williams Institute estimates that around 3.5% of the population identifies as LGB and that about .3% identify as transgender (Gates, 2011). The report also suggests that Seattle may have the second highest population of LGB people in the nation, with 12.9% of the population identifying as LGB.

Given that this study is centered in the ocean of masculinity norms of which participants are negotiating and re-negotiating all of the time, it is critical to talk about the particular norms of Seattle in relationship to masculinity. Hybrid masculinity theories can help illuminate the norms of a white, liberal masculinity (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001). Aligned with the theory, participants in this study strategically distance themselves from notions of hegemonic masculinity, in favor of subordinated identities, in order to avoid rejection and gain social capital with their peers (and presumably me, the interviewer).

## **Recruitment**

The first part of this project involved recruitment and initial phone screening to identify eligible participants. In addition to the partnership and outreach activities listed under formative research, we posted flyers around UW and in social spaces around the city frequented by emerging adults, community health and social service centers, and in local businesses such as book and gaming stores and restaurants and bars. Two members of the study team identified as bisexual and both posted on two local Facebook pages, one specifically for bisexual people and the other for queer people. In addition, a designer was hired to create a user-friendly website that allowed interested participants to learn about the researchers (via online bios, as well as pictures

and video), some background for the study and its aims. The site also included an encrypted method to contact the research team to indicate interest. Research suggests that getting information online is the modal form of communication for emerging adults (Pew, 2013).

Sampling methods are intended to seek out information-rich cases to be studied in depth (Patton, 2002; Emmel, 2013). We used purposive sampling to identify fifteen 18- to 30-year-old participants from Seattle and the surrounding King County area for in-person interviews. Multiple forms of purposive sampling were used to recruit study participants and were appropriate for this study given the specifics of the target population. Purposive sampling is designed before the research starts and is common in interview-based studies with specific selection criteria and small samples. Patton (2002) suggests that researchers do what makes sense given the constraints of the research process and study population, and report transparently on “what was done, why it was done, and what the implications are for the findings” (p. 72). This approach to sampling is iterative and concerned with practical application of findings, consistent with my theoretical orientation and the social justice commitments of both feminist and social welfare research (Gingeri, Wahab, & Anderson-Nathe, 2010; Emmel, 2013).

While this is not a population-based study and was not intended to generalize to a larger community of interest, it was important to reflect a diversity of experiences. Thus, the stratified purposive sampling strategy aimed for heterogeneity of experiences within bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals (Tedlie & Yu, 2007). Given that aim and guidance from previous research (McCormack, Adams, & Anderson, 2013), towards the end of recruitment, I began selecting for

underrepresented cases (e.g., never attended higher education institution; non-white) to ensure that the results reflected a multiplicity of experiences.

Historically, this study group has been difficult to recruit. However we found that not to be the case given that 65 people contacted us and 15 participants enrolled in the study within the 3-month recruitment window (McCormick, Adams, & Anderson, 2013; Brewster & Moradi, 2010). The study recruited a diverse sample in terms of race and ethnicity, country of origin, class background, educational attainment, geographic location, upbringing (urban vs. rural, for example), religiosity in childhood, and current identification as “having a disability.” A detailed description of the sample is presented in Table 1 below.

Given that this study was originally “only” about sexuality identity development (with gender being a significant part of the interview guide, but not a major research question), we initially recruited men who identified as non-monosexual, anticipating that we would have trouble recruiting generally and would not get many inquiries from trans masculine individuals. However, early recruitment experiences suggested that many informants identified as trans masculine. Recruitment was an ongoing process, occurring during data collection and analyses as is the convention with inductive methods. Because the first two participants were trans masculine, it became clear that the study aims would need to be modified to reflect the critical importance of gender in the experiences of participants. Thus, we began recruiting for a sample that was relatively equally split, based upon gender identity and expression (cis and trans masculine) as the most important variable for heterogeneity.

## **Eligibility**

Interested participants were directed to contact the study team via an encrypted phone number (using Google Voice) to ensure confidentiality and were asked a series of screening questions to assure that they met the study criteria. If they met the criteria, the study team then informed them about the goals of the study, including timeline and expectations for their participation, confidentiality assurances, risks and benefits, and other approved IRB guidelines and requirements for the study. If participants consented to join the study, a unique identifier was created before their confidential, in-person interviews. All but one interview took place in a private office at the UW School of Social Work to ensure safety and confidentiality for researchers and participants. One interview took place in a private room at a local public library as requested by a participant.

Eligibility requirements included the following: (a) 18-30 years old, (b) cis men or trans masculine and/or masculine leaning or identifying, (c) comfortable expressing oneself orally in English for up to 90 minutes, and (d) self-identify as non-monosexual (bisexual, pansexual, queer) at the time of the interview.

The eligibility criteria were deliberately open and ambiguous given the study's theoretical underpinnings. Gender and sexual identities are relational, contextual, and fluid in nature and may have changed from participants past or may change in the future. Because of this, participants may have chosen to identify their sexuality in other ways earlier in life; for the purposes of this study, they must have identified as non-monosexual during the phone screening, which was typically conducted 1 day to 2 weeks prior to the first interview. Similarly, while participants may have identified, been

assigned, or presented as other genders in the past, for the purposes of this study, they must have identified as cis men or trans masculine during the phone screening.

Table 1:  
*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Cis/ Trans	College Y/N; Now Y/N	Geography	Social Class	Religiosity Y/N
Jordan	24	Korean	Trans	Y; N	Urban/ Suburban	Poor	N
Chauncey	22	White	Trans	Y; Y	Suburban	Upper Middle	Y
Liam	21	White	Cis	Y; Y	Suburban	Middle	Y
Collin	19	Black/White	Cis	Y; N	Suburban	Middle/ Upper Middle	
Daniel	20	White	Cis	Y; Y	Rural/ Urban	Middle/ Lower Middle	Y
Andre	20	Black	Cis	N; N	Urban/ Suburban	Poor	Y
Eli	26	White	Cis	Y; N	Suburban		
Kerrion	19	Black	Cis	Y; Y	Urban	Middle	N
Chadwick	19	White	Trans	Y; Y	Rural	Lower Middle/ Middle	N
Fabian	18	White	Cis	Y; Y	Suburban/ Urban	Upper	N
Montell	25	White	Trans	N; N	Urban/ Suburban	Working	
Shelton	18	Chinese	Cis	Y; Y	Urban	Middle	N
Miles	29	White	Trans	N; N	Urban	Working / Middle/ Upper	Y
Joaquin	22	Latino/ (White Passing)	Cis	Y; Y	Rural/ Suburban	Upper Middle	Y
Sean	19	Korean American	Trans	Y; Y	Suburban	Working / Middle	Y

All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

The study sample consisted of 15 participants, nine cisgender and six masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer people. Two of the study participants were over 25 years old, while the remaining 13 were 25 years and under.

Highlights of this sample include having both cis and trans masculine participants, variability in age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, work experience, social class, geographical environment, and differing cultural groups that participants reported an affinity with in childhood (e.g., religious affiliations, cultural traditions).

This study was originally conceived as a study about sexuality identity development in bisexual men. Given that the theoretical framing and cisheteronormative context of this study acknowledges the ways in which hegemonic masculinity norms structure sexuality, and also given that this sample includes cis and trans masculine individuals, it was critical that gender identity, expression, and socialization was substantially explored in the interviews. As discussed in more length in the section below, the interview guides were worked and re-worked to ensure that questions comprehensively explored participants' experiences of gender as well as sexuality, given their intimate connections with one another.

## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Interviews**

This study is exploratory, intended to identify and connect themes that are related to sexual and gender identity development. All methods in the interview process aligned with my feminist epistemological and methodological commitments, and I think elicited rich, reflective, meaningful data. Phenomenological interviews were the primary

method of data collection. Phenomenological interviewing is a common method used in identity-related research and provides a rich platform with which to “deep dive” into participant experiences (Smith & Flowers, 2009). The phenomenological interview method was chosen for its strength in conveying deep insight and understanding of the meaning that participants make of their experiences (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology, as a philosophical orientation, assumes that the researcher is intimately implicated in the research; instead of “bracketing” and setting aside biases and assumptions, they are explicated and integrated throughout the reading of the study and particularly in the findings (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Dewitt & Ploeg, 2006). Furthermore, science is often concerned with “doing no harm,” which goes without saying as an imperative in the research design. In recent years, researchers have concluded that partaking in research can be a potentially therapeutic opportunity (Murray, 2003; Rossetto, 2014). Using the phenomenological method of data collection, the design and content of the interviews themselves were planned in this spirit.

Study participation involved completing two 40- to 150-minute interviews. Given time constraints and an interest in exploring concepts more in depth, some participants completed three interviews. The first interview began with rapport-building with participants, which included chatting about participants’ days or where they had just come from or their trip getting to the interview (a clinical strategy to gather information about participants’ possible mood state). This step also included offering snacks and drinks to the participant, paying them for their participation, and then moving to the interview space. Each step in the interview process was reviewed with participants, including after consent, engaging in a few somatic practices, then talking briefly about

the interview topics. The interview then proceeded with review of and attaining written consent. Informed by feminist embodiment theories and clinical neuropsychological, psychological, and arts-based literature, two specific somatic practices were explained and informants were invited to participate in them with me. These practices were a 1 minute “quiet sit” and an active partner activity. Broadly, these evidence-based practices were intended for both myself and the participant to (a) deliberately make important the interview space as a time for presence around our current experience (create “bounds” in beginning and ending the session together), (b) support awareness of sensations in the body as an important source of information about experience and integral to knowing and expressing “the self” (Winnicott, 1956; Damasio, 1999; Cope, 2018), (c) encourage empathy and attunement between the two of us (McNeill, 1997; Tronick 2007; 2011; van der Kolk, 2014; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004), and (d) support or “bring online” the safety system in the brain that enables the executive functions such as self-reflection, awareness, and the capacity to regulate emotions and manage relationships to be accessible (Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014). These are all critical to support participants’ capacity to both trust me and their own ability to reflect on the *totality* of their experiences, and to comfortably and effectively express them in the interview. As well, connecting with the body is a critical and woefully underutilized resource to access memory.

Psychoneuroanatomy, neurobiology, and the science of epigenetics have taught us that memory resides not just in the “mind” disconnected from the body (where narrative research has exclusively relied), but rather in the cells and neuropathways throughout the body-mind (Cope, 2018; Kreiger et al., 2005; Yehuda & Bierer, 2009; Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014). As Steven Cope (2018) has reminded us, “[t]he skin, the muscles,

and the nervous system all record and hold exact memories of how we were touched held, and soothed—or traumatized and frightened—from the moment of our birth and even before birth” (p. 236). Further, engaging the body and asking participants to name specific emotions that may have come up, elicits a wider variety of expressions (van der Kolk, 2014). Thus, engaging the body as an imperative part of our experiences and memories would yield more vivid, rich, complete stories. In addition, the ability to attune to one another is imperative to the *functioning* of the interview, particularly considering its flexible nature, which requires me to be responsive in relationship to the participants’ utterances, mood states, comfort, capacities, and so on. Historian William McNeill (1997) called this “muscular bonding.” Insights from other fields, and specifically research and therapeutic interventions based in interpersonal neurobiology, support this approach (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2001; Ogden, Minton, Pain, Siegel, & van der Kolk, 2006).

This body engagement and interpersonal attunement continued via the somatic partner activity, which involved holding a dowel on one finger between us and moving about the room (explained further in Appendix A), provided a space for me to open up a conversation about other important elements of interview studies based in assumptions of critical inquiry, embodiment, and feminist methodologies: (a) further rapport and empathy building (movement with another builds attunement and synchrony, important for the interview process [Berrol, 2006; Cirelli, Einarson, & Trainor, 2014]); (b) a spring board to discuss the assumptions that they have about “what this will look like” or what we will talk about or who I am or who they are, and so on, coming into this; (c) participants get to “tune into” their own capacities and choose their own boundaries for this study and everything is voluntary (for example, during the dowel activity, when

asked to try to turn around, most participants complied and two participants said “no.” In debriefing the practice, I then used that request as an opportunity to note boundary setting around what they chose to share and not); (d) provide an opportunity to experientially explore the space where the interview would be taking place, which can further support safety and comfort, both helpful as possibly therapeutic and also eliciting more data (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010); and (e) deliberately try to minimize power discrepancies and amplify the co-construction of knowledge: that we are “in this together.” Even as I recognize that it is my words that get put on the page, I am committed to making meaning together and transparency, and making clear that participants can ask anything, correct me or go back to some other point in the interview at any time.

Following the somatic practices, the first interviews commenced with introducing the “stim toys” and art materials that were available for participants to use freely during the interviews. The use of these materials has been well documented to calm the nervous system and can allow for greater ease, comfort, and expression, particularly when discussing sensitive topics (Landreth, 2011; Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). I then proceeded by asking participants what pronouns they would like for me to use (this was asked at the beginning of each subsequent interview as well). I developed open-ended questions, informed by previous research and consultation with advisers and key informants identified in the formative research. Questions were intended to reflect various established and hypothesized components of identity development and sexuality and gender. I used a “guided conversation” approach to interviews, which involves an interview guide, but provides space to be flexible and allows the participants to more easily tell their story and ask relevant follow-up questions, rather than following a

specific schedule for each participant (Fielding, 1996). This method also encourages more natural transitions between topics and assumes frequent prompting such as “can you tell me more about that?” which precipitates further reflection on a topic.

Interviews focused on how participants conceptualize, describe, process, and claim their gender and sexuality identity and how they make sense and meaning of their experiences of those identities in the context of their relationships. Interview domains included conceptual understandings of gender and sexuality and how they *relate to, feel about, came to know, and experience* themselves in relationship to gender and sexuality, and how those have shifted over their lives. Guided by previous research, this conceptual domain was expanded upon after a few interviews to include specific questions about relationships (of any kind) that had been significant to them in the past and how that/those may have shaped their experiences of their gender and/or sexuality. I also asked about previous sexual or romantic experiences (ever, first, significant, and most recent) and how those informed their conception of their gender and/or sexuality.

Other domains well supported in the identity development literature were explored, including race/ethnicity (how they are both read by others and how they self-identify), social class in childhood and currently (how they are both read by others and how they self-identify), geographic/sociopolitical environment(s), e.g., urban, suburban, rural; conservative, progressive) of their childhood and at present, and any religious or spiritual practices that may have been in the past or are now a part of their lives. All of these domains were explored in the context of how these factors (a) may have influenced their gender and/or sexuality, (b) influence their understanding of their gender/sexuality, and (c) affect how they feel about or experience their gender/sexuality (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Martin, 1996; Tolman & Tolman, 2009; Galupo,

Davis, & Gryniewicz, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015; Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017).

The interview then covered questions about their “outness” regarding gender and sexuality. If not already thoroughly explored earlier, participants were asked to identify “good things” and “challenging things” about both their gender and sexuality, and also peer-centric questions such as “how do you think other men/trans masculine people like you learn about their gender/sexuality?” (the “like you” terminology is often used in research with adolescents and emerging adults and can be interpreted in any way that they chose and also wording it in this way provides the researcher with information on who they see as similar to them (Morrison, 2013 personal communication)). The interview proceeded with a question intended to inspire reflection upon their current experience (and maybe something to “chew on” and reflect anew in the following interview), which was, “*what is one thing that you’d like people to know about what it means to be a \_\_\_\_\_ (trans bisexual person, bisexual man, etc.)?*” It closed with asking them if there were any additional topics that they wanted to cover and if the answer was yes, we explored those. The session ended with another 1-minute sit. Participants were asked if they would like to complete a second interview. All participants said yes, and were then scheduled 1-3 weeks in the future.

Interview two was intended to primarily reflect on the content and experience of the previous interview. It began with the same 1 minute sit. Participants were asked to spontaneously reflect on the previous interview and asked if they had been thinking about anything since then or if they had talked to anyone about it since then and what the content of those thoughts/conversations had been. Next, they were asked to reflect on specific parts of the interview (essentially going through the content of the first

interview and asking deliberate questions about if and how they may be thinking or feeling differently about that domain).

Consistent with the future-forming and life course perspective of the research, they were then asked to respond to the prompt: *If you could create a supportive sexual culture, what would it look like and how do you see yourself in that world?* They were given a number of mark-making art supplies and 10 minutes (more if needed) to create their conception of that. When they were finished, they were asked to describe their “supportive sexual culture” and where they fit into that world. This included the following questions: What feels meaningful about their picture? What about this picture seems ideal to you? What might it feel like to be in that supportive sexual culture? Where do you fit in? Why that place? What feels meaningful about that placement? What was the process of imaging and creating that world like?

Arts-based methods are consistent with feminist epistemologies and methodologies, and have been suggested to be useful for eliciting rich data in health research and research with younger populations (Bagnoli, 2009; Fraser & al Sayah, 2011). Further, seminal work on bisexual identity development employed the use of arts-based methods in asking bisexual people to draw a map of their communities (Rust, 2000).

After participants verbally reflected on their pictures, the interview proceeded with presenting a summation (“participant summary”) of the previous interview. This summation, typically 1-3 pages of single spaced text, was constructed via my notes from the previous interview, and I tried to remain as consistent with the trajectory and exact utterance(s) of the participants as possible. I was originally going to show them the transcripts and have them reflect on them, but the transcripts were too long and

cumbersome. This technique was intended both as a tool to jog my memory in later stages of the project and as a form of member checking (essentially a condensed summary of the transcript/our interactions from the previous interview). This method, consistent with feminist research perspectives and qualitative methods, was conducted by presenting participants with a summation of their utterances from the previous interview and asked for their thoughts on it: specifically, did I accurately capture their stories? Did it still “ring true” for them? Was there anything that they were thinking or feeling differently about now? And would they like to expand upon, change, or add anything? (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants once again were asked if there was any topic that they would like to further explore or anything that we might have missed. If the response was “yes,” we explored that topic, and if it was “no,” the interviews ended.

In such cases where a third interview was required, it was typically because a participant had time constraints from the previous interviews, and we still had content to explore or because, after consultation with advisers and reading the transcripts, I realized that there were concepts that had not been fully explored. Interview guides are detailed in Appendix B.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into Word by an outside transcriber (who only knew the unique identifier of each participant). Transcriptions were then “cleaned” by the study team to ensure that any identifying information was removed or errors were corrected.

### **Researcher Self-reflection and Notes**

Before and after conducting each interview, I wrote notes regarding my feelings, thoughts, things that were coming up for me and so on. This was a space for open

reflection and generally took the form of memoing, a typical method in qualitative methodologies (Straus & Corbin, 1990; Maxwell, 2012). This reflexive practice was useful in ensuring transparency in my role in the research process and added to the rigor of the study. Excerpts or summaries of these notes were useful in the analysis and interpretation stage.

### **Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Before data were analyzed, all materials (participant summaries, memos, process notes, and interview transcripts) were cleaned, organized, and standardized. I listened to all of the interview audio files as I read through the transcripts, de-identifying proper names such as people's first names, names of local organizations, and city names. All interview transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, qualitative analysis software. Excel spreadsheets and Word tables were used to manage participants' demographic information and organize emerging themes. I took photos of all of the pictures created by participants to have both electronic and physical copies of participants' "supportive sexual cultures."

Thematic networks analysis was used to analyze the interview data. According to Attride-Stirling (2001) thematic network analysis is essentially thematic analysis (description below) with the additional aim of organizing identified themes into networks to analyze and illustrate the *relationships* between identified themes. I chose this method of analysis because it was best suited to derive the collective participant "voice," and connect the inherently interdependent and enmeshed themes. Drawing heavily on Attride-Stirling's (2001) structured, step-by-step description of thematic network analysis, my analysis involved the steps listed below. Although the steps are

presented in a linear process, analysis occurred iteratively, informed by the idea of the hermeneutic circle, which requires “movement back and forth between the parts and the whole of text” (Mantzavinos, 2016). In this analysis, the “parts” are constituted by excerpts from interview transcripts, and the “whole” is the thematic network representing identified latent and semantic discursive practices occurring across the whole group of participants. These themes are all enmeshed, connected, and overlapping, such that extracting discrete themes would not be nearly as illustrative or helpful in responding to the research questions.

Steps for thematic networks analysis:

1. Coding material
2. Identifying themes
3. Construct thematic networks
4. Describe thematic networks and interpret thematic patterns

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method most appropriately used with research that aims to understand a phenomenon as experienced by research participants by identifying and analyzing patterns across participants in a data sample (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Thematic analysis is a descriptive and inductive method, which generally keeps analysis close to or as more immediately observable in the data. However, the inductive approach of thematic analysis does allow for interpretation. This analysis relied heavily on interpretive methods of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis at the semantic and latent levels. Semantic thematic analysis involves the identification of themes “within the explicit or surface meanings of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Thematic analysis of latent themes, on the other hand, “starts to identify or

examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

Braun and Clarke have noted that the constructivist approach required for thematic analysis at the latent level overlaps with critical discourse analysis, “where broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings are theorized as underpinning what is actually articulated in the data” (2006, p. 85). In other words, themes identified in data can be contextualized within larger sociopolitical discourses. Analysis of language as representative of larger social processes is normally the domain of discourse analysis. More specifically, critical discourse analysis is interested in the way in which language represents power relations. Gee stated that critical discourse analysis is concerned with “whose ‘interests’ are represented, helped, or harmed as people speak and write” (2011, p. 204). The latent analysis conducted for this study will overlap with and be informed by critical discourse analysis in that cisheteronormative/cishomonormative discourse will function as a latent context for participants’ experiences. The identification of latent, as well as semantic, themes will be informed by my review of the available literature, which suggests that bisexual men/trans masculine individuals use a variety of different discursive tools and compensatory practices to make meaning of their bisexual identity in different contexts (Bowes-Catton, 2007).

In the context of this study, sensitizing constructs include the ubiquity of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and relatedly, hegemonic although shifting masculinity norms. As well, the pervasiveness of white supremacy together with these social structures provides a framework (however unattainable) for participants to compare themselves to—many offer up the image of the “perfect Neil Patrick Harris

gay,” a white, wealthy, conventionally attractive, monogamously partnered, currently able-bodied masculine, father. This image signifies constructs and affective states that undergird their experiences: desire for belonging and connection coupled with hurt, anger, and ambivalence at the structures that may keep them from actualizing those experiences and certainly impact their capacity to *feel* them.

## **Coding**

Coding was the first level of analysis to search the texts for “meaning units” that can be organized, combined, or differentiated to form broader conceptualizations (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Padgett, 2016). Members of the study team and I developed codes after several readings of the interviews. As Padgett (2008) has suggested, we began with open coding by assigning code labels within each transcript using ATLAS.ti. Some labels were developed *a priori* based on my guiding theoretical framework and research questions (i.e., intersectionality, socialization, gender norms), while others were derived organically from emerging thematic content of the interviews (i.e., bodies, LGBTQAI2 community, stereotypes). After we analyzed several transcripts, we developed a code book used to guide the analysis of other transcripts. We then dropped or merged codes with too few cases or when a different code made more sense in light of the research questions.

Second-level analysis included organizing codes into categories, themes, and patterns. We used axial coding to specify the characteristics of each category/theme and its subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), thereby creating a preliminary conceptual framework. We used schemas to visually display these themes and the relationships between them. Schemas were critical to the network approach of this method. Mapping

relationships was important to achieving data saturation, or the point in which the data/analysis has reached “fullness,” the point no new codes needed to be developed and the themes were clearly conceptualized (Padgett, 2016). I selected quotations for inclusion in the analytic chapters for readability, handling each quotation or excerpt with the highest integrity to the narrative as a whole.

Having started the analysis after the second interview, we were also able to determine that saturation of themes had been achieved after 15 participants. This is not to devalue the participants’ stories: each interview added something new to the body of narrative, and it is true that more interviews would have contributed uniquely. However, the majority of themes were identified within the first 11 participants and after fifteen interviews, the thematic schema was exhaustive and no new themes were identified. Other studies have also shown this pattern of data saturation in thematic analysis (see Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The next step in analysis was using the schematic maps to create thematic networks. Thematic networks analysis systematizes the creation of web-like maps connecting themes and subthemes across different levels, similar to procedures used in other methods of qualitative analysis such as grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These maps are simply techniques used to break up the text and organize, finding within it, explicit responses and their implicit symbolism and latent meaning (Attride-Sterling, 2001).

### **Memo-Writing**

Before, during, and after each session of analyses, I collected my thoughts and reactions through journaling and memo-writing. The research assistants involved in this

study periodically did the same. Memos enabled us to explore the affective work of the interview process and document our insights across each interview. In this sense, we used memos as “safety zones for discovery and creativity, a place for hunches and conjecture” (Padgett, 2016, p. 155). Through the use of memo-writing, we performed a *constant comparative analysis*, systematically seeking out and naming similarities and differences that emerged across and within interviews, as well as areas of overlap and contradiction. Additionally, memo-writing served to organize notes of emerging ideas and potential interpretations.

### **Arts-Based Methods**

Their descriptions of the images that they created will be used for the analysis and reflected in the results. I will not be using any specific arts-based analytical methods nor including this data for this dissertation.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness features consist of any efforts by the researcher ensure that the study is conducted in a rigorous manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). In order to ensure rigorous scholarship, I employed a range of techniques to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Moss (2004) described the process of establishing trustworthiness in critical narrative and ethnographic methodology as a “creative art.” Braun and Clark (2006) have suggested that theory and method need to be applied rigorously in order to ensure trustworthiness. “Rigor lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way one conceptualizes the subject matter” (Reicher & Taylor, 2005, p. 549). Negotiating the tensions between scientific rigor and the integrity of the participants’ experience was an integral

component of this study. As noted in previous research, “although narrators are accountable for the credibility of their stories, narrative researchers treat credibility and believability as something that storytellers accomplish” (Chase, 2005, p. 657).

I met with advisers and the research team regularly to broaden my thinking and improve the trustworthiness of my observations, known as group analysis. Gilgun described the benefits of such collaboration by stating, “[i]f we do analysis with others, we increase the likelihood that we will identify multiple dimensions of informants’ accounts and have checks and balances on our individual perceptions” (2015, p. 744). I also used Tracy’s (2010) model for achieving credibility in qualitative research, focusing on the elements discussed below: crystallization, multivocality, member checking, and researcher reflexivity.

Aligned with feminist methodologies, the research team was made up of people with differing positionalities and experiences. I worked with two research assistants during the formative research and recruitment (Gina and Caylo). I then worked with Gina and another research assistant, Vern, throughout the coding process. We met several times as a group to talk through the studies guiding theories and methodology. We individually coded several pages of a few different transcripts and compared codes, then talked through why we coded things as we did until we came to consensus about code names and when and how to apply them, guided by my coding of the first interviews. The learning process continued; after each subsequent interview was coded, we met to discuss the codes applied and to connect over any potential conflict or questions that we may have had.

## **Crystalization**

Crystallization recognizes that there are many “truths” in experience and was used as an approach to credibility (Ellingson, 2009; Moss, 2004; Tracy, 2010). Within this framework, truth and knowledge were always considered partial, contextual, and multidimensional. Therefore, the coding and analytic processes used searched for themes and patterns across participants and also considered each narrative’s unique form and content, examining each narrative independently as well as in relation to others. This strategy allowed ideas and experiences, as well as the way they were narrativized, to remain complex while being interpreted and communicated effectively by the researcher.

## **Multivocality**

I used multi-level coding procedures that accounted for rigor, while also striving to remain faithful to multivocality—the unique voices and experiences of the participants—rather than reduce their stories to singular conclusions. To achieve this goal, and consistent with most qualitative work, this research was not focused on generalizability (Savage, 2000). Instead, I worked to preserve “the worth and dignity of the teller” as a measure of faithfulness and integrity (Moss, 2004, p. 364). This was accomplished through honoring the diverse responses to the interview questions and experiences of the research process. In the analysis as well as the writing of this study, I organized interview excerpts in such a way that they were “in conversation” with each other, allowing for divergent positions on any specific topic/theme to emerge. My use of multivocality allowed for stories that departed from others, that self-contradict and fracture, and that create dissonance with the researcher.

## **Member Checking**

Lincoln and Guba are often credited with establishing a guide for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. In their view, the member check is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (1985, p. 314); however, they provided little specifics on how member checks might take place. In this study, a form of member checking occurred when I presented a summation of the previous interview to participants and asked them to check it for accuracy and reflect or expand on content presented therein.

## **Researcher Reflexivity**

The quality of my analyses was also enhanced by the integration of reflexivity. Reflexivity, an important element in rigorous qualitative research, acknowledges and values the researcher’s role in creating knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gringeri, Wahab, & Anderson-Nathe, 2010; Stige, Malterud, & Midtgarden, 2009). Stige and colleagues noted that “reflexivity is not a matter of methodological control but about articulating questions tacitly underlying and motivating research” (2009, p. 1508).

Throughout the research process, personal reflection and reflexivity were essential to recognizing my role as the researcher. Researcher reflexivity was woven throughout the study with the goal of a genuine, honest, and transparent research process. I achieved this through “showing” reflexive practices, not just “telling” (Tracy, 2010). For example, Gina, Vern, and I were intentional with our use of voice and positionality as we analyzed and interpreted the data, weaving in our own meaning-making moments, reflections, and reactions. We were honest and transparent about our own goals, biases, and mistakes regarding the research process. This use of transparency allowed me to

provide “a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done” (Seale, 1999, p. 468) in the form of memo-writing and an audit trail (Tracy, 2010). I also used techniques similar to inter-rater reliability. Gina and Vern were integral parts of the conceptualization and application of codes. Given this, and the importance of researcher reflexivity, they wrote positionality statements describing how their experiences and identities provide a lens on the data. Their descriptions are below.

### **Gina’s Positionality Statement:**

I am a queer-identified femme, light-skinned Latinx cis gender woman, able-bodied, and young, and some of my identities are not as apparent as others. I am also a first generation U.S. citizen and higher education graduate, and low-income individual. I married a heterosexual cis gender male, therefore, rarely read as “queer” in most settings.

Growing up in a low-income immigrant community, with a Catholic religious background, my experiences coming out to my family and friends have varied. Particularly within my community of friends, often times I’ll hear “Oh I forgot you were gay,” when I’ve shared an opinion or made a comment that diverges from heteronormativity. Being socialized female in a religious immigrant family, the concept for homosexuality was seen as a sin, which made it difficult to come out to most people in my family in fear of being ostracized.

I am still not out to many folks in my community, and strongly believe that this has impacted the way my sexual identity has been shaped. The fluidity within my own sexual identity are also concepts that I’m not sure many of my family members might understand, not just because of religion, but also because of education level. I acknowledge that my privilege in not having to question the gender assigned to me at birth, and also the lack of exploration that I’ve had to do in order to come to identify as a woman, has also given me a certain amount of safety within my community. I identify as female, and I married a heterosexual cis-male – this allows me to pass as a heterosexual female in my community.

This is important for the reader to know because I am identifying with some of the participants especially around growing up in an immigrant family and talking about sex and sexuality, it is an interesting way of growing up. It impacts the way that I am coding things and especially how I am coding things around emotions, am I just coding the emotions that I think that I would be feeling or the actual feelings that they are expressing? Maybe if parents were supportive would she have had more

exploration of her gender? This most specifically impacts how she is coding emotions and interpretation of “safe spaces” for example. The relational dynamics of gender impacts the way that she codes.

### **Vern’s Positionality Statement:**

As a social worker and PhD student focusing on trans and queer communities, while embedded in the community myself, I am perhaps always considering the dual relationships I hold. I have never known what it is like to have zero personal connections to or relationships with anyone in a sample of a study I have been involved with. In many ways, my own tireless search for more insight into my non-binary and disabled identities have helped me as a researcher, as well as my more recent taking up of deconstructing my own whiteness as I engage more deeply with being German-American. I am familiar with much of the vernacular, have heard my community share deeply personal stories, which help me read into nuance that may otherwise be missed. It also means my own success, my own struggle, my own ache is deeply tied to the research—for better or for worse.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed description of this study’s research methodology. Critical narrative methodology was used to illustrate participants’ experiences and meaning-making process centered on gender and sexuality identity development and change. The participant sample was made up of 15 purposively selected individuals. Two forms of data were collected and two forms of data collection methods were employed, including in-depth phenomenological interviews and reflexive practices, which included researcher reflection, collaboration with co-researchers, and interview notes. Thematic networks analysis was used to identify codes, construct themes, and connect themes to one another. The following chapters will detail the study findings derived from these methodologies.

## CHAPTER 5 OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

*Selfhood is not an imperial possession of the human orphan. It is not exclusively human. Selfhood is more patient and ancient, a diverse intimacy of the earth with itself. Out of the fiber and density of each experience transience makes a ghost. The future, rich with possibility, becomes a vacant past. Everything, no matter how painful, beautiful or sonorous, recedes into the silence of transience.*

—John O'Donahue, *Four Elements: Reflections on Nature*

The study is an exploration of sexuality and masculine gender identity development in this particular geographic and historical location. The data made clear that the process of identity development and “identities” themselves as well as participants’ *relationships to* and *experiences of* those identities is fluid; they are ever expanding, contracting, “becoming,” and shifting over time. These results are products of participants’ social, affective, artistically expressed, and somatic experiences are interpreted across and within the semantic and latent structures in which they are embedded.

The study findings are divided into two major and interconnected themes that are presented in two chapters: ***Cisheteronormativity/Cishomonormativity: Reproduction, Resistance and Dissonance*** and ***Finding Myself: Who I Was, Who I Am, and Who I Am Becoming***. Using a life course perspective, these themes and their respective sub-themes are salient in different forms and with differing intensities throughout the life course. They are embedded within a larger “time and place” theme that provides the context for distinct and overlapping time and historical periods in participants’ lives based upon the *content* of participants’ utterances, as well as the *emotions* connected to those experiences and how they are connected to latent concepts. Together these dimensions and relationships tell a complex story of the

dynamic and shifting nature of individual and collective notions of identity for bi/pansexual/gay/queer, cis/male/demi-guy/masculine/trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer emerging adults. Of note, the term “theme” is used extensively and elastically in qualitative research. I am using the term theme to indicate the idea that both elucidates something significant about sexuality and/or gender and/or identity, and is common across multiple participants (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003).

Given the broad nature of the research questions and iterative methodology, interviews varied. The process of theme generation was based on a subjective series of decisions and cross-checking made after thoughtful critical reflection. Overwhelmingly, the study data reveal diverse and sometimes contradictory pathways between identity construction and transitions, and their intersection with personal experience. Thus, this data reflects the theoretical orientation to the fundamental nature and process of human identity: it is slippery, dynamic, and non-linear. We are both the unique and the universal, and certainly never just one thing.

...as it's finally sinking in that if gender is fluid, how can sexual “orientation” not be as well? How can you be rigidly orientated toward something that is amorphous, shifting, fluid, tricky, elusive? Basing your identity on sexuality is like building your house on a foundation of pudding. (Scott, 1997; pp. 65-66)

Figure 1. below represents an emergent conceptual framework that delineates the relationships between the key themes as multidimensional and reflective of the complexity of the lived experience.

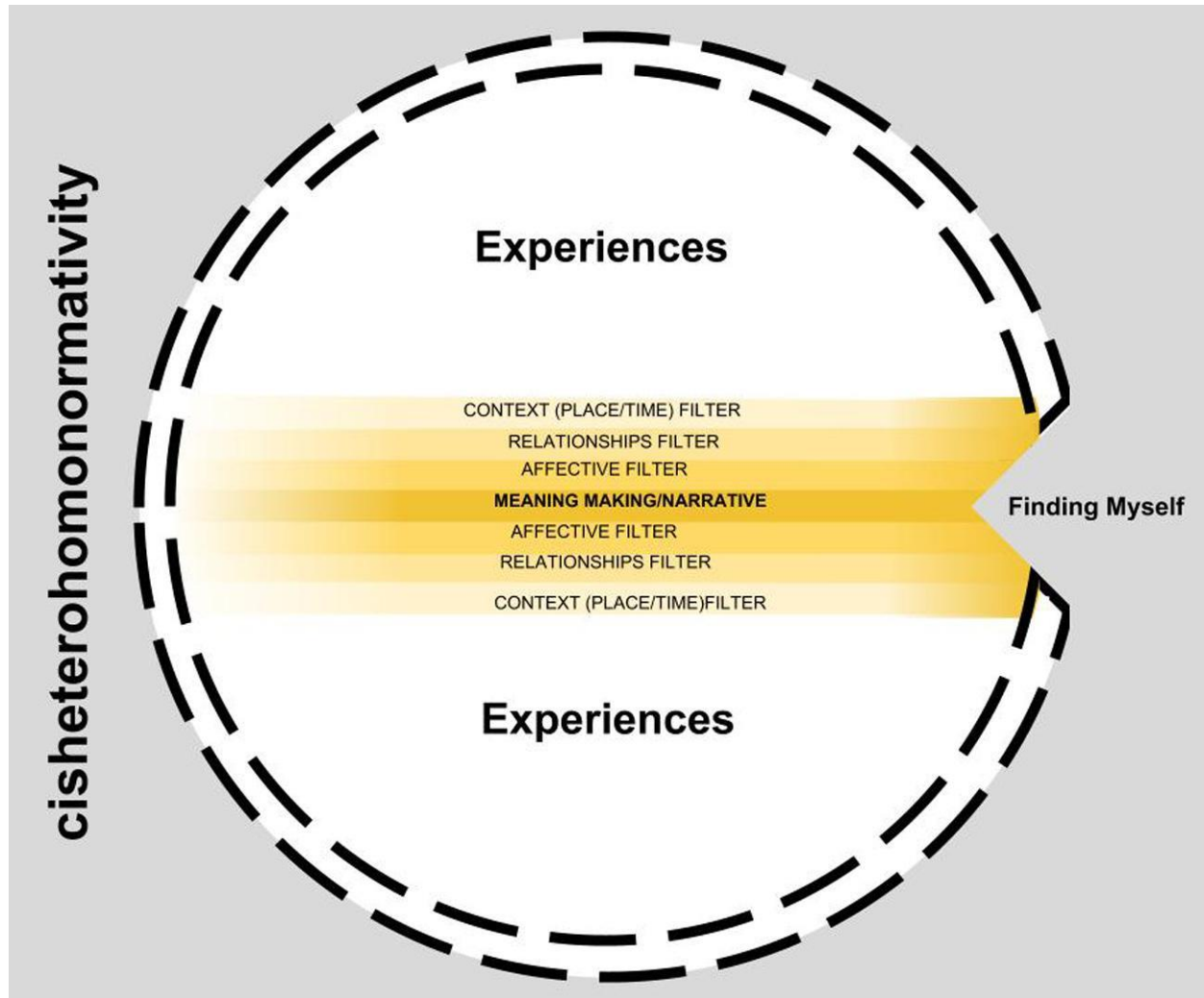


Figure 1. *A visual representation of relationships across and between themes.*

Description of the Conceptual Framework:

1. The open form of the shapes indicates permeability and flexibility and ever-shifting (not fixed)
2. Outer most context of white supremacy and capitalism (white space on the outside of the “cishet/homonormativity circle”); this is the white space of the page, ubiquitous and ever-present as to be almost imperceptible.

3. Theme 1: Cisheterhomonormativity/cishomonormativity: reproduction, resistance and dissonance.
  - a. While the context of cishetero/homonorms is pervasive, the open shapes connote spaciousness and the possibility of resistance (poststructuralist framing). The double circle points to Theme 1; the inner circle can be interpreted as participants beliefs and behaviors, sometimes they “line up” with the outer circle (reproducing) sometimes there is space to exist “outside” of cishetero/homonorms (resisting), and sometimes the lines mostly line up, but there is space or they partially line up or etc. (dissonance, usually showing up in such situations whereby they are reproducing norms, but that reproduction doesn’t line up with their integrity or they actively critique norms and also adhere to them); this dissonance is more prevalent than the lining up and not lining up, which is represented in the figure (“stronger” dissonance as opposed to reproduction and resistance).
4. Theme 2: Finding myself: who I was, who I am, and who I am becoming.
  - a. Within that wider context, people have individual experiences that get filtered and added to and interpreted by going through a series of “filters,” which they then make meaning out of in the form of a narrative. Those **experiences** (which involve experiences related to race, social class, significant life events, etc.) get filtered through **context (time/place)**, then **relationships** (institutions, groups, individuals; this also includes the importance of those relationships

to that person, thus the “filter” is both the relationship itself and how important that relationship is). The relationship filter signifies how they are *responded to* within those relationships. That relational experience then informs their **affective** experience, which they then **make meaning** out of to form their narrative. Given that their affective experiences are so critical for meaning-making (and can also be viewed as how they relate to their experiences), it was important for me to explicate that as an entire theme; thus, it has its own section in the chapter.

- b. Meaning-making is inside and in-between all of those processes and over time, the meaning that participants have made is an amalgamation of experiences filtered through these processes (shown with increasingly saturated and defined colors moving left to right). This culminates (for now, since identity is never an “end point”!) at...
- c. “Finding myself” has become more and more defined and “sure” as participants have become more solid in their sense of self. “Finding Myself” comes from integrating all previous life experiences via that process into a coherent narrative (it could be called “finding the story that I tell myself about who I am at this moment in time” because that is more accurate really). Their identity is simultaneously more defined and has more “richness” in the color and also is more open and expansive and connotes more possibility

and simultaneously less confining. although still within the larger cishet/homonormative context.

### **The Relationship Across and Between Themes**

This section will detail each facet of identity construction and shifts identified in the research. The first theme, ***Cisheteronormativity/Cishomonormativity: Reproduction, Resistance, and Dissonance*** refers to the ways in which participants implicitly and explicitly relate to cisheteronormative and cishomonormative social, cultural, and political norms. Sometimes this is actively stated, often when taking up a political identity in relationship to those norms. Participants often recognize the inherently oppressive structure and nature of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity, especially given their claim to at least one identity that is antagonistic to its ideals. However, participants also affectively express a longing to “belong” in a cisheteronormative/cishomonormative culture. This push/pull or rejection of/desire for belonging and also expressions of ambivalence and dissonance are consistent with the theoretical assumptions of the project, which support the intentional making and re-making of an identity that feels more authentic to study participants. These affective and behavioral responses to cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity are also active, strategic deployments of particular aspects of participants’ identities, often with the aim of belonging or pragmatically “not wanting to deal,” i.e., not needing people in that space to accept them for “all of themselves.”

The second theme, ***Finding Myself: Who I Was, Who I Am, and Who I Am Becoming*** refers to an awareness of and reflection upon the ways in which place

(geographic and also figurative, such as place-in-time) and culture (dominant and sub-cultures, such as church culture, for example) operate and their influence on participants' interpretations of their experiences. There is a temporal aspect to the development of identity in the consciousness about moving from their current/present-day experiences into the future. This theme also speaks to where participants were raised and the political and social conditions of those early spaces, as well as how their experiences of adhering or diverging from the cultures of those spaces have shaped who they see themselves as today and who they see themselves becoming.

*Finding myself* speaks to a self-awareness that both narrates past experience as intentional (e.g., "it was all for a reason") and points to a future "becoming" a self that participants are actively engaged in making. This theme suggests, "I've had these experiences to become this person sitting before you, and I am actively working in these ways to get closer to the person that I want to be in the world." It also recognizes the Jungian concept of "the whole self" as multidimensional, i.e., participants talk about a range of factors, elements, and experiences that are important to them beyond their sexuality and gender. In addition, this theme engages participants' desire for connection and belonging, and to experience rich values-based relationships and meaning through acts of service. Consistent with the theoretical orientations of this project, "*finding myself*" is always done in relationship to oneself and to others. Notions of community and belonging are prevalent in this theme, and a future-forming, agentic orientation to the world entails feeling supported, cared for, and having meaning to others to whom participants feel connected. Through introspection (often born of struggle relating to discrimination) participants come to this understanding of themselves as actors in a larger social world and integrate that larger social analysis into their own personal

narratives in an attempt to deliberately construct a more easeful experience of who they are becoming.

CHAPTER 6:  
RESULTS PART 1. CISHETERONORMATIVITY/CISHOMONORMATIVITY:  
REPRODUCTION, RESISTANCE AND DISSONANCE

*darling, you feel heavy  
because you are  
too full of truth.*

*open your mouth more.  
let the truth exit  
somewhere other than  
inside your body.  
—Della Hicks-Wilson*

This theme comprises several parts: doing, undoing, and critiquing masculinity; race and ethnicity shaping my identity; connecting religion/spirituality norms and personal experience; experiencing social class and coming out in the context of cisheteronormativity. The intention of this chapter is to illustrate how cisheteronormative/cishomonormative privileges and assumptions “work” in the world through the words of participants. This chapter directly addresses the structural elements that shape identity and will lay the groundwork for the next chapter, which will detail the subtle and pernicious ways that these norms manifest on an inter- and intrapersonal level.

In order to understand the power of the social world, it is critical that the reader recall the cisheteronormative/cishomonormative contextual “ocean” that this data is swimming in. Cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity refers to social norms that assume and reify cisgender and heterosexual partnerships as the normal or natural foundation of familial relationships (Utamsingh, Richman, Martin, Lattanner, &

Chaikind, 2016). Cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity functions as an ideology permeating social interactions. Yep has stated that because heteronormativity is integrated into the central values and expectations of our society, it functions as “the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others” (2003, p. 18). This also applies to “gender others,” namely those who don’t identify along a gender binary or with the gender that they were assigned at birth. Cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity is ubiquitous and reified socially, politically, and discursively, and acts on all of us, all of the time, but particularly as a marginalizing mechanism for those who do not fit within the scope of cisheteronormative/cishomonormative assumptions, namely the participants in this study (Yep, 2003; Mink, Lindley, & Weinstein, 2014). Furthermore, while individual differences abound, there are undeniable differences in the experiences of cisgender participants and trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants. This dissertation will present the entire sample together so as to not privilege difference over sameness absolutely (Perez, 2005). Distinctions within each section will be named.

The theoretical orientation of this study departs from many contemporary psychological approaches to identity development, which center individual experiences, consistent with philosophical ideologies permeating individualistic societies (e.g., Eurocentric societies) (Matsumoto, 1999; Mclean & Seyed, 2015). Indeed, dominant models of identity development separate cultural context from the individual and leave the relationship between the two relatively unexplored. As Mclean and Syed have suggested, these models often simply apply arrows indicating a causal relation (unidirectional or bidirectional) or an unexamined association (i.e., correlational)

(2015). However, in order to reach a fuller understanding of how these macro processes inevitably and differentially influence individual experiences, researchers need to examine the self in society. Narrative theory (as discussed in Chapter 2) provides the concept of the master narrative, which offers a framework for how one constructs their personal narrative in the context of a larger, cultural story (Hammack, 2008; Weststrate & Mclean, 2010). Given the U.S. context of white supremacy and cisheteronormativity, master narratives are based upon the ideals set forth by those ideologies and provide guidance on how to be a “good” member of a culture (conferring benefits and sanctions to those who do or do not conform to them) (Mclean & Seyed, 2015). Thus, the master narrative can be unproblematic and operates unconsciously for those whose histories, experiences, and identities “fit” with the master narrative in all aspects (which is a rare person). However, for many, it is necessary to construct alternative narratives that partially or wholly resist these norms (Mclean & Seyed, 2015). The results presented here are the product of the meaning-making that has occurred for participants in negotiating the relationship between their personal narratives and the master narrative.

Aligned with the theoretical framing of this dissertation, these macro structures of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity are always “working” (as master narrative) on participants, in different ways and in different intensities. Participants, as active agents in their experience, are then reproducing, resisting, and negotiating their relationships both to these norms and based upon these norms, in every context, all the time. Thus, the shaping and re-shaping of specific micro and macro narratives throughout this section should be read through the lens of the fluidity and deliberation. Inconsistencies and complexities are entirely developmentally appropriate and should be seen as an active, reflexive process wherein, even within the space of the interviews, participants

are learning things about themselves and their relationships and experiences and then re-integrating them into their existent schemas and re-working their personal narratives. This ability to not be attached to a particular “self” demonstrates the multidimensional nature of identity and a capacity for flexibility to incorporate and deploy different “parts” of that identity. The narratives of participants show an active engagement within, through, and around what it means to them to be a masculine presenting emerging adult in this particular epoch.

### **Doing, Undoing, and Critiquing Masculinity**

Participants describe a variety of relationships to hegemonic masculinity within cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity as a social system that structures their experiences across the social ecology. It is important here to remind the reader that masculinity is not the same as maleness. According to Connell, gender is illegible without knowledge and incorporation of the social contexts that it exists within. Gender is inherently relational and thus masculinity is a collection of social practices that have been discursively constructed as “masculine” and linked to men in the gender structure that positions masculinity in opposition to femininity. Masculinity refers to male bodies, affect, and corporality (sometimes symbolically or indirectly) but is not determined by biology. Masculinity is a multifaceted social construction (Levant & Richmond, 2007) that intersects with race, class, sexuality, nationality, and other aspects of identity. It is a part of the “gender project” that organizes the social world and is pragmatically a set of practices that individuals enact that is tied to cultural conceptions and norms of maleness (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1987). As Miles, a 29-year-old trans masculine participant concisely conceptualizes gender in this way:

I'd say there's gender expression, which is, like, are you more butch or more feminine? And then there is gender identity, which is, like, do you consider yourself a male or a female? I'd say what we call gender is a mix of those two.

Study participants described and showed emotions that included shame, rage, sadness, enthusiasm, and an overwhelming ambivalence knowing that they are both privileged by taking up a masculine subject position and confined by the expectations of masculinity. These expectations have traditionally included dominance, lack of emotionality (isolation), competence, and toughness, and have carried with them a narrow range of acceptable ways of being sexually (Connell, 2014; Connell, 1995; Flood & Please, 2005; Kimmel, 2008; 2018). While contemporary norms around masculinity may be shifting (Anderson, 2010; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Ryalls, 2013), the lineage of hegemonic masculinity persists and has shaped our social world. Their interviews illustrated this ambivalence; there are spaces of conscious and unconscious conformity, passive and active resistance, and dissonance between what they want, and how they understand and perform masculinity. This in-between and both/and relationship to cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity is particularly striking given participants' intersecting identities, i.e., those that they have chosen, such as "activist" and those that they have not chosen necessarily, but are read as, such as "light skinned black man." This is undergirded by the fundamental assumptions of this research; that we are all seeking to belong and feel like we are part of something. That dissonance comes from a tension between what it might mean to participants to "belong" (their understanding of what "belonging" looks like in a particular space) and their embodied reality or what *feels* more authentic to them. That is, both wanting to belong and resenting that belonging might mean having to conform to norms that are not authentic to them or

their experience (they don't "fit in"), and also not aligned with their philosophical commitments to equity. Or said another way, they want to "fit in" and whether they do or don't, they resent that "fitting in" means privileging whiteness or conditions of hegemonic masculinity such as emotional isolation.

Given that masculinity is rooted in socially constructed and policed, gendered socialization, Shelton, an 18-year-old, cisgender, Chinese college student talks explicitly about his experience of masculine socialization in the following quote:

...I liked little dolls when I was really young...but my father used to get really pissed off it because he think it's just for girls, and he always trying to raise me...(very male)...it confused me... "how do I do...male things?" because it feels like my actions (are) spontaneous...I don't (have a) boundary to say what things I do to be...male or trying to fit in this society because I don't know...sometimes a boy who dressed up like girl or a girl dressed up like boy, they are...criticized a lot...in society.

Shelton describes feeling confused; an understandable emotion given that gendering his preferences, desires, and behavior seemed unnecessary. Tragically, gendered (sexist) socialization is not only "viewed" (but more often occluded from view, as is its pernicious and ubiquitous power) as necessary, but also an integral aspect of child development. As Shelton's quote makes explicit, "growing up" and being a member of civil society is synonymous with learning, internalizing, and re-ifying gendered norms that privilege hegemonic masculinity and result in (as Shelton notes) criticism and alienation.

Sometimes participants challenge masculinity norms semantically in an impassioned, social justice frame, which may or may not be connected to their own experience. Collin, a 19-year-old, mixed race, black/white, cisgender man, describes his experiences of directly confronting cishomonormativity and its attendant expectations of "ideal" masculinity in dating contexts:

(If you)— are more attractive than them, but they are skinny...but you're feminine and not white. Your success rate...plummets...it has turned me so sour about gay culture in general.—it breeds a lot of self-hatred, and, for me, it breeds a lot of hatred, in general. I have so much against conventionally attractive, sexually successful, committed relationship sort of gay men... I see...white gay couples walking down the street that...have it all, and I'm like, fuck them...—the gay ruling class. It's extremely exclusive. Yeah, and it's a very emotional place...to be discriminated with the dating game and to fi—see yourself being undesirable to others—...in not being a part of that...

Collin expresses frustration with the privileging of a hegemonic masculinity and its white anti-feminine imperatives within the gay community. This frustration and his ethical commitment to promotion of more expansive conceptions of masculinity, and by extension, non-degradation of femininity were common among participants. Desiring and ascribing to more spacious notions of masculinity are aligned with recent theorizing on men and masculinities by Anderson (2010) and several scholars using hybrid masculinities, notably Bridges and Pascoe (2014) who discussed men's selective integration and performance of identity elements typically associated with subordinated masculinities and femininities as a discursive tool potentially serving to both perpetuate and occlude hierarchy.

Joaquin, a 22-year-old, cisgender, self-described white passing Latino, jumps immediately into hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic masculine gender roles when asked about how he relates to gender. Like Collin, Joaquin positions hegemonic masculine norms in relationship to (subordinated) femininity in a matter-of-fact way:

...I don't identify a lot with...the manly man... I identify most with a traditional female gender and... I...enjoy talking about my emotions a lot and talking about other people's emotions. And I do not like being closed off in the traditional sense...men don't talk about the way they feel about things.... And then I'm also very supportive of my friends and family and of anyone. I'm always looking to serve...—people and do things...being a lot more supportive.

Joaquin's comments illustrate the taken-for-granted assumption that men are emotionally closed and unsupportive. Both Collin and Joaquin use language and affect that distances themselves from both hegemonic masculinity and by extension (and Collin explicitly states this), whiteness and homonormative expectations. This discursive strategy situates them and their masculinity in a space that is more meaningful as a historically subordinated Other (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Simultaneously, however, Collin's comments about "skinniness," and conventional attractiveness mark his agreement with, or longing for, what the mandates of cishomonorms prescribe as desirable. His frustration with the racism, sexism, and monosexism (expectations of monogamy) implicit in cishomonormativity is palpable and was shared by other participants. While he is addressing dating specifically, dating can be seen simply as another reflection of idealized masculinity within cishomonormative assumptions. Collin's utterances also, however, show a self-awareness that provides a window for another affective response—one of exasperation and longing for belonging and to feel desired. The dissonance of both critiquing alongside longing for belonging and acceptance within cishomonormative culture is demonstrated as Collin continues in the following quote:

— I shouldn't be so hateful. And I literally keep myself from doing things for that reason...—and I guess my awareness of it (primacy of "idealized" masculinities) has really ruined a lot of that as well, but, yeah...—it's harder for me now to watch well-functioning, well-adjusted, conventionally attractive, white gay men do their thing. It's just—it's not that it's boring. It's just like, ugh, when do I get there?

Of note, it was typical for participants to talk about gay men as their proximal affiliative group: as a male-centered, "non-normative" sexuality that has some level of cultural capital and representation. Gay male social culture seemed to be the group they

could most likely see their experiences reflected in. They tended to use gay men as a proxy for bisexuality as the most visible and “acceptable” sexual minority group via the rules of cishomonormativity. Also relevant to this comparison, gay men feel the effects of homophobia in relevant ways. As well, many of them identified as gay sometime in their lives. However, as bi/pansexual/gay/queer men, they didn’t find belonging there either; they were often met with suspicion, confusion, and erasure (as well as misogyny). Such is the power of cishomonormativity and its exclusionary and restrictive bounds, which disturbingly and unsurprisingly reify the same social hierarchy that gay men have often experienced themselves (Ravenhill & deVassar, 2017). Like gravity, those constraining norms are working on all of us all the time. The sadness and disappointment of this non-belonging and discrimination will be explored further throughout this dissertation.

Participants also discussed their ambivalence about both the structural and personal privileges that being read as male and/or masculine-bodied involved, while also resenting gendered hierarchies. Jordan, a 24-year-old masculine-of-center, Korean American person concisely named this tension around his experience as he thought about transitioning during college:

...something I was juggling was this idea of... lean—...the fear of...leaning into masculinity and how that also...generally...means...leaning into misogyny.

Jordan explicitly names masculinity as synonymous with misogyny, which, given his ethical commitments to gender equity requires him to confront and negotiate this tension and seeming contradiction to ultimately create a masculinity for himself (that is not often modeled) that aligns with those commitments. This is a tricky and intrepid dance in and of itself, but the ambivalence and sense of both/and, neither/nor, in-

between-ness is hard to exist in because it implies a high degree of uncertainty, which is a difficult emotion for most.

Montell, a white, 25-year-old trans masculine participant shared the ways some trans people reconciled being trans masculine while not re-inscribing the sexist gender hierarchy. His comments are also evidence of the diversity of identities that trans masculine people occupy and experience.

...speaking specifically about men with experiences similar to mine, it's, like—on the one hand, it's...frustrating and sad because it's like I feel negatively about this group of people, and yet I can't help being part of that group. And that can hurt a little bit, but I think that, personally, what I do to deal with that hurt is I focus on what being a good man looks like. I focus on...listening to feminists and...being aware of relative privilege...even in transitioning, being mindful of toxic masculinity and ...not getting so caught up in being masculine that you let it make you an asshole, is how I deal with that, is by thinking real about that kind of stuff.

I'm using the phrase toxic masculinity in the sense of...—where it becomes this thing where you have to shut down your emotions. You have to be cold and separate and distant, and if you're affectionate with other men...that's embarrassing and bad, and you'll get ostracized for it, ...not following those guidelines that...cis het male culture has, sort of, set ... that entitlement...that feeling like they have to be dominant or something...

Chauncey, a 22-year-old white, half Jewish, trans masculine person expands on the ambivalence towards having masculine privilege and the connection between masculinity and misogyny in the following description of how sexism operates in online spaces:

...as someone who is perceived as...male... people will still respect what I have to say more than my perceived...female counterparts, or will even just...my name on...a discussion board, and I can say the same thing as what someone (named) Sara...(who is)...presumably female. And they'll say, "oh, you made a great point," when Sara said the exact thing previously. Or...always giving me the benefit of the doubt or wanting me to talk first or asking my opinion or—I think just having lived in a world

where people saw me as female and then now interact with me as male, I really see the difference...

Chauncey goes on to describe the ways in which he strategically uses his masculine privilege in social spaces and relationships to promote awareness and equity:

...in class discussions...even in a place where I feel...comfortable enough to share that (trans) part of my identity, I know that I still have...such a large amount of privilege...being someone who has...this masculine identity. And so I always try to...let my femme...identifying peers...speak first. But then if there is something that I think is...relevant that is being shared related to...female identities or...experiences, like, I have...spoken up and said..."oh...as someone who was, like, socialized as female... female...and now...as... male"— so...not necessarily...saying as a trans person... I think it's an instance where...it's relevant to the conversation and I think can be...eye-opening for a lot of...masculine people in the room...

Chauncey, like most other trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants is most often read as male and is afforded the privilege and power that that identity carries. As Chauncey points out, they have had the unique experiences of having navigated the world as female/femme for at least a portion of their lives, which provides them with interesting insight into gendered socialization and masculinity.

More typically, participants reported ambivalence towards maleness and/or masculinity in their personal lives. Many expressed deep disappointment related to the impact of masculine socialization on their relationships with friends and sex/romantic partners. Participants mentioned having more female/femme than male/masc friends and relating to women/femme people differently, with statements such as "I just get along better with women," "I feel more comfortable," or "the conversations with women seem to be more deep." Daniel, a 20-year-old, white, cis demi-guy expanded on this idea and expressed his disappointment in the following way:

...most of my friends are female...and most of that comes down to the fact that the—how men socialize...—it's just not open...— there's a lot of things

that are left unsaid. There's not a lot of...emotional things that go into a conversation. Usually, it's a conversation **about** something...not how you **feel** about something, and that's just something that persists constantly whenever I interact with men, unless...they're very in-touch with their feminine side, and then we have a grand old conversation about our feelings or something. But it just—it feels like, guys in particular, there's not even, really, a good way to bring up (emotions) because it's...immediately, shoved off to... the side, where it's like “oh, they're going to talk about their feelings....”

Daniel's affect was disappointed and he sounded defeated when describing this to me in the interview. He, similar to most participants, longed to feel more connection and intimacy with other men. With this longing is an inherent judgment...feeling disappointment or desire or any emotion (other than anger) challenges ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, they are “doubly” wounded in this system of masculine socialization, which (if you “follow the rules”) prohibits them from feeling accepted by and connected to *both* self and others.

When asked specifically about their conceptions of gender as it relates to them, cis participants were interestingly abrupt. Their responses were generally more brief and were characterized by stereotypical notions of maleness that centered on essentialized behaviors such as how they dressed, the absence of make-up, or the way that they spoke. Liam's statements were typical for cis participants' understandings of their male gender:

I dress traditionally masculine-ly, generally. Though my mannerisms can occasionally border on feminine, I generally act traditionally, culturally, male, I suppose...I say “dude” way more than I should...I wear... pants, t-shirts, traditionally male outfits in Western culture...I'm definitely— on the more effeminate side of masculinity, for sure, but...I don't like sports, never been good at any of them... I sit with my legs crossed...I just generally act just slightly effeminate sometimes.

Both Liam and Daniel described gender and maleness as in contrast to, but not exclusionary of femininity. This allows the spaciousness for them (and presumably

other male identifying people) to take up a more expansive and accepting masculine subject position.

Andre, a 20-year-old black, cis man, whose family was from the Caribbean Islands, also noted the “default” position of cisgender people who by definition don’t “have to” confront or challenge gendered socialization practices:

What does that term (men) mean to me? It doesn't really have a meaning. I just, kind of, adopted it because I was born with it because, I mean, I do th—I can't really associate masculinity with it because I can be very feminine at the same time, so it's just, kind of, one that I take...I mean, I dress a certain way that is typical for men. I guess, I speak with a certain s—twang, I don't know. And then, outside of that though, I mean, outside of the visuals, I can't really say there is.

Cis privilege manifests this “default, naturalized” position of gender assignment and subsequent socialization, rendering cis people more vulnerable to reifying sexism and hegemonic conceptions of gender. It is apparent that Andre is wrestling with this indefinability and liminality of gender in this quote, not only in his invocation of Liam and Daniel’s separation of maleness and its relationship to masculinity and femininity, but also in his utterances of “I mean...” and “I guess...”.

Another cis participant, Eli, a 26-year-old, white, half Jewish man noted the cultural connotations of his physicality in informing his gender and the way that it is read by others, as well as the ways in which his family influenced his conception of gender. His quote highlights the ways in which intersectionality influences the myriad and nuanced regulations that cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity confers, in his case, referring to his deep voice and physical height:

I think a lot about how I express myself, and, even that, I've had a problematic relationship...with my own expression. But I think—and the way that I present myself...—it's easy to perceive me as male, which then aligns with how I perceive myself and feel...I think a lot about my voice. I

think a lot about...the depth of my voice...how deep it goes. And I think a lot about—I think j—also, just being tall...—a lot of people have associated my height with my maleness—or my masculinity, and so I think a lot about that, especially when I'm in a room. It, kind of, just emphasizes my masculinity too...

Eli goes on to re-ify the naturalization of these attributes of “being male” in using words that acknowledge/assume a common cultural understanding that equates a deep voice and tallness with masculinity in the following quote:

Very male, masculine, man, men, all in the very traditional sense. When I say traditional too, I think of—in a way that makes sense...as I was raised...to my family, generationally. It just—that classic, traditionalist understanding of what male means...Yes...I feel comfort in that. I don't feel uncomfortable in that, but I don't give too much thought to it. It—I—it feels comfortable, and it feels satisfactory.

Gender and masculinity norms were complicated for trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer people who had taken action to deliberately change the gender that they were assigned at birth to live as masculine-bodied people. They articulated very different relationships to their gender and performance of maleness (and implicit in that had different relationships to their female socialization in earlier life). For trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants, this relationship to maleness and masculinity is critical for a few reasons: first, it introduced additional layers of dissonance given, like Jordan said, masculinity can be equated with and operate as misogyny. This is not only problematic given all participants stated beliefs in gender equity, but also because trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants had negotiated the majority of their lives as female/femme people. Montell describes this interesting and complicated relationship in the following way:

...I'd like to clarify...-while I do use words like socialization and stuff like that, I don't think that transmen are immune to developing those ideas.

Just because...we're not socialized from birth (with)...--fucked up notions of masculinity in mind, we're still internalizing messages about what it means to be a man, and so that's why even men like me who don't pass at all...develop a little bit of a sense of male privilege.

Yeah. That's a—you know, that's hotly contested. I—there's all sorts of arguments about it...but...here's the thing: Even if we're trained to behave a certain way from birth, if I'm thinking of myself as I'm a man and I see a message that's, like, men are great, I'm like, "oh, that's talking about me." And if people say something... misogynistic, it upsets me, but it's not *about* me. Even if people think it—that they're saying something about me, they're actually not, and I know that, and so I might not internalize it to the same extent as I would if I were a woman, and I think that's a really important.

This statement connotes Montell's awareness of, and desire to gain distance from hegemonic masculinity and its misogynistic implications. It also provides interesting insight into how socialization processes might operate for trans masculine people (and importantly for trans feminine people as well). All participants are acting outside of the expectations of their gender in not ascribing to heterosexual and monosexual norms, and thus the direct impacts of living in a cisheteronormative/cishomonormative world are implicated in their experiences and written into their narratives, and particularly overtly for trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants, into their bodies.

Expressing masculinity often manifests in a set of practices performed in relationship to others. Interactionist approaches to gender theorized this masculinity performance in asserting gender as a "meta construct," or variable that interacts across all levels of social ecology and cannot be sufficiently understood outside of sociocultural forces that shape identity, attitudes, and behaviors across all levels (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009). As such, behaviors may be compensatory strategies to construct or

maintain a valued identity, such as an emerging adult man engaging in sexual aggression or homophobic commentary to avoid being perceived as effeminate. Eli exemplifies this self-conscious masculine performance and his ambivalence in the following quote:

...(I performed masculinity)...to avoid being called faggot, which was, like, a word that I heard a lot. I think it was also to provide comfort to my parents...— I was really good at baseball, but...I hated everything about it except the actual playing of it...just the inherent associated...masculinity in...sports culture...it never felt right...when I got dropped off at practice...it felt like a performance. Like, I had to...prepare. I remember on the car rides there...preparing...holding in things and then...going out there...it never was enough to...be super happy and thriving...but it was enough to survive...

Eli's use of "performance" is apt. Famously coined by feminist scholar Judith Butler (1984), masculine performativity manifests across social spaces. In Eli's example it was aligned with hegemonic constructions, specifically, being good at sports and "holding in" emotions. At closer inspection, it also represents a more subtle expectation, that by performing norms of masculinity he was doing his parents a favor by "providing them comfort." This comment assumes that having and expressing emotions is problematic (which they are if one is adhering strictly to gender norms) and that others need to be protected from them. Masculine performativity naturally plays out in the ubiquitous "hot spot" of performative cultural spaces, social media. Andre discusses his anxiety around this gender performance on Twitter around the time that he realized and named his bisexuality:

...Like my tone...especially when I'm around those people (some in-person friends), I would always try to put on a super, what I thought was, heterosexual facade so that they wouldn't have any question about it, and then I could do whatever I wanted on Twitter, and they would just take it as, "oh, that's just how he is," which is how they see me now; "that's just how he is."

Some trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants complicated the regressive tone of historical interactionist traditions. For some, performing masculinity was far more about their own comfort and self-efficacy rather than being deployed exclusively to build solidarity with other men (Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 2008). Chadwick, a 19-year-old, white, trans man shared how masculinity influenced both his sexuality and his *experience* of his sexuality and gender (i.e., his *feelings towards* and *interpretations of* his sexuality and gender) in the following quote:

I've found that...I like being the man of the relationship...that classic, ... holding open doors and this very... 1960s ideal.—I don't know if this is going to be a bit TMI, but...in sexual positioning... just, sort of...having that...masculinity connect all throughout it...that traditional masculinity connect all throughout it, is really validating. And so—...I really enjoy...being in a relationship with...someone else who is masculine-leaning. They are still nonbinary, and they are still androgynous, but...they are masculine-leaning, and so it just feels really, really good to be not necessarily a man in a relationship with another man, but a man in a relationship with someone else who is masculine.

Chadwick describes a *felt sense* of masculinity experienced via feelings, emotions, and/or sensations *in the body*. This is most apparent for participants who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). For most trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer respondents, the practice of “figuring out” their sexuality started with “figuring out” their gender; which meant feeling into the information provided by the body, meaning sensations, emotions, an affective and corporeal sense of the self as male and/or masculine. This inner knowing can be difficult to access given Eurocentric epistemological orientations that dismiss the body and privilege the mind. Supported by feminist theories as well as the principle of organicity discussed in the theory chapter of this dissertation, connection to an inner felt sense appeared integral for trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants to

understand and communicate their masculine gender identity and expression. Multiple participants shared Chadwick's experiences, connoting *feeling* and the *body* as places of knowing and being:

I mean, I feel like I am. I feel like I am... a man in a relationship with a nonbinary person, and...sometimes...the labels, like trans, will just, sort of, fall off, where I don't feel like...someone who was born in a woman's body; I feel like a man in a relationship with a person. And so it's—like, it's just—that in and of itself is, kind of, new to me, sort of, like, being able to drop the trans from, like—or...having the feeling of having dropped the trans, I guess, and being a man, no if, ands or buts about it.

Clearly, for trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants, their journey towards masculinity and/or living in a masculine presenting body has been intentional and complicated. Nearly all participants critiqued hegemonic masculinity as a constraining *system* of oppression and all *personally* wanted to live in a masculine body and/or be read as such. For nearly all participants, constructing masculinit(ies) that are more aligned with their ethics and conception of self was important and will be further discussed below and in the next chapter when it will be touched on as participants describe “who they are becoming.”

On the same side of the gendered coin, participants had different orientations towards femininity and femaleness. These manifested primarily in two ways: (a) rejection of femininity and/or female socialization (for some trans masculine participants) and (b) expressions of gender fluidity. Anti-femininity is an imperative of hegemonic masculinity, consistent with dominant patriarchal ideology privileging masculinity, which has already been discussed and is important to recall (Flood, 2008). Cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity assumes denigration of the feminine as foundational. For trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants, who are well-aware of the dominant, binary assumptions of gender, they

described conflict in what beliefs, behaviors, mannerisms, and other gendered elements to “take up” as part of their own identity. This kind of deliberate awareness of and separation of self from socialization is a typical element at this developmental stage, which is further complicated for those socialized as female/femme. Montell’s utterance below is a response to me asking what would look different for him if gendered socialization did not exist:

I really don't know. I ask myself that a lot...because I think of myself as wanting to transition to some extent...I want to start hormones and all of that, (and) I think about what transitioning into more masculine behavior looks like for me, and it's really hard to pick apart what's just naturally who I am and what was trained into me as the socialization of an AFAB child. And so, for instance, like, I don't want to not be gentle. I don't want to not be emotional, and I don't want to *not get excited* over cute things, that kind of stuff...that all just feels like just who I am, and so I'm not going to try to train that out of me. But, for instance, being overly apologetic... And I'd want to train out... my voice going into a higher register when I don't consciously want it to.

The other primary way that femaleness and femininity were discussed was in the context of gender fluidity. Even while feeling more at ease in a masculine body and what that meant for them, participants further resisted being labeled within “a gender” or “a sexuality,”-as if that labeling itself were constraining to them. They overtly critiqued a cisheteronormative/cishomonormative sexual culture that mandates monosexuality and discrete, categorical labeling. This could be read both as a discursive tool to demonstrate iconoclasm or uniqueness (typical at this developmental stage) and as a direct contradiction to the very idea that they needed to “pick” a gender (and the attendant *performance* that comes with that “chosen” gender)—a political act of resistance to the binary assumptions of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. Consistent with previously discussed theorizing on hybrid masculinities, it could also be read as a strategic alignment with feminized masculinities to incur social capital. Collin

exemplified this comfort and fluidity in the in-between. He resisted the labels others imposed on him, primarily related to sexuality, gender identity and expression, and race. When I asked what meaning he made of others wanting to put him in particular boxes he said:

So much of it is just like I am an extremely complicated person, and people keep trying to throw me into these racial and sexual boxes. And I'm like, no, stop it. I just want to be every shade of gray, and I want you to stop asking questions. And if you want to have sex with me, just do it. Like, that's...my thing, my end game.

Yeah...it's just easy. It's how the human brain works. It's like, "let's just shortcut it" and, like—and a lot of it is...linguistic and grammatical. It's like they want to figure out the way to describe me in the least amount of words...I'm also trying to do that as well...trying to figure out my own definitions and trying to make it easier to explain to people.—I don't know...why anybody is trying to put other people into boxes, for efficiency and tax purposes.

Participants also talk about their relationship to this ambivalence with masculinity and gender norms with a tone of both/and, of “in between-ness,” with differing levels of comfort. A few participants were very comfortable, as demonstrated in the following quote from Collin who seemed to really thrive within the liminality and whose conception of the self as malleable and multifaceted is apparent:

... it's hard for people to have a productive conversation about that because they're so often like, “oh, well, I do this, or...I know somebody who is also” ...and...they also went through an incredibly unique sexual experience that led to who they are today. And I bet you they wouldn't describe themselves as “just a lesbian” or some—...people don't understand... the individuality and...complete malleability of it...what I really want to do is... explain the idea of fluidity in all of those things, racial and sexual and gender fluidity...— so many people now have such a hard time grasping that, of—in any of those respects, those three specifically...— especially white men, they just...don't get how you cannot just be one thing. And that has been so much of my explaining and so much of my issue with my own sexuality and telling people about it, is...I am just everywhere.

Collin's quote provides a window into so many concepts. First, he notes his frustration about the common practice (manifested from a U.S. cultural discomfort with uncertainty) of diminishing peoples' experiences and identities into discrete and disconnected labels ("just a lesbian"). As he asserts, we can and all are more than "just one thing." This reductionism is a manifestation of a collective cultural discomfort in the United States with uncertainty, and an inability to imagine an orientation that provides space for the existence of multiple "things" or identities or parts of self to exist at once.

Second, Collin expresses a common sentiment of ambivalence towards the effort in "teaching" others about the fluidity inherent in sexuality, gender, and race in this example. However, he also subtly extends this ambivalence towards himself, at the end of his utterance here when he talks about his "issue with his sexuality," as being "everywhere." As *A Course in Miracles* (Schucman, 2007) reminds us "words are but symbols of symbols," and Collin describes himself as simultaneously nowhere (as "he" *as a self* is indefinable with our currently limited lexicon) and "everywhere." Residing within undefinable space was a commonly mentioned conception of participants' own social position.

Collin's quote also demonstrates a pragmatic attunement and adaptability to different situations and capacity to express different parts of himself based upon his "reading of the room." Participants described a lot of variability and capacity to expand and contract into their gender and sexuality based upon the context and the risks and rewards that different expressions might confer. Along with their *capacities* to move between different expressions of their identity, sexuality, and gender, they also talked about their feelings associated with this kind of fluidity or liminality in expression:

feeling like they had to “justify” parts of themselves to make others feel comfortable. This is certainly an adaptive strength and also left some participants feeling like the wholeness of their experience was not acceptable. In fact, feeling like parts of you need to be strategically concealed *precludes the possibility* of being accepted for all of the myriad parts of yourself (i.e., hiding aspects of “you” doesn’t even allow those aspects to be in the light where they would have the opportunity for acceptance). Eli provides an example of both this flexibility in expression and the affective experience of bisexual erasure, necessitated via the assumptions of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity, in the following quote:

...in my work environment...I’ve...struggled with being open about my identity...I’ve shared it since day one...and I don't expect people to... ask about it, but I—the way that I get interacted with is in such what I perceive to be a very heteronormative way that I just—shut up, and I don't share because it's very hard for me to talk about. If I'm in a relationship with a woman, then everybody's expectations of heteronormative relationship come in, and then they start treating me and the relationship as a straight, heteronormative relationship, heterosexual relationship. And then I feel this need to...prove my bisexuality by then, like, playing up...interactions that I've had with men, talking more about it, acting...I remember at a previous job somebody asked me...what my percentages are...what percentage do you like men, what percentage do you like women...—and that's, unfortunately...a frame that I use when I get in those moments... “how am I being seen? ...do—I need to even out my percentages?” So, like, if I've been talking about this girl that I've been with or if I've been talking about this experience with a man...I need to counteract that (at) some level.

—it makes so much sense to me, but it's so... antithetical or so against who I am...it just feels like this calculated game that I'm doing to myself that just hurts and so exhausting over time. And so this—so then I'll just, like, suppress it, and then I *hate that* because then...it's not...how I want to be in any space, let alone...a work environment. And then I think people...take that as “oh, he's not sharing, he's not open...” and so it just feels like a situation that I can't quite win.

Eli's quote illustrates the kind of gendered, binary policing that occurs at social/cultural levels and is expressed in everyday life interpersonally and interpsychically. His distress

around his own internalization of the “bisexual burden,” and the “hurtful” and “exhausting” monitoring that he experiences from others and from internalized messages is apparent. And thus, while he is referencing his sexuality in this passage, he is also making a more general statement about not feeling seen or understood. His comment at the end of this quote demonstrates the sense of helplessness he feels in not being able to express the fullness of who he is and trust that it will be accepted.

Participants sexuality (and for some their gender identity as well) is inherently antagonistic to cisheteronorms, given that it violates the implicit assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality, monosexuality and assumes the immutability of gender (Rich, 1980; Eisner, 2013). Bisexuality also violates the norms of cishomonormativity, which, the reader may recall still operates off of cisheteronormative assumptions of a binary and hierarchical gender structure and monosexism, perpetuating discrimination and acting to constrain possibilities for more expansive and authentic expression of gender and sexuality (Paul, 1984; Eisner, 2013; Yoshino, 1999).

Bisexuality also contradicts assumptions about the binary and immutable nature of sexuality, identity, and sexual orientation (Duggan, 2002; Stryker, 2008; Eisner, 2013). Eli’s quote is an important and apt example of the material ways in which these systems operate in the daily lives of participants. Most participants named a number of difficult emotions when narrating their early life experiences of discrimination associated with cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity; however, feeling distressed at “not being able to be all the parts of myself” was more prevalent among cis participants and white participants (Eli is both cis and white). This could be because participants of color and trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants don’t have the expectation that “all of them” will be acceptable all of the

time—they have had to selectively deploy, diminish, or somehow modify certain parts of their identity throughout their lives to minimize the discomfort of others. Thus, while negotiating this dance of modulating certain aspects of “the self” in different contexts is part of being human, part of how identity is understood in this study, and part of participants’ experiences, they felt differing levels of distress around it depending on their social location. This happened even and maybe especially in spaces that implied a high level of salience to participants, such as their important church community. Andre illustrates this in the following quote:

...a recent thing that they said in church...when you go to church, it’s like going to a hospital. Like, so if you’re telling—you’re not going to see every patient in the hospital get the help that you need... So in a spiritual world, you wouldn’t go to the...church to talk to all these random church people in the pews to get help. So, like, not that I need help with my bisexuality, but...in life as a whole, I’m not going to go to them talking about life things.

So it’s, kind of, the same analogy for me...I don’t really need to come out to all these people because they’re not going to—their response is going to—I’m pretty sure I know what it’s going to be anyways, so I can just tell my —pastor and people that I respect in the church, and then, from there...I don’t care.... So if the church does know at that point, then great. If they don’t know and they deci- —if my associate pastor and myself decide it’s best to keep it to ourselves, between ourselves, then that’s great too.

Notions of masculinity are woven throughout the data (and implicitly and explicitly inform the design of this study). This section provided just brief examples of the most relevant ways in which participants reflected on masculinity in light of the research question; however, it is critical to keep in mind that the cisheteronormative/cishomonormative expectations of masculinity and “the right way to be masculine” are (a) shifting at macro and micro levels based upon context and (b) operating all of the time and (c) “work” in embodied ways and (d) “work” differently on different bodies. Participants are distinctly situated within the context of these shifting

and elusive macro structures, which they have different relationships and attachments to, and that alchemy of layered identities shapes their realities.

### **Race and Ethnicity Shaping My Identity**

Participants are making, re-making, and shifting within and around the fluid spaces in-between during the individual interviews and over the course of the study. These spaces in-between and participants' ambivalent approach to masculinity norms extends to identities beyond bisexuality (as demonstrated in Collin's quote earlier about people trying to put him in racial or sexual boxes). They talked about their experiences of race, ethnicity, and nationality and how those interacted with cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. However, their utterances were most often couched in vague language of oppression/privilege (most often white participants) or as related to other constructs such as social class or cultural context (like China or church, more often said by participants of color). Within the white cisheteropatriarchial context of this study, the importance of race and ethnicity, both as participants identified and are read by others (sometimes congruent and sometimes not), and their collective influence on identity development and change cannot be overstated. Participants described variations in their own and others' awareness of race/ethnicity generally and the influence that it may have had on their own gender and sexuality identity development and experiences. This was in fact, a subtheme with more variability in responses than with other themes. Participants talked about how race/ethnicity shaped their earlier life experiences. These utterances were also connected to culture (country of origin, religious affiliation, ethnic cultural identification), social class, masculinity, belonging, and their sexual and romantic experiences. Intersectionality is a critical lens to hold in

exploring these intimately intertwined constructs. Some participants directly addressed topics of race and ethnicity, but most did not, which makes sense given that the way in which race/ethnicity is read and thus how the social world operates is not a discrete happening. There are likely myriad other variables that impacted the ways in which participants talked about race and ethnicity, and some will be further discussed in Chapter 8 of this dissertation. Some participants reflected on their enmeshed socialization around masculinity and race. Kerrion, a 19-year-old, black, cisgender, asexual/biromantic participant articulated this intersection around the dissolution of his first romantic relationship and his ex-girlfriend's feelings of confusion given that his behavior contradicted masculinity norms:

...but it's (pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity) definitely prevalent in, like, the African-American community because, like, if you don't have...the stereotypical... relationship as -- I'm saying, like, it weighs more heavily on you because it's not only you have other people who looks like you...telling you how to do it, but you have everybody else. So it seems like there's more pressure to perform the role of being the guy, I guess....I wasn't overtly sexual, and I think that's...the one thing that really stood out to her was that. And...— I show more than just anger...I had a variety of...expressions... a typical man shouldn't... express joy or...sadness or distress. He's supposed to be, like, the rock of the relationship...

Kerrion's comments are consistent with those previously expressed around hegemonic masculinity norms. However, it is important to note that his blackness cannot be separated from those masculinity norms, which is the nature of racialized sexual stereotypes and the reason that this dissertation embraces an intersectional lens. Thus, Kerrion is embedded in a culture that valorizes dominant masculine expression (whiteness, expressed in "you have everyone else" as symbols of normative culture), although his social position (as a black cis gender man) prescribes a subordinated masculine social position within that hierarchy. As is clear in his comments, while

subordinated to white masculinity, he is still positioned “above” women and femme people. Some researchers have suggested that this pressure for or enactment of hypermasculinity could be viewed as a compensatory behavior for black men’s subordinated status (Cooper, 2005; Ferguson, 2010; Goff, DiLeone, & Kahn, 2012); however, this reading runs the risk of perpetuating subordination by not recognizing agentic expressions of black masculinity outside of the context of whiteness, or, said another way, the ways in which black men resist dominant norms. For example, some literature has suggested that black men hold more egalitarian attitudes towards gender than do their white counterparts (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Seale & Ehrhardt, 2003). Voluminous literature has been written on the subject of black masculinity, specifically, and is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The data included here is simply meant to provide a snapshot of the (always intersectional) ways in which participants discussed race/ethnicity in the context of gender and bisexuality.

Kerrion expands further to talk about how gender norms manifested in friendships, providing a useful lens from which to examine perceptions of women and how to “appropriately” engage with women within the narrow scope of hegemonic masculinity:

...guys aren’t supposed to have...female friends...either... you have sex with them or you don’t speak to them at all.

It is not difficult to imagine the implications for this approach to gender and friendships. It is well established that empathy, trust, and connection support well-functioning relationships, and that higher levels of those traits reduce incidence of violence perpetration amongst emerging adult men (Foubert & Perry, 2007; Querna, under review; Renner & Whitney, 2012; Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Thus, if social

messaging supports that “guys aren’t supposed to have female friends,” and then they don’t, it would follow that they don’t build relationships with women that aren’t sexual, reducing the possibility that they would see women beyond being people that they would just “have sex with.” I asked how this narrow conception of possible ways to engage with women relates to race. Kerrion said:

...(if you are black), it’s just like that, but just on steroids...if you have female friends, you are shamed...and if you have emotions more...than anger...they assume you are gay, call you...bitch, pussy...it seems like there’s more pressure to perform the role of being the guy, have a girlfriend, be the breadwinner... I think it just puts...more stress onto...other African-American guys because society...already...sexualizes (them)—so it’s like it’s just another thing to have to deal with...

Kerrion’s quote provides a lens into messages about black masculinity both from inside and out. His initial utterances speak to the ways that men (presumably black men) internalize hegemonic (white) inscribed notions of masculinity. However, he describes the amplified manifestations of that role adherence (“more pressure” and “you are shamed...call you bitch, pussy.....”) and connects all of that back to dominant, Puritanical notions of black, male sexuality in his subtle, yet important comment about society (white, cisheteronormative culture) constructing black men as hypersexual.

Still other participants discussed the ways in which race/ethnicity impacts them now in relationship to their sexuality. A few participants, when asked about the ways in which race/ethnicity shows up in their sexual lives described dating-related experiences. Collin described his experience this way:

--it has played into my sex life, certainly... there have been a couple instances of fetishization for my race...That's such a horrible turnoff that you are...turned on by the color of my skin. It was very strange. And so there have been a couple of instances, especially with older men, where they're...specifically attracted to my mixed race.

(They say things like) “I bet your hair is so thick and your skin is perfect, and, like, you're not—you're going to age really—and...your babies are going to be so beautiful.”

Kerrion and Collin both note a clear essentializing and stereotyping of black and mixed-race sexuality. This stems from the exoticization and eroticization of non-white people, especially in women and gay men. The othering of Collin's sexuality is in part born of legacies of anti-miscegenation and colonization, and is inseparable from violence and dominance (Powers, 2002; Root, 2004; Alcoff, 2017). Participants of color expressed initial surprise that they would still experience racialized micro-aggressions in spaces with other gay men, assuming that they might “get it” more than straight men do—but soon realized the powerful dual forces of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and the desire of others (in this case gay men) to feel belonging and acceptance. Those influences combined contributed to discrimination that they experienced “even” in gay spaces. This is further complicated for Kerrion, whose very identity as asexual challenges deeply held beliefs about the fundamental nature of sex and sexuality and further still black, male sexuality. As scholars have noted, this othering likely has more to do with the anxiety queerness raises for those who consciously or unconsciously struggle with phobias and stereotypes around queerness and/or sexuality and its connections with race, ethnicity, nationality, and social class (Halberstam, 1998; Moore, 2006).

Shelton expanded on the interaction between race and sexuality in the following comment:

My race? I think...it's so weird to see people... — Asian people to be gay...It's so weird because our culture, people who don't actually stand up, like—you can see very often people...in U.S., who are holding hands, {and are} same-sex {attracted}. But s—for Asia, it's definitely harder... It's definitely hard to tell my sexual orientation or to find a partner...people

who are in the same race or who have the same...physical features are more inclined to be attracted by each other...—there’s also culture barrier, right? It’s...hard for me to find a – {partner}. But that doesn't influence my sexual orientation. My sexual orientation {is} just there; it {isn't}...influenced by any other things outside, like religions or...— or...{my} race.... It’s—the only difference is—it makes is just...how I deal with it...

...Asian people... try...to label {me} or {I feel like I need to} try to making others realize I’m gay is just different than the way I would talk to...American people... I have this different experience in Asian culture and also in U.S. culture...{I have to} consider my actions {differently}...

Shelton’s quote illuminates a number of concepts that connect sexuality and race/ethnicity: empirically supported and experienced understandings that most people pair within their race (Laumann et al., 1994; Histch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010), and that sexual orientation, in dominant U.S. (white, cisheteronormative) culture is not thought to be impacted by race. However, this is based on a focus on mate choice, whereas in other countries and/or cultural traditions, sexual orientation labeling is focused on the *role one plays* in a sexual encounter based upon binaried gender norms that position masculinity as dominant and femininity as passive and receptive (e.g., the penetrative partner is labeled as heterosexual, whereas the receptive partner is feminized and labeled gay) (Zhang, Zheng, & Zheng, 2018). Thus, Sheldon concedes that his sexual orientation is not influenced by his race or cultural traditions, but the ways in which he approaches his sexual orientation and the “actions that he takes” depend on the physical and social location that he is in. More about individual responses to the ways in which these macro structures (e.g., race, nationality, and cultural traditions) operate within participants’ individual lives will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Other participants, mostly white, when asked about the ways in which race/ethnicity had impacted their gender identity or expression or their sexuality

identity, responded in ways that certainly relate to whiteness, but are more about “white culture” (which they constructed as “more accepting” than communities of color) and social class. Aligned with ideals of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity they noted explicitly and implicitly, that their whiteness enabled them access to resources that supported increased fluidity and expressiveness. This is demonstrated in the following quote from Fabian, an 18-year-old, white, cisgender, upper middle class participant who grew up in several different countries and attended schools with a diverse array of students of different nationalities before moving to the United States in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. His quote succinctly illustrates the opportunities conferred by whiteness (and upper class status) throughout the life course:

I've never thought about this before. Hmm. Yeah, I f—I wouldn't know where to start on this...I don't know...class has always something to do with upbringing and culture, and I think that itself has...an effect on sexuality, so it possibly has...{and} that could be applied to race and ethnicity as well...

...my parents are...well-off—so I've always felt that there were lots of opportunities for me. I went to good schools ... I can see why some people who are...not straight or not gender conforming might feel left out for some things, but that's not...affected me ever, since I've...always had lots of opportunities open to me.

Fabian's quote provides an opportunity to consider the ways in which whiteness operates across the social ecology. First, his mentioning of “never having thought about it before” is powerful. Whiteness assumes the racial Other, it is “the default”; some would argue that “not having to think about it” is the very definition of white privilege. Fabian's quote also demonstrates the material and social benefits of whiteness conferred via the promises of white supremacist ideology (i.e., white people have been able to accumulate wealth, hold higher paying positions in occupations across the board, and as Fabian's experience shows, have had greater access to high quality educational

opportunities etc.), all while “never having to think about it” (and thusly, never having to confront their/our own complicity in creating and maintaining a wounding, hierarchical system).

Some participants talked about themselves in a way that suggested previous reflection on the ways that race/ethnicity operated at political, social, and interpersonal levels. Miles, a 29-year-old, white, trans masculine participant who grew up “feeling very accepted” in his Unitarian community discusses the privileges of whiteness and middleclass-ness in the following way:

...being middle class and white, I have privileges that allow me to express gender variance that, especially if I was in a more maybe religiously conservative ethnic group or a—you know, a—maybe even if I was extremely wealthy and I had more image to uphold or if I was extremely poor and...in a more traditional community, I might not have had the freedom that I do.

Miles’ quote demonstrates the recognition of race as a socially constructed system of opportunities and constraints conferred on certain (white, middle class) bodies. Miles further complicates his analysis with the inclusion of social class-based and religious differences, which will both be elaborated upon in this and subsequent chapters.

Many white participants express a deep ambivalence about their whiteness. That ambivalence sometimes manifested in discursive distance, consistent with theories of hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) and was further expressed in the following quote from Montell:

...because my experience is the dominant narrative in our culture, i.e., being white, I’m conditioned to think of my experience as the norm. And I’m—my idea of what makes someone conventionally attractive is heavily influenced by being white in a white supremacist society, which is something I’m trying to unlearn, of course...

The unlearning of white supremacy, as Montell identifies, is a constant practice given that it is the “dominant narrative,” thus doing the work to “undo” internalized notions of white supremacy requires consistent and deliberate vigilance.

As Collin reminded us in the previous section, race and ethnicity are common spaces of categorization and erasure. As a reminder of the ways in which this can operate, see his utterance below:

...people don't understand that being mixed race is its own category. You're not just, like, half of something and half of another thing put together. You don't have to defend white people and black people. I'm, like, gray... {that is a thing about} being mixed race {that has} been a huge issue for me is—... everybody loves to guess and...has to tack down...your percentages. And I'm like, why do you care so much? ...— the weirdest thing for me is everybody wants to know which parent was white and which was black. And I'm like, who gives a fuck? Like, what possible effect couldn't that have on your opinion of me?

Collin's comment shows the limitations of a binary imagination that inherently reduces his (everyone's) multidimensionality to stereotypical notions of race and gender, which is extended to his parents. People's interest in “who was white and who was black” is a tool of categorization based on (racist and sexist) intersecting assumptions of whiteness/blackness and femaleness/maleness applied to sexuality. It also assumes that identity can be reduced to quantifiable “percentages”—negating the role of individual experiences, histories, lineages, stories, and so on. Later in the interview, Collin re-connects to this essentialized notion of sexuality and race (and also subtly connects to Kerrion's comments about black masculinity) in the following quote:

...—there's a lot of writing and work out there about the relationship between black culture and homosexuality. They have a very interesting thing going on, and I feel like there's not as many exclusive interactions between white culture and homosexuality. I feel like it's a lot more diverse. Like, you can go to Catholic white culture and talk about their interaction with gays. Or you can go to—you can subdivide it into so many –

Whiteness and white privilege makes room for a diversity of experiences of sexuality *within* whiteness. Reducing people's experiences to a monolith is another way that oppression operates. The collective capacity to *imagine* and *provide space* for a multiplicity of experiences necessitates a social culture that theoretically and materially values racial equity. Only from genuine racial equity is there space for recognition of the multidimensionality that Collin mentioned earlier of being “not just one thing” and for the possibility for more expansive conceptions of sexuality, gender, and identity.

Chauncey, a white participant, corroborates this reductionism imposed by white supremacy in reflecting on the topic of race and sexuality.

I think my initial response is to say that it (my whiteness) doesn't (matter), and then I would follow that up by saying, “well, it is assumed that I am straight because of ...white norms, but that's not really something that is more specific to the white community. I think that would be more relevant to—if I was black. I think those kind of norms are more—there's more stigma surrounding...queerness in the black community, just based off of what...friends have told me...their lived cultural experiences versus being white and in the white—gay community, trans, queer—community. I think that there can be a little bit more leeway {in}...white, liberal lobbying and...use of a queer child as... a liberal chip in community for social acceptance from family and relatives. But, those are my overarching thoughts...me personally...I haven't really thought about my whiteness in regards to my sexuality a whole lot.

Chauncey's discussion of macro cultural implications for race and sexuality demonstrates four key points: (a) whiteness occupies a default position, such that its potential impacts are not even *considered*, (b) experiences of sexuality differ based upon racial social location, (c) whiteness is positioned in opposition to blackness, and (d) whiteness is equated with liberality (from Chauncey's highly educated, middle-upper-middle class lens) such that queerness in white contexts provides social capital for individuals and families, whereas blackness is treated as stigmatizing to queerness. While Chauncey qualifies that his comments are based off of “overarching thoughts” and

the experiences of others, they provide a useful heuristic to view many cultural conceptions of the intersections of race and sexuality. As well, regardless of whether his comments on acceptance in white vs black communities are empirically supported or not, his comments (as “but symbols of symbols”) reduce whiteness and blackness to cultural monoliths conferring contrasting freedom and constraint and inherently limit the breadth of possibilities allowed within a dominant white supremacist ideology. Further comments about the ways in which race/ethnicity interacted with sexuality and gender will be presented in the following sections of this chapter, as they are related more directly to other subthemes such as nationality and/or religion.

### **Connecting Religion/Spiritual Culture and Sexuality and Gender**

Experiences of race/ethnicity and nationality are sometimes connected with religious communities and institutions. Participants spoke of the pervasive, repressive structural power of such cultural monoliths as “Christianity,” regardless of their personal connection to it. Church/fait h traditions represent a critical regulating feature of U.S. culture that has historically and continues to structure political and social institutions as well as norms of interpersonal interactions (Berger, 2015).

For the participants in this study, experiences with formal religion were complicated. Participants whose lives involved some level of Christian religious influence, all said that the doctrinaire and repressive approach to gender and sexuality influenced their experience in so far as it limited their capacity to explore namely via shaming their bodies and desires.

Several other participants identified their childhood affiliation with Christianity and the interplay between the teachings of the church and their sexuality. Andre also noted the influence of his conservative church on his sexuality in the following way:

Yeah. So they're...Adventist Christians. They're—they have been for generations, and Adventist Christian is a very, very conservative style...—ladies can't even wear...if half of your shin is showing, you have to get off the stage...that kind of thing. And so them being that way, I knew that being bisexual was going to be a problem for them.

Another participant, Sean, a 19-year-old, Korean American, trans masculine participant talked about his confusion over the discrimination, which seemed antithetical to the teachings of Christianity, that was expressed at this church, in the following quote:

... always being surrounded by people who are preaching...Adam and Eve and...— gay people are sinning....I didn't understand why there was so much...hateful, discriminatory speech in a place that was supposed to be loving and accepting.

Sean's dissonance and confusion is apparent here. He expanded upon this to talk about his experience being in this repressive church environment and questioning his gender.

...being trans wasn't even fathomable... —I mean I just felt like however I was feeling was wrong because... when I was younger, I felt more attraction to women than men...And so I felt like, whenever she (my Aunt) was saying that, I was like—"is there something mentally wrong with me?" Because w—the way they {the church teachings} were speaking about it, it sounded like it wasn't normal for everybody, and...I couldn't identify with that.

Sean expanded on this later in the interview:

I think the church was mainly the reason I suppressed much of my, like, identity or how I came to terms with it. I...started... shifting away from believing in God and believing in a church...I think, it came out of the fact that—it disagreed with who I felt like I was.

And so I didn't really think about that in terms of gender. I just thought I'm going to church because my friends are there. That was primarily the reason I went to church.

...I had to be baptized wearing, like, a white dress and, like, everything like that. And I remember, like, not wanting to go to baptism because of that reason. And...everyone around me was... having a good old time. It was a celebration, and I didn't feel that way. And I just felt, like, so out of place. Like, everything just felt—like, the world didn't feel like—I felt—I didn't feel like I was supposed to belong in that world...I think, from then on, I just felt more...isolated from church. And I tried I bridge that gap by, like, dressing more feminine when I went to church or trying to, like, fit in when I went to church. And, like, speaking about... girls gossip...and...I just could not...relate to that.

Religion and the church—as (a) symbolic of religion, (b) a physical structure which held a (c) social community—had been a significant part of Sean's life. He and his family had moved from Korea to a conservative Southern state when he was young. Feeling connected to both Korean and church culture (practically synonymous in the way he described it) was very important for his immigrant family. He said that his family “only socialized with Korean people in the church.” His mother was very involved and even taught Sunday school. Given this context, the pain, shame, and isolation that Sean experienced as a result of the attitudes that were espoused in formal church teachings about his sexuality and “gender dysphoria” (as he described it) are palpable.

Andre, who had grown up attending Christian church (Seventh Day Adventist and Baptist), and for whom religion was a big part of this past and current life, reflects this hurt that he felt regarding the dissonance between the homophobic teachings of the church (painfully conveyed via his grandfather) and the sense of connection that he felt to it. Andre's grandfather was an elder in the church and Andre went twice a week and sang in the choir. He talked about it in the following way:

...my grandfather's an elder of the church, and the pastor was supposed to be on—whom I respect and love. He was on, like, a missionary trip

somewhere, and they were having elders (cycle through)...my grandfather...got up there, and he was supposed to be talking about something else, but somehow got to {talking about}—homosexuality. And he was, like, raging against it, like, in the front of the church....for one, this is not the sermon for today. For two, like, I'm your grandson...you realize this, right? Like, he doesn't know, but inside, I was like, you realize, like, I'm bisexual. There's people here that might be a different sexuality, and you're...not helping them at all get close to God, or if they want to get close to God, you're not helping. And so being in church...—is one thing that majorly affects it or how I saw myself.

Another participant, Liam, who grew up in a rural, conservative environment, and attended a Christian school through eighth grade talked about his understanding of sexuality via the teachings of his faith tradition in the following idiosyncratic way:

...I grew up in a conservative private Christian school environment, where we were...taught that being gay is a choice, and homosexuality is wrong. Ironically...bought into the being gay is a choice thing because I did experience attraction to both sexes, and I was like, “yeah, but I choose to be straight,” so it makes sense. Looking back on it, that was stupid. But it was just an...—an assumption the kid me made...these people in power are telling me that this is a choice, and I've clearly made that choice. And the comeback people usually make to that, of course, is...”when did you choose to be straight?” But I actually did...

Of those who identified religion as a part of their upbringing, two described their family as half Jewish and half Catholic, and one said that as a child and also now, he identifies as a Unitarian. These three said that their experiences of religion/spirituality generally felt more accepting overall and less rigid than those participants who had grown up with another faith tradition. As well, they described their many members of their family as having a more flexible *relationship to* religion and/or spirituality, so that (a) their faith did not prescribe their lives/beliefs/relationships and (b) the beliefs of that faith were not repressive. In a similar manner, this quote demonstrates Miles' experience of his Unitarian church:

A lot of people in my church ended up being transgender. I mean, many were before I came out. Like, it was known—we had a gay pastor, and it was known as an extremely queer-affirming church.

The church and organized religion relate to participants' experiences of self-exploration and "finding themselves," in that for some their religious traditions were foundational to their upbringing and thus influential in the ways in which they conceptualized sexuality and gender. Importantly, given the criticality of feeling belongingness and connection, supported by myriad religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions, participants often found that sense of belonging within spiritual communities. Thus, their capacity to explore and fully live into and feel accepted for the wholeness of who they are (bisexual, some trans) was and in some cases continues to be impacted by their fear of rejection from their religion and also their religious leaders and communities (as symbols of that tradition). The phenomena of strategically deploying parts of themselves in differing contexts has sometimes been viewed as "repression" of who they are, but it also can be conceptualized as a self-aware, adaptive strategy. In this study, participants note both.

Of note, normative teachings of formal Christian religions were often in contrast to the experiences that participants had with individuals within those communities. For example, a few participants talked about growing up within a religious tradition that espoused homophobia, but their experiences with church leaders and/or friends who attended the same church were very supportive. This will be further explored in Chapter 7.

## **Experiencing Social Class**

Cisheteronormative/cishomonormative notions carry with them conceptions of wealth and social status that confer access to social and material resources (Lorde, 1984). Several participants connected social class to their experiences of gender and sexuality and gender expectations. Jordan characterized himself as poor during childhood and illustrates this in the following quote regarding gender and social class in his childhood:

...I finally didn't have a uniform, and my mom had finally stabilized herself enough...we were at one school. I won't say one spot because we were definitely still moving and, at that time, homeless. But—and I would say that, like, the money thing also factored in...we didn't get a choice in...what clothes we wore...the clothes that we got were the clothes that we wore, and it didn't matter.

Daniel discusses his family's lower middle class status growing up and how it impacted this capacity to explore, confront, and/or expose his sexuality. He suggests that there was an “additional problem” on top of his families' social class struggles:

...we were probably lower middle class. But, also, I have a handicapped brother who has some mental issues, so we had to... pay out of pocket for some people to come over occasionally...lot of our money went towards his well-being...so...I didn't really want to talk about it with my family because there was already...much more prevalent issues than myself, and I didn't...want to add on to my family's —problems

Participants' contributions are vital to a more nuanced discussion of social class advantages. For example, Daniel's family's financial stress (on top of the stress of having a family member with a disability) contributed to him feeling like his needs (to explore, name, talk about his sexuality in this case) were unimportant. Thus, it follows that having more financial resources could have reduced some family stress and possibly enabled Daniel to explore his sexuality and to have a more full experience generally in

the world (presumably “hiding” his sexuality was not the only need for support and care that Daniel did not disclose to his parents growing up).

Daniel’s financial situation was further complicated by the homophobic context of his upbringing. His articulation of the complexities of his negotiating his sexuality in the context of his lower social class paints a helpful picture by demonstrating the amount of strategic decision-making and interpsychic energy required to “make it all work” in his homophobic family of origin:

“Should I tell my family? Should I not?” And at the time, I was in high school, and I realized that I relied on them for a lot of things. And if I told them...they could kick me out of the house. I realized that I was not in a financial situation where I could be on my own. And if I told them, then there was a chance that I could not have money for school. There was a chance that I would destroy my likelihood of — any chance of, like, going to school and doing what I wanted to do.

Daniel’s decision not to disclose his sexuality to his parents is informed by a reasonable assumption of material losses that could impact other parts of his current and future life. Daniel saw living away from his family of origin as a “ticket to freedom,” and that ticket was dependent on him having money to afford to do that. Further, accruing money required him to both live in his family home longer to save enough to move out, and to stay in school (further costly) so that he could get a job that enabled him to be sustainably free of those constraints. Had Daniel had more financial resources, he would have been able to actualize moving out sooner. This translated into him putting an enormous amount of pressure on himself to get good grades and establish meaningful relationships with his instructors so that he could get a “good job” and not have to live with his parents again. This impacted his school-related experiences, his mental health, and as research has suggested, may have embodied

health outcomes throughout the life course (Cope, 2018; Kreiger et al., 2005; Yehuda & Bierer, 2009; Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014).

Holding middle and upper social class status allows the resources to be able to “perform” the expectations of one’s gender, such as getting new clothes (as Jordan suggests) or wearing make-up; all of the adornments that performing gender within a binary gendered system imposes within capitalism (Cameron, 1998). At another level, holding class privilege provides the time and mental and emotional energy *to be able* to explore one’s identity. For Jordan and Daniel, whose families did not have the luxury of that space for self-exploration, the urgency of their basic needs took precedence.

Meeting basic needs is an adaptive nervous system response to the real, material fear of survival (not a “choice”) (van der Kolk, 2014). Given that, it would follow that those who characterized their upbringing as being poor, working or lower class, had less space in their early lives to devote to questions of the self or cultivating a deeper sense of self-awareness. Or said another way, feeling financial insecurity is a chronic stressor that does not allow for the mental, emotional, and interpsychic space to engage in non-necessary activities that support deeper self-awareness, including the capacity to be critically reflective and think about the ways in which elements of “the self” relate to larger systems and structures such as gender norms: for example, the space to reflect and say “popular media teaches me X about gender, but that doesn’t really fit with my experience, so I am not going adopt that way of thinking or being into my conception of who I am, and alternatively integrate the parts of that messaging that feel authentic to me and ditch the rest.” If one lacks the space to support that kind of reflexivity (i.e., they have more basic material and emotional needs to meet), they might more easily

identify with group norms (such as hegemonic masculinity and homophobia), which would likely be distressing given their bisexual identity.

Miles provides a useful complication and further nuance in his analysis of social class in a quote that was mentioned earlier, but will be included here as well for its helpful troubling of wealth:

...being middle class and white, I have privileges that allow me to express gender variance that, especially if I was in a more maybe religiously conservative ethnic group or...maybe even if I was extremely wealthy and I had more image to uphold or if I was extremely poor and...in a more traditional community, I might not have had the freedom that I do.

In recognizing the synergistic pressures to conform to cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity that whiteness and middleclass-ness conveys, Miles complicates the “more wealth the better” notion of social class privilege. His middle class status (as normative) provides him with the freedom to explore his gender variance, a freedom that might be less available to someone who grew up in a different social class (with possibly more social pressures to perform cisgenderism and heterosexuality). Jordan discussed the more obvious ways that lower social class inhibits gender expression, and similarly Miles’ points out the ways that wealth too can constrain identity.

This problematizing of wealth is also present as Chauncey, a white, middle class/upper middle class, queer trans man talks about the lack of representation of queer people who were in the “social strata” where he grew up.

...we didn't interact with queer people because queer people, at least where we lived, were not a part of that...social strata, and if that was somehow what kept that distance between me and other queer people, my family and other queer people...disconnect between—socioeconomically, ...most queer people and then my family...{if I grew up in a lower social class} I would have interacted with more queer people...

Chauncey explicitly names the power of the organizing and regulating functions of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and how it plays out on specific bodies. He (like many other participants) used “queer” as a more general term to include trans people and others that identified as queer (which is typically interpreted as not cis gay men or cis lesbians). Given the queer-ness of queer and its refusal to semantically conform to categories or accommodating labeling and thus inclusion and exclusion, citing “queer” socioeconomic status is not possible from empirics. However, as Chauncey suggests, trans people report lower educational attainment and higher rates of living below the poverty line than cis people (Crissman, Berger, Graham, & Dalton, 2014).

Like many other participants’ commentaries on the importance of representation to their capacity to imagine, feel accepted in, and actualize a more authentic gender identity and/or expression and/or sexuality, Chauncey felt like had he have been exposed to more trans people growing up, he would have started exploring that aspect of himself sooner.

Participants also talked about the ways in which social class connects directly to other elements of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. Collin provided this social commentary detailing the role of social class in the construction of the “ideal (hegemonic) gay”:

...And, you know, I guess that whole...being conventionally attractive and white and gay thing obviously comes with a great amount of wealth disparity, so it would figure into that part of it...{is definitely} “why don't I have money or privilege in order to be my best gay self?”...Because...once again, part of that trope that's fed to you as a young gay person is...like...Neil Patrick Harris. They're in a happy and successful family and relationship with...millions of dollars...

Collin further connected his cishomonormative socialization in early life to social class expectations. The following quote implies that the only acceptable non-heterosexual sexuality is gay, and that is only acceptable if you still conform to the expectations of cishomonormativity, specifically wealth (multiple marginalized identities are not permissible):

...until much later in high school, I didn't really think of or see or understand not rich gay people...— it wasn't until very late in high school that I became aware of... gay and trans homelessness... and of the actual effects of...not being accepted by your family and being sent out into the world. I—didn't see *Rent* until very late in high school...because of that image of the ideal gay man, I truly didn't understand until a certain point. I couldn't identify, but I didn't understand at all that there could be... ..destitute, struggling gay people. I...— can recall myself saying, “have you ever seen a gay person that's, like, not living in a nice apartment?”

Collin's quote demonstrates the power of a middle/upper class narrative in the construction of idealized (or even simply acceptable) “non-normative” sexuality. When paired with Chauncey's comment above, a few things come to light. First, the difference between “queer” (trans, bisexual, asexual, essentially further from idealized cishomonormativity) and “not queer” (read cis gay men or cis lesbians) in LGBTQAI2 discourse and popular representations. Queer people are rarely represented in popular culture. When a sexual and/or gender minority is represented, it is often a gay man (“not queer”) and when gay men (“not queer”) are represented, they are rich. The empirical reality of queer people's lives is that they are more often poor than non-queer people are (Smith, 2018; Williams Institute, 2015).

As Collin suggests, the possibility of being anything other than wealthy as a non-heterosexual person did not even exist for him. This also reinforces how crucial diverse representations of sexuality and social class (and other subjectivities) are for younger people in exploring their sexuality. The importance of middle and upper-class status as

an integral part of “acceptable gayness” is reinforced at every level of the social ecology and is facilitated by the United States’ capitalist economic system and perpetrated by many, including “members of the gay ruling class” (as referenced by Collin earlier). Neoliberal ideals of consumption and domesticity have made way for a gay rights assimilationist agenda termed by Duggan (2002) as the “new homonormativity.” This has primarily centered on a rhetorical remapping of a public/private divide, “designed to shrink gay public spheres and redefine gay equality against the ‘civil rights agenda’ and ‘liberationism’ as access to domestic privacy, the ‘free market,’ and ‘patriotism’” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). This remapping has highlighted and been used to explain conflict and ruptures within the LGBTQAI2 rights movement, which will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.

Popular culture (as a reflection of social norms) colludes with cishomonormativity in constructing the “ideal gay man.” Today, popular culture provides more diverse representation of gay men, although still woefully inadequate compared to their heterosexual counterparts, and bisexual public figures are incredibly rare. In the above quote Collin talks about *Rent*, a cultural reference for several participants, and how it impacted his conception of how social class interacted with sexuality. He elaborates:

And every single gay person that you see in public is—...is somebody with severe amounts of money...I guess that contributes to that core image of a “successful white gay man.”

When asked about the influence of social class on their experiences of gender and sexuality, participants overwhelmingly noted the privilege and importance of social and geographic mobility. This was particularly striking for those participants who had grown up in a politically or socially conservative place that overwhelmingly espoused

cisheteronormative views and lacked representations of diverse masculinities and/or sexualities.

Chadwick, a 19-year-old trans man discussed the importance of social class and social mobility on his capacity to distance himself from the pervasive cisheteronormativity of his rural, conservative upbringing when he moved to Seattle to attend college. This quote provides an explicit recognition of the privilege of educational opportunities and social capital and their connection with more accepting attitudes of gender and sexuality expression and identity.

I spent... my entire life in one small community or another where everyone knows everyone else's business, so I was always really paranoid and always really, like, secretive and, like, felt I had to, like, stuff that {being a trans man} away...{And then I moved} here I'm like, no one knows anybody else's business, and everyone's too busy to care, so I—you know, I can be as...loudly queer or quietly queer...{I can} wear a trans flag as a cape around my shoulders...

Chadwick's sense of freedom is palpable in this quote as he realizes that he would not have been able to move had it not have been for the opportunity to attend college, which is undoubtedly tied to social class privilege.

Many participants who grew up with social class privilege had complicated relationships to that privilege. Aligned with Bridges and Pascoe's conceptualization of hybrid masculinities theory (2014), they sometimes took up marginalized social positions to distance themselves from cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and its expectations of wealth in an attempt to gain social capital (belonging). Miles makes an important point about the security that having more money entails in the following quote. However, similarly to Montell's comment on white participants wanting to distance themselves from whiteness and its attendant power, Miles complicates the

meaning of money and social class, describing the discursive distancing that is done from wealth amongst his peers:

I mean, social class is...a funny thing in that a lot of—especially people who come from more privilege often downplay it because...no one wants to be seen as...a trust fund kid. ...— I’m not sure which one of my friends have parents who make \$20,000 a year and which ones’ {parents}...make \$200,000 a year because, independently, they live in the same way. But there’s also that big difference that, if one of them has a crisis...they’ll have a safety net, versus the other one will not.

This distancing from the normative power of wealth to presumably be read as having less money and assets is consistent with Pascoe and Bridges use of hybrid masculinities (2014) in that it positions them as a marginalized subject, thereby conferring social capital. As Miles says “no one wants to be seen as a trust-fund kid.” This utterance does “double work” in that it positions the “trust-fund kid,” as symbolic Other, antithetical to the values of a Protestant work ethic, the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” work ethic that is an integral aspect of American Exceptionalism, and also in opposition to the marginalized (and romanticized) lower class “coolness” that Miles is specifically referencing, thereby weaponizing it as a term of moral inferiority in two distinct but related ways. The following quote from Collin, who grew up with middle class/upper-middle class status furthers this point:

...the way that I project and present my class and myself publicly and within the dating game. There have been...moments of vulnerability and worry about...how I’d be perceived...walking into a really nice home of a hookup. I don't want...to look...like this gutter-rat gay kid...{One time} I literally ended up—I was going on a hookup, and I did not expect them to be in...a 20<sup>th</sup> floor loft apartment. And I got to the door, and I was like, “fuck...I’m going to look like a piece of garbage rolling through the doorway.”

Collin’s strategic presentation of being a “gutter-rat kid,” provides him with both ease and anxiety in social situations. He explicitly states that he is presenting himself in

a certain way in dating situations (as lower social class, assuming that others are lower class as well) and also fears that he will be perceived as out of place when/if the off chance occurs that one of his hook-up partners is of higher social status. This strategic deployment of identity is typical for participants and aligned with my theoretical conception of identity. And for those who grew up in higher social class positions, this ability to “pretend” to be a different social class highlights their class privilege; this is the difference between being broke and poor for example (which Miles highlights in his “safety net” comment). Collin has the luxury of choice; he gets to flexibly present himself in a way that communicates whatever class status he thinks will help him attain greater belonging within the social spaces that he inhabits (i.e., concealing his higher class status for example). However, it could also be said that Collin has some dissonance around his higher class status or ambivalence towards it; particularly in light of his antipathy toward the “gay ruling class.”

Thus, class privilege confers myriad opportunities and is connected to more accepting social experiences. It is also possible that social class privilege allows the interpsychic space to explore one’s sexuality and gender and reflect on life experiences to come into a more solid self-conception, or the ability to be more fluid and flexible and expansive in their expressions of identity. However, the existence of such disparate social classes limits their ability or capacity to connect with others that they may be able to relate to.

### **Social Class Providing Gender Supportive Resources**

Access to the material resources conferred with higher social class was particularly germane to the trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer

participants. Many noted the importance of being able to present in clothes and get their hair cut that were more consistent with masculine norms. Miles says:

...I cut my hair short, and I was wearing all boys' clothes at that point, but I wasn't on hormones yet.

Sean talks about his Mom giving him a credit card so that he could get clothes that were "in a sweet spot" of "not too masculine..." but that he felt comfortable in:

And so whenever I wanted to shop for clothes, I had to get approval from my mom. And it was...a sensitive topic because...it couldn't be too masculine, but I didn't want it to be too feminine. And so I was trying to find that...sweet spot where...everyone can be okay with it.

Social class privilege was especially important for those who desired to medically transition. For some trans masculine people, medically transitioning is not imperative nor desirable (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). However, many of the participants in this study saw it as vital to their gender *and* sexuality identity development. Medically transitioning entails a significant cost (Williams Institute, 2015). Paying for these interventions is untenable for most, particularly for emerging adults who've most often not accumulated enough wealth to afford such interventions out-of-pocket. Thus, social class is relevant to having health insurance and adequate health coverage that could cover the cost of these interventions. Given participants' age, most of them are still insured under their parents' insurance plan(s). Thus, if they want to medically transition, and are fortunate enough to be insured under a health insurance plan that would cover such interventions, they need to come out as transgender to their parents. If one does not have a job that provides adequate health insurance (only two participants were employed in jobs that provided health insurance independent of their parents, one participant was ineligible for such an arrangement), then they would have

to pay for the total cost of transition-related medical interventions out of pocket. The Williams Institute estimates that cost for surgery alone (just one intervention among many others) could be up to \$100,000, which is unfathomable for most emerging adults (2015). Several trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer participants, when asked about how social class impacted them in relationship to their gender, discussed the material supports that they have needed to medically transition and how those have helped them feel more comfortable. This is illustrated in the following quote from Sean:

...then after I got on hormones and my voice started changing... the fact that my voice changed makes everything much...easier... it makes me feel very good.

Sean went on to talk about his family's capacity to access gender-affirming health care resources such as top surgery (breast surgery which often includes bilateral mastectomy and male chest reconstruction):

—if I do need something, that my parents would have the means to save for a couple of months, that would eventually allow me to achieve what I want, and this was the case for...top surgery. I told my parents that I wanted top surgery... about six months after I began hormone therapy...—my Dad was...looking up the dangers of it...my mom was like, “If that's going to help you feel more at peace with yourself, then, yeah, let's do it.” So they started saving up money...—all of us saved up money. And then I got top surgery about seven months later...I think, because of my class, I'm able to feel like the things that I want to achieve are actually achievable...financially. Because if I was all by myself, I don't think that...

Miles talks about his experience raising money for top surgery here:

...considering how accepting {my parents} were, they probably would have been willing to completely pay for top surgery for me...it wasn't covered by insurance. But we didn't have enough to money, so ...my parents... asked a bunch of my relatives and some of the church members for some small donations, and I paid for part of it with a part-time job. And at the time, I was humiliated. Like, that was really embarrassing to me to feel like a

charity case... but I'm glad that I did because having top surgery changed my life so much for the better.

Miles' quote clearly shows the material resources required, which were enabled by support and social capital of his parents and the church community that he belonged to. Chauncey further details the nested layers of social and material resources required to augment his body to more closely match his experience of his gender:

I was able to...afford binders once I started binding...I had a bank account that had money in it to do that, and I had...worked to have money in that bank account. But I also—like, even just to have a bank account...to have someone to set up that bank account...the steps that were taken {previously} to do that. And then I—when I had top surgery, that's...a huge financial thing...—that a lot of trans people...cannot access...I had worked for a company and saved up the money to do that, but had to have a loan from my parents in order to pay for all of it ahead of time because I was...a couple thousand dollars short, and then pay my parents those—the last couple of thousand dollars afterwards...And so to be able to have... parents who could, like, loan you... \$2000...says something...

Chadwick talked about the complexity and tension that they've experienced in trying to access top surgery. His experience was complicated by his not being out to his parents who are the arbiter of his health insurance:

...I'm not out to my parents as trans. I'm...drafting up that letter now...I have a deadline to tell them now because I'm getting top surgery this December. So it's...a really big deal that I'm...moving forward with my medical transition... I feel bad that I've kept them in the dark as long as I have, but, on the other hand... those feelings of "you need to shut up and be safe about this..."- shifted {from my sexuality} over to my transness...

These quotes demonstrate the importance of medically transitioning for participants in this study, as well as the resources required. Taken together, they illustrate the diversity of experiences that trans masculine participants had in thinking through, being responded to, and enacting a medical transition. Chadwick's affective vigilance and anticipation of rejection was pervasive within several participants' experiences of coming out, whether related to their gender and/or sexuality.

### **Coming Out in the Context of Cisheteronormativity/Cishomonormativity**

Chapter 3 detailed the significant body of literature dedicated to theorizing the process of coming out for LGBTQAI2 people. Traditional stage models of coming out assumed that the adoption of a sexual minority identity was the end point of sexual identity development, only reached after going through a series of linear “stages” from initial awareness to acceptance of their sexual minority status. These models fail to capture bisexual and/or trans coming out experiences in that they inferred cisgenderism and a monosexual lesbian or gay identity and failed to account for the duration, variability, and continual nature of the coming out process (Rust, 1993; Diamond, 2000; Kitlinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Paul, 2014). More recent models of coming out have acknowledged its continuous and ever-changing nature, and that individual conceptualizations of coming out differ (see Eliason, 1996 for a review). Further, research has suggested that bisexuals have unique coming out experiences, which differ from gay and lesbian individuals, related to the layers of discrimination that they experience, described as “bisexual burden” (Anderson, McCormick, & Ripley, 2016) in Chapter 1.

Participants in this study describe a lot of coming out experiences, which are inherently in relationship to cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. In fact, the very definition of coming out is based in cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity because it assumes that all people are cisgender, monosexually oriented, and heterosexual. If it did not, there would be nothing to “come out” about! Participants describe coming out as ever-unfolding and ascribe various degrees of importance to being out publicly, and to particular people in their lives (e.g., they might say that it is important to them to be out to their immediate family, but not to classmates).

Developmentally most are just coming to understand their gender and/or sexuality and are at different places in that understanding, which of course influences their coming out processes. For example, some participants were just starting to explore their same-sex sexual attractions (and thought that they might be gay and/or “didn’t know what that makes them” regarding their sexuality), while others had identified as bisexual for several years. Similarly, for trans/trans masculine/gender non-conforming/gender queer binary and a few cis participants, they are in a variety of places regarding their self-understanding of gender. Aligned with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, Montell connects his thoughts on coming out to performing masculinity (Butler, J., 2006). Thus, gender is something that you are “out” about as a *performance* for others; outness implies an act of agency and for Montell, if he was just moving through the world, without knowledge of the way that the social world (and its insistence on gender norms) operates then they could just exist without having to be “out” in relationship to cisheteronorms/cishomonorms.

Yeah. Outness...that just means, like, being able to talk about my gender, being viewed as who I actually am, feeling comfortable that how I behave won’t challenge my transness. Being out in a public sphere...it has more to do with performing masculinity, you know, at least for me. I’m not trying to speak for every transman, obviously. But if I were to think of being out publicly, I would think of maybe putting in more effort to be recognized as male...

As the quote demonstrates, the *coming out process* (italics my own used to emphasize its monolithic importance in historical literature), like all other identity-related projects, is influenced by assumptions of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. Montell’s quote highlights the performativity necessary to “do” gender, or specifically to “do” masculinity.

Participants noted that social class privilege, as established, another element of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity, also has implications for coming out. Collin describes how social class connects to coming out, while simultaneously conferring liberalism to higher social class status, implying more accepting political and social views in the following quote:

...I haven't personally met and talked with a lot of people that had major struggles with their—with the beginning of their gayness, so...I don't know. I would like to learn more about that...- I want to be less separated and able to—and be able to learn a lot more of those experiences. ...I've mostly met a lot—some other privileged gays.

This utterance also highlights the class divide that exists across sexual and gender minorities and how that impacts peoples' experiences of acceptance and support. In his quote, Collin is in essence saying, "I only know gay people who have felt accepted in their coming out, and those people are wealthier." This segregation certainly has real implications for the "new homonormativity" described above and thus for the cohesion and advancement of genuine equity initiatives for sexual and gender minorities. This utterance, suggests that there is one "right way" to be non-heterosexual, and that is to be wealthy, as that is the only you will be accepted. Interestingly, this could be seen as in conflict with Collin's early statements critiquing the importance of wealth (and whiteness) in constructing the "ideal gay man." This is an important example of the both/and, in-between, ambiguousness and ambivalence that participants are walking all of the time in making and re-making their identity. Said another way, all of these utterances can exist together and should not be viewed as contradictory, but as making up the complexity of human experience.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed sexuality and gender identity development in the context of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity through a poststructuralist perspective. The purpose of this chapter was twofold: to provide the macro context for participants' individual experiences and to show the ways in which participants interact with these norms including the ambivalence, dissonance, desire for belonging, and rejection, the push/pull experiences of participants within this macro context. Specifically, this included presenting participant narratives in relationship to white supremacist, cisgender, heterosexual norms reified across institutions and social practices. I centered participants' experiences that complicated typical binaried narratives, parallel to the liminality and in-betweenness of identity itself. It is within that space of in-between (which is often disorienting and difficult) that new possibilities can exist.

Lived liminal experiences can help illustrate the complexity in the ways in which different people (situated differently) experience and engage with a cisheteronormative/cishomonormative world, especially "when characterized by the kind of liminality in which borders of belonging become blurred" (Hudson, 2012, p. 81; Hall, 1994, Kavoori, 2007). Said another way, participants varied and complex positionalities influence *their relationship to and experience of* cisheteronorms/cishomonorms.

The following chapter will further detail the personal aspects of participants' lives that influence how these norms were/are experienced, interpreted, and responded to.

CHAPTER 7:  
RESULTS PART II. FINDING MYSELF, WHO I WAS, WHO I AM,  
AND WHO I AM BECOMING

*We have lived before.  
We will live again.  
We will be silk,  
Stone,  
Mind,  
Star.  
We will be scattered,  
Gathered,  
Molded,  
Probed.  
We will live  
And we will serve life.  
We will shape God  
And God will shape us  
Again,  
Always again,  
Forevermore.*

—Octavia Butler, Parable of the Talents

This chapter is devoted to participants' processes of "finding myself," i.e., experiences that participants described as significant to learning about themselves, shaping their understanding of their sexuality and gender, and integrating that learning and experience as they look towards the future. Included here are experiences that they have named explicitly and/or their affective descriptions suggest have been important. These experiences center around making meaning of difficult emotions precipitated by experiences from the past, and finding purpose, meaning, and a sense of belonging, always in relationship to themselves and their own values and/or to groups of others that they feel connected to in some way. Elements of "planning for the future" or thinking about these experiences not only as part of their present moment but also as they begin to think about their values, ideals, and lives moving forward are prevalent. Even though "finding myself" could sound like an end point on a journey, the reader

should continue to interpret utterances in the context of identity via the lens of fluidity and change. Said another way, this section could be called “finding myself, in this moment.”

Given this project’s theoretical orientation, the work of “finding myself” is understood as always occurring within relationship—relationship to systems, institutions, communities, other individuals, and themselves—and it is also always understood as happening over time. Narrative methodologies assume that one will construct a coherent story between past, present, and future constructions of self. Thus, participant narratives are always occurring within nested layers of context and relationship throughout the life course.

This project’s narrative methodology makes critical the ways in which people tell the stories of their own lives. It assumes that the content of our experiences is important, but that it is the *semantics, affect, and meaning that we make*, embedded in (and largely informed by) the rich context of relationships, in the narration of our experiences that is paramount. The intent of narrative methodologies is to get at the *meaning that people make*, or “illuminating human experience: the complexity, opaqueness, and mystery of an essentially subjective species” (Paget, 1983, p. 88). The narratives of this chapter should be interpreted through that lens and also through the lens of the developmental theories included in this dissertation. Participants are moving through their lives as many young people do, becoming aware and negotiating their own socialization, across the social ecology, and how that conforms or contradicts (via their personal and alternative narratives) the “self” that they want to move towards (McLean & Syed, 2015).

This theme broadly encapsulated an overall flavor of belongingness or not belongingness, and their stories seem to move them from less agency (childhood) to increased agency and possibility throughout their lives. The affective experience of those markers of identity development seems to be largely determined by two primary things: (a) their capacity to feel a sense of control and self-determination, and (b) finding a community of people whom they feel accepted by. These experiences are happening at the macro level of social and cultural norms within the spaces in which they are living, growing, attending school, and working. Importantly (and this is a significant factor in the meaning that participants are making of their experiences), the experiences are also happening at the interpersonal level within their relationships, whether it be with peers, parents, or others that are significant to them. This relational element is imperative to feeling self-determination and belongingness, and imperative to the meaningful relationship between the two. For example, in order to feel like we can take the risks necessary for self-determination (such as attend college and study what we want or move to a new place that would be more “gay friendly”), we need to feel like we will be able to “survive” (as belongingness is imperative to survival) that emotional risk. Or said another way, in order to reduce the space between the possible better future and the present, we need to take leaps of faith that have emotional and material risks. Supportive relationships help build the confidence necessary to take those leaps and also to trust that we will “land on our feet” on the other side and effectively integrate those past experiences into the present reality. Thus, the data in this chapter *in particular* demonstrate the notion that we are born in relationship, we are wounded in relationship, and we can be healed in relationship as we move towards

greater ease and find ourselves (e.g., construct a coherent narrative that allows us to make sense and meaning of our lives) (Hendrix, 2007).

Aligned with this study's theoretical orientation, these parts of the self are always existing in the context of a larger "self in the social world" or how one creates their personal narrative in the context of the master narrative (McLean & Syed, 2015). This chapter will present participants experiences of "finding myself" both in the context of gender and sexuality, and apart from it. This understands that all of their experiences, to differing extents, inform their conception of themselves as a whole, inclusive of themselves as sexual and gendered beings.

This chapter will be organized via the five subsections. It begins by talking about the importance of place and culture, inextricably linked to social class, gender, and race. This includes geographic place, but also the social and political cultures of the places that they grew up in and/or influenced their development. Second, I will talk about subcultural spaces, including spaces on the internet, as important elements for participants "finding themselves." Third, I will discuss the role of significant relationships, including family of origin, peers, friends, and sex partners, in shaping the affective experiences and capacity to explore, feel supported, attitudes, and acceptance of self within the context of identity development. Fourth, I will discuss coming out in its own section. Coming out experiences were included in Chapter 6 as they related to the macro discourses endemic to the institutional and social structures that shape society. Coming our experiences are included here specifically in their relationship to participants' personal lives, sometimes congruent with metanarratives included in Chapter 6 and sometimes divergent. Coming out to someone important to them seemed to be a bridge for many participants between their early socialization and a more

deliberate, self-determined life that feels more authentic and connected. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a “finding who I am becoming,” a section that will focus on participants current life and future aspirations.

### **Experiences within Place and Culture Shaped My Past and Present**

The current “place and culture” section of “finding myself” will focus on this first layer of how the perceived norms and expectations of the cultures and subcultures in which they were embedded, influenced the participants’ experiences of their own bodies, sexualities, and gender.

Participants talked about the importance of *place* to their experiences of “finding themselves.” Many grew up or had spent the bulk of their younger lives in the United States. When asked about their younger lives, many talked about the specific places and cultures connected to those places that they grew up in. Given the nature of childhood, where they grew up, and all of the elements of the environment and social culture that was attached to that place informed the “finding myself” theme. Chadwick talks about his rural upbringing in this way:

I mean, it was, kind of, terrifying...I was trying to figure out...my own identity...feeling like I'm in the wrong body, and it was...transness, dysphoria, and...— it was scary. I was raised in a very rural area where that either wasn't talked about or, when it was, it was very, very negatively talked about...my initial reaction was definitely one of, like, fear and denial, I guess, and then, over the years, it shifted to...pride, and then... general acceptance...yeah, okay, that's how that is.

Chadwick explicitly notes his fear and denial provoked by the rural geographic location that he lived in and the lack of conversations around gender. This clear, cisheteronormative messaging was common across participants who grew up in rural locations or lived in rural locations for parts of their lives. This data is consistent with

the literature on rurality and low levels of acceptance of “non-normative” sexualities and gender expressions (Herek, 2002; Preston, et al., 2007) and LGBT youth experiences of safety within their school climate (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Place is conceptualized as an *experience* that is intimately interlaced with race, gender, gender expression and identity, and social class and all of the potential resources those things entail. Geographic place is intersectional, and for many participants in rural locations in the United States, isolating. Bridging the gaps between where they grew up and where they live now, on the trajectory of “finding myself,” required resources and effort.

The inherent smallness of the population in rural locations (and typically, their homogeneity) contributes to an *empirical and felt* lack of diversity of possible ways of being and moving through the world. Participants mentioned that this lack of representation was a significant factor in being able to even conceptualize the possibility of a life outside of their homogenous environment (beyond sexuality and gender). They described a really limited sense of the world and the possibilities for who *they could be and who they could become*. This constrained worldview manifested in a number of ways and is characterized by the following quote from Chadwick, who talks about how limited representations of non-cisgender people influenced his conception of who he could be:

... I grew up in...a rural, conservative area, so the media that I was consuming was largely influenced by that, so I didn't really see trans representation a lot, and when I did, it was always transwomen. And I...didn't understand what it meant to be a transman. Like, I didn't... see transmen anywhere...was an invisible group to me...

This quote from Chadwick also makes explicit the importance of representation through media for youth living in rural areas. And it demonstrates the importance of nuance and comprehensive representation. Or said another way, even though Chadwick did eventually encounter the possibility of socially and physically transitioning gender, in his childhood, he found limited representations of trans men specifically.

Similar to Chadwick, the necessity of a nuanced, critical interpretation of place and culture is demonstrated in the quote below by Collin. Collin was born in an urban center, moved to a few other urban centers on the West Coast of the United States, and then settled during adolescence with his Mom and step Dad into a small, but wealthy, liberal suburb outside of another urban center. He describes feeling that to be gay was acceptable and that he felt safe in this place during critical time of development; however, it is clear from his quote that his bisexuality was still not seen:

Well, it's just because that's...a fact that's known about me, especially, like, in the small community that I was living in. Everybody's just like, yeah, Collin has dated a guy, has sex with men. And because of the simplicity of it all and hearsay...everybody's like, oh, so he's gay, easy, done. And because I didn't have ample relationships with women —

And so then there would be a woman that I was attracted to... And I would...go in for it or start really flirting, and they'd be like, what's going on?

Collin's quote demonstrates that even for participants who grew up in places where they felt less discrimination, a binary, monosexual orientation to sexuality was still the norm. This limited their capacity to feel that anything beyond that binary orientation was even *possible*, let alone an acceptable identity for him to adopt.

Cisheteronormative/cishomonormative notions of family and belongingness were often characterized by participants as being connected to political conservatism and religiosity. Research suggests that rural locations tend to have higher concentrations of

people with “conservative” values regarding sexuality and gender roles, including religious views that condemn homosexuality and deviation from traditional gender roles (Preston, et al., 2007). Daniel talks about his perception of the teachings of the Seventh Day Adventist tradition that he grew up in:

I started questioning myself because... I was very uncomfortable with the fact that I was attracted to that [???], and as part of my religious upbringing, I was explicitly told that gay people are evil, and I was constantly reminded of the story of — I think it’s Sodom and Gomorrah...I remember thinking I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be evil; I don't want to be eradicated for doing something wrong. And it was even — it was, kind of, like a layer on top of a layer, where... I understood that— my family would perceive that as wrong. My church would perceive that as wrong, but, for some reason...I couldn't help but feel that way, and that, kind of, terrified me a little bit because I felt like I couldn't control my emotions.

This perspective was added to by other participant whose experiences of living in a rural place were inextricably linked to high degrees of religiosity within the community and also expressed within their own families. At this point, it is important to note that for participants, there were distinct layers associated with the role that religion/spirituality played in their lives: (a) the macro level teachings of the particular spiritual tradition that a person identifies with, (b) the leadership within their specific spiritual community (e.g., pastor, rabbi, imam), and (c) individual relationships that they have with people who are also affiliated with the faith community. Sometimes all of these layers “lined up” and had consistent messages in participants’ lives and often they did not. Many of the participants *who did* talk about religion, talked about the interpretations of Christianity that they were exposed to that espoused a rigid approach to gender and sexuality. However, formal teachings of Christian religions often stood in contrast to the accepting and supportive experiences that participants had with individuals within those communities. For example, a few participants talked about

growing up within a religious tradition that espoused homophobia, yet their experiences with church leaders and/or friends who attended the same church were very supportive. I will explore this contrast later in the chapter. Participants who were involved in other faith and/or ethnic communities (such as Judaism) found that those communities taught acceptance (and included supports for queer people), support which they experienced from that community when they came out.

Political and social conservatism was not limited to rurality. Participants who had lived at least a part of their lives in a country with conservative politics espoused similar constraints. Shelton described it this way:

...In China... I would say the most devastating thing...my parents' generations and my grandparents' generations ...from their, kind of, governmental propaganda, all the information they've received, they just perceive...LGBT...and transgender people as mentally illness [sic] people.... It probably...disgusts them. So I only came out to my parents, but I haven't — and I will consider never came out to my grandparents because they are really nice people, but it's just their ideas, you know, it's very hard to change...

Like those that grew up in rural locations, this experience of lack of representation and “not belongingness” was often in the context of religious conservatism and more specifically Christianity. Sean was born in an large city in South Korea and moved to the Unites States at age 7. While more than half of South Korean's don't ascribe to any religion, about 26.7% of the population identifies as Christian, far more than any other religious affiliation (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2015). “Following the Korean war, South Koreans came to view Americans as savior, and Americans' religion, Christianity, as a source of strength and wealth” (Hazzan, 2018, June 11). This is important to note, not only for the inherent religiosity that informs the place were Sean came from and the cultural heritage of his family, but also in that it implies that

Christianity in and of itself is synonymous with “strength and wealth.” Thus Christian, conservative values were both existent in his upbringing as a force shaping norms and expectations, lauded as aspirational, and synonymous with the United States (where he would move with his family at age 7). Sean spoke of the cultural values of Korea, including the stigmatizing cisheteronormative culture and stereotypes about trans people, as being influential to his capacity to feel accepted in the following quote:

And I feel like, in Korea, there is a very repetitive, heteronormative culture, like, exemplified in our media...

Like I said before, transgender people in Korea are always seen as, like, sex workers or, like, just bad people or, like, hookers. Or, like, they always work in bars or, like, things like that.

Both Sean and Shelton ascribed conservatism to older generations and both stated that they felt hopeful as these repressive norms were changing within younger populations and with their peers. Shelton described it this way:

People who mocked, you know, LGBTQ community, they get attacked by some other comments, — for my peers, people doesn't seem has a very strong issues. Even a big portion still has, but it's getting better, the situation.

However, like most historical movements aimed at advancing social rights for LGBTQAI2 populations, cishomonorms prevail and bisexual and trans people are invisible:

... gay folks always begin the movement, and then, afterwards, we — like, the rest, like, follows... in Korea, like, gay rights is becoming sort of an issue.

Regardless of the geographic location and the cultural, social, and political values that a place represents or prioritizes, many of these quotes of place are about *finding representation* that creates the conditions for a possible sexuality and/or gender

identity or expression that feels more connected to their own experience. Participants are ultimately looking to find a place that allows them to *imagine, actualize, and feel accepted in* a life that diverges from cisheteronorms/cishomonorms and feels more authentic to them.

Other participants, who grew up in more urban, heterogeneous, and/or socially and politically liberal environments, describe different experiences of place. In contrast to homogeneity that many described about their rural and/or socially or politically conservative upbringing, those that grew up or lived part of their childhoods in urban centers described the distinct influence of representation of a diversity of ways of being in the world. Proximal closeness with diverse race/ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities, relationships structures, class-based differences, and so on allowed them to imagine a future beyond the typical cisheteronormative/cishomonormative depictions of “acceptability.” Montell articulated this in the following way:

I know that living in a city, even if I’m on the outskirts, made it easier for me to come out. I know that going to a progressive middle school — progressive-ish in the city, made it so that I could be out and not worry about, like, being physically hurt...I feel like, if I grew up in a more rural area, as other people I’ve known have, I wouldn't have been able to come out as early. I wouldn't have been able to form an idea of myself as queer and trans at such a young age.

Collin, talked about having a “lot of feminine influence” in his upbringing in a few different large, urban centers. His mom was 21 years old when he was born, and his biological Dad was in jail (his mom remarried his current stepDad when he was six), and most of her friends were single, heterosexual women and gay men, who “talked a lot of shit” about cis, heterosexual men. Collin describes his perception of how this environment influenced his sexuality and attitude towards hegemonic masculinity:

...the fact that I had a single mother had a huge influence on my sexuality and the way that I was raised around women, raised around almost exclusively women and gay men until I was, like, five or six. And so — my mom ...when I came out to her and in the subsequent years, we would talk about being gay and everything. And she would be like...“No, obviously,... it’s 100 percent genetic. Like, there’s nothing — like, I didn't make you this way, and you didn't choose to be this way.” And I was like, okay, it’s true that it is genetic on some level, but it’s also true that the fact that you raised me as a single mother had a lot to do with it. And, like — and in many ways, the realization of somebody’s sexuality has to do in my opinion, in my experience, is genetic and cultural...and at least your realization of it is cultural. And so...the absence of my Dad definitely exposed me to a lot more feminine influences, which led to a much earlier realization of my sexuality.

Chauncey, a 22-year-old, white, half Jewish, trans man, grew up in a “super white, pretty Jewish” suburban community. He described feeling supported by a faith tradition that had influence over his early lives (the Judaism of many of his peers and his Dad’s side of the family), but not by the Catholic side of his family. He also said that the class-based homogeneity and focus on appearances contributed to him not feeling supported in exploring his identity:

...my Dad’s (Jewish) side is super great and accepting...And then my mom’s side is not, and they’re, like, super Catholic. I think if I was raised Jewish, that I would have had a very different experience with my sexual orientation and gender identity. I would have had a very different experience... just are a lot more open and accepting about gay people and transpeople.

Miles, who was raised in a midsized, politically liberal city outside of Seattle and grew up attending a Unitarian church (known for its socially and politically liberal views), said that when he was young, he had confidence that he would be accepted by this faith community based upon his experiences there. Miles, who is a 29-year-old, white, trans masculine person talked about it in the following way:

...it was...an open place...there were a few trans women that I’d known in the Unitarian church...we had a youth group...it was a good support.

Taken together, these utterances of living in a rural place, and the socially and politically conservative culture that existed there, tell a story of affective experiences of repression and constraint, and formed the basis for the *anticipated* rejection that many participants who grew up in conservative places experienced. Seeing only a limited scope of possibility for a reality where they could exist in the wholeness of who they were or who they could imagine themselves to be was, for many, devastating. And for those who grew up within liberal, urban social and cultural spaces, their experiences were more mixed and often still colored with the norms of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. For all participants, regardless of the environments that they grew up in, they described longing for more diverse representations of masculinities, gender identities and expressions, and sexualities.

This next section will detail the ways in which participants were impacted affectively within their interpersonal relationships, embedded within and related to these larger social contexts. Within these larger social and cultural spaces, many participants found important islands of kindness, acceptance, and belonging, both in the form of subcultural spaces (such as anime groups or community theater) or within their direct interpersonal relationships.

### **Experiences within Subcultural Spaces that Shaped Who I Was and Am Now**

Hypervigilance is a chronic stress process and exemplifies the kinds of health impacts that sexual and gender minorities experience throughout the life course and that have informed this study (Meyer, 2003; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Rejection precludes the capacity to further explore or be out with parts of the self, specifically sexuality and/or gender identity and/or expression. In contrast to the hypervigilance

and rejection that some participants had experienced in the places and cultures that they grew up in, participants talked about subcultural spaces that they were engaged with and *the felt experience* of belonging that these groups offered. These subcultural spaces were sometimes a part of their everyday physical realities, such as theater at their school, or were online communities, and sometimes were both (such as anime groups). Some participants talked about the ways in which these subcultures offered both a sense of belonging and a way to learn about themselves, including about their sexual and gendered selves.

### **Theater helping me find myself**

Youth development research has consistently documented the positive role that theater plays in the lives of sexual and gender minority youth (Alrutz, 2014; Halverson, 2005; Halverson, 2007; Irazábal & Huerta, 2016; Wernick, Woodford, & Kulick, 2014; Wernick, Kulick, & Woodford, 2014). This was reflected in the participants who were involved in theater as well. Both Chris and Joaquin were heavily involved in theater in high school and talked about theater as a critical space of acceptance for them both at the time and in their current lives. Joaquin characterized his experience in the following quote:

And, at first, [theater] was really helpful to be comfortable in social settings and conversations and in talking because, before that, I was hardly ever comfortable. Actually, whenever I was, it was in...theater rehearsal.

Yeah, because it's like all of us are just — it's all the weirdos. And even if — I had friends who weren't that, and I was always able to pass as not a weirdo, but I always liked the weirdos more because I saw that, like, oh, if no one else wants to be your friend, like, I'll be your friend because I have no problem with it at all...I think it — like, a cast is different than a sports team because we're still all working together to get to one point, to have one big achievement. But maybe it was just because I liked the people more. And their — again, they were all willing to put themselves out there,

which made me more comfortable. And it was — they were always supportive of me.

Several participants talked about the significance of finding a place where they felt like they could be themselves. Joaquin’s comments about feeling *comfortable for the first time* through theater is profound. Others found social spaces like this and described their experiences using affective language like “freedom” and “belonging,” and “I felt like I mattered,” and noted that their uniqueness (being “a weirdo” as Joaquin says) was celebrated (not “tolerated” or worse), in such spaces.

### **Anime helping me find myself**

A few participants brought up anime communities, which exist both offline and online, as spaces where they felt like they belonged.

Growing up, I felt like I had community at, like — and this is silly to say, but I felt like I had community at, like, anime conventions because it was like I was surrounded by other people who shared my, like, nerdy special interest. But even there, it was like the only thing we all had in common is we enjoy this media....It — that doesn't — it may have felt like being understood, but that was only being accepted piecemeal.

And it’s like, no matter how much I invested in the identity of being an anime nerd or whatever as a child, that still wasn’t the whole. And while — I think it’s interesting though because there’s a lot of trans anime nerds.

However, Montell notes that this sense of community felt conditional, as if he was only “being accepted piecemeal.” Many participants noted the importance of anime, particularly for trans people. Montell goes on to talk about how anime and other role play games help queer and trans people feel supported in “figuring out” their gender identity:

...for instance... it’s really normal in anime fandom to...cosplay as characters that are a different gender than you...There’s nothing considered weird about, like, a cis woman dressing up as, like, a sexy man from an anime she likes and getting that attention from other

girls...Exactly the same because that's the — that same experience goes on at anime conventions all the time, where someone who's assigned male at birth will put on, like, a maid dress, you know, wear cat ears... wear stockings and high heels because here's a situation where that's not weird... it's okay to experiment with your gender presentation. And I don't know how that came about specifically in anime fandom. I'm not sure because I don't think it's to the same extent in, like, fantasy sci-fi...I've known plenty of cosplayers who were trans —

Montell's quote both identifies the importance of finding a community of people to which he felt belonging and how common it is for trans people to find that sense of belonging in role playing spaces. Importantly, Montell also hits on another element that was common across the data and is an integral part of theater as well, that these role playing spaces enabled the capacity to “try out” a different persona or gender identity and/or expression. Many noted initially trying out being a different gender to “test the waters” of what it felt like to interact with others as that gender. Miles, a 29-year-old trans masculine participant, added his experiences of role playing on the internet. He reflects on both how the pervasive nature of sexism and his desire to experiment with gender helped him in his identity development:

...so a lot of these friends, we'd do role-playing, so we'd have characters in video games, and I always picked the male character. I never wanted to be a female... I mean, games are still very sexist in a lot of the ways they design characters...this was very a time where, like, if you wanted to be the male character, you could be the wizard or the barbarian or the archer. If you wanted to be the female you could be a dancer wearing a bikini and help the group instead of doing any actual fighting...I wanted to pick the more heroic roles...— so people would call me “he” and...refer to — the male names of my characters. And that gradually became comfortable enough that I just... let people assume that that was who I really was, not necessarily, like, a fantasy character, but that I was really a teenage boy.

Gender experimentation is not unique to online spaces, but was much more commonly enacted online than offline. The next section of this chapter will discuss the importance of the internet for the participants in this study and, specifically, how it

relates to “figuring out” their sexuality and gender identity/expression in the context of their identity development.

### **The internet and media helping me find myself**

Emerging adults in this particular epoch are the first cohort to entirely grow up with the ubiquity and reach of the internet. Considering this age cohort primarily uses online and web based technologies to communicate, this has implications for their kinds of communication (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013). A critical element of the online spaces that participants began to feel a part of is their ability to remain anonymous. This comes up in a number of ways. For some, they began to explore what it could mean for them to come out in their sexuality or gender within these spaces. Online spaces are a vital support system for many LGBTQAI2 emerging adults and also can be forums for transferring knowledge (Gray, 2009; Perez-Brumer et al., 2017). This can be particularly critical both for LGBTQAI2 people living in rural spaces (again, who often lack those in-person forms of representation and support), and also for trans masculine individuals specifically, regardless of where they live, given that there are both social and physical transitions that trans individuals often go through. In addition, discrimination, alienation, and hurtful social experiences in their offline personal lives may further limit their access to sexuality related resources as well as their ability to explore or develop their identities in their offline lives, making online spaces even more important (Gray, 2009; Pascoe, 2011; Craig & McInroy, 2014). Research with LGBTQ emerging adults suggests that the internet can enable access to resources to “try on” identities, digitally explore coming out, and find likeness (Craig & McInroy, 2014). For example, for sexual and gender minorities that live in rural and/or politically or socially

conservative spaces, the internet offers coming out stories that can provide social support and hope (even just by virtue of the fact that they can see that other LGBTQAI2 people exist!) (Gray, 2009).

Participants talked about their experiences with online communities and spaces with overwhelmingly positive regard. Many spoke about finding online communities that did not have anything to do with gender and/or sexuality specifically, but allowed them to feel like they were connected. Anime was referenced earlier in this section (both in offline and online lives) as well as spaces such as chat rooms where participants found emotional support and a vital sense of belongingness, along with pragmatic information and resources. Kerrion, a 19-year-old cisgender, asexual/biromantic participant talked about the benefits of the internet in the following quote:

Yeah, because a lot of people find refuge in...forums...or little communities that are dealing with, like, their s- — not their same problem, but, like, a similar situation, and that's how they...find out more stuff or... research, and they don't really need to... talk to somebody about it or have to deal...with being embarrassed.... And it's more anonymous too, so it's not like you're putting yourself out there, so if — like, if it goes wrong, they can just, like, back out... it's more...a no-risk, all-gain type of situation.

Many began exploring the possibility of being “not heterosexual” via online platforms such as chat rooms and also by reading blogs or other internet-based content about the experiences of other non-heterosexual peers or simply looking at images that they found arousing. Collin described his realization of not being heterosexual this way:

So it probably took a good year after, like, the full-on realization, like, the conscious thought of... “I’m attracted to men...Google searching pictures of dudes with abs for — ...for a year or two prior

This kind of comment was true for both trans and cis participants as many of the cis participants were questioning whether they were gay (as opposed to heterosexual;

generally bisexuality did not enter in as a possibility for them until later), and trans masculine participants often thought that they were lesbians (again, as opposed to being non-cisgender and non-heterosexual). The imagined possibility of bisexuality as an identity was foreign to many participants prior to their discovery of it on the internet.

Fabian, a cis man, nonchalantly describes his experience:

I...never really talked about...I didn't realize that...people could be transgender or bisexuality existed until I was, like, maybe 13, 14 years old. I had no idea people felt that way...or that was a — something that was real...I had heard...homosexuality is a thing...I had never experienced anything like it. And over time and then after moving to the U.S. and becoming more active, online especially, starting to read more stuff, then...I slowly learned more about it...

In addition to providing representations of bisexual and trans identities, many participants talked about the internet as directly facilitating sexual exploration. The following quote from Eli elucidates this kind of active exploration:

...{AOL Instant Messenger}...because we weren't face-to-face, but we had a way to talk in real-time, and that's where it all happened... now that I think about it, like, a lot of my sexuality was really driven by access to the internet, like instant messenger, being able to talk to friends.... like, cybersex anonymous...you're not having sex with somebody, but you're basically typing it all out, and so these puberty-ridden kids are, like, all going out...putting their stuff out there, and you don't know who's on the other end, but that's, like, the mystery of it. That was the birth of it all...

In addition to Fabian's quote which demonstrates the importance and basic necessity of seeing bisexuality as a possible identity, Eli's quote illustrates a number of crucial, unique elements that characterize the internet and that can facilitate identity exploration and development: (a) the anonymity online diminished the social consequences of interactions (less self-consciousness and shame), (b) even when participants were known to one another, being online (rather than face to face) made conversations about sex/sexuality safer, (c) young people are eager to have

conversations about sex/sexuality, and (d) young people are eager to “try out” sexual scenarios, and the internet can provide a pragmatic and in most situations, safe way to do that.

Importantly, the internet not only provided depictions of bisexuality, but also facilitated representation of diverse *masculinities*, a crucial support for trans masculine participants in particular. Chadwick talks about his excitement in realizing that trans men existed:

...I didn't ...see transmen anywhere...the only way I found out about that was through, like, the internet and, like, a couple of, ... lucky Google searches. And so, like, whenever I see something pertaining to transmen, it's, sort of, like — it's like it's, like, you know, bold, italic, underlined. it's cool to actually... see that acknowledgement,— because it's still, kind of, novel to me that...transmen existed...

Chauncey, who had been out as a trans man and had been involved in trans inclusive spaces for several years, discussed the emotional and pragmatic support that they received in online communities, which they described as affirming and critical to individual development as well as collective well-being:

most, ... sex ed and, ... health education is not.. queer-inclusive, ...at all, and so whether it — that is, like, gay sex or, — just anything queer, and so anything trans-related just, typically, ... isn't included. And so I know that, ... for me and most of my, ... trans or queer friends, , the information that we've sought out has been, ... intercommunity or online

These subcultural supports often came about out of a necessity for connection and belonging. Taken together, these spaces of representation and likeness (importantly distinguished from “normative”) were vital to participants' feelings of belongingness and to *sense the possibility* of a more comfortable and authentic future. Especially in these ways, subcultural spaces facilitated sexuality and gender identity development in participants' younger lives.

In addition, the internet played an important role in providing forums for people to explore their own sexuality and gender and to digitally “try on” different identities and both give and receive vital emotional and pragmatic support. The feeling of mutual care and belonging is critical for humans to feel safe in any environment, and it is only within that context of safety that one can explore and become more self-aware. That safety provides the grounding for the personal growth that facilitates becoming the people that they are now.

### **Porn Shaping Who I Am**

Insofar that this project is treating the internet and online spaces as a subculture, a significant way that participants gained self-awareness and learned more about sexuality and gender generally, and themselves specifically, was through online porn or erotica. Viewing porn began for most around middle school, a particularly significant time for identity exploration and sexuality development (Diamond, 2006; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Porn often came up when I asked participants about how they learned about their sexuality.

Fabian also discusses discovering and using “non-straight” porn to help him come into his bisexuality:

... I just, like...slowly — with the process that I talked about...talking with people, I was more open to...non-straight pornography, and that...helped with the process, I guess, or helped realizing.

Eli went on to talk about his complicated and ever-evolving relationship to porn. He details how it both supported him in discovering his desires and learning more about his sexuality, and also inhibited his capacity to engage in in-person relationships. This tension is felt as he describes his experience:

... in high school and in college, forcing myself to watch non-gay porn to, like, prove that I could still be — that I was still bi or that I was not just gay, and, like, it was an internal battle and a struggle. And it's so unhealthy to think about, but, like, I was just so locked into this binary that, like, I had to be able to, like, okay, at least if I have some of this exposure...And so by the end of it {college}, porn became, like, an escape, but it was not — like, it was so — you know, like, in the moments where you're watching and you're... in the... masturbation phase, like, it's very... liberating and thrilling, and you're esca- — you're in this moment, and then when it's all over, it's like this overwhelming feel- — like, feeling of everything you were feeling before is just... multiplied because you're like, this doesn't solve anything...it just magnifies what I'm feeling...it {was} a cycle like that to the point where I got so desperate...

Eli's quote above illustrates the interpsychic struggle from his internalization of cisheteronormativity and the sexuality hierarchy that it entails. Given the implicit binary assumptions of sexuality, he positions bisexuality as preferable because it is, in his interpretation, closer to heterosexuality than homosexuality, and trying to “prove” his “not *as bad*” sexuality to himself via porn as a proxy. Eli's emotional struggle is apparent. His use of emotional descriptors like “battle,” “struggle,” and “desperate” are evocative. And it is important to point out that these difficult emotions existed for him because of the pervasive and ubiquitous context of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity, not because of his porn use. In fact, he uses words like “liberating” and “thrilling” to talk about porn and recognizes his younger self's attempt to use porn to “solve” the conundrum of “figuring out” his sexuality, to be an effort to get his attraction to men “off his chest,” so that he could (in his interpretation) go back to being heterosexual. Even the notion that his sexuality was something that he needed to “figure out” suggests that it is a problem to be solved and if he could just get “the right answer” (assuming binary sexuality), then he would not suffer anymore. This orientation to our experiences is culturally supported by neoliberal, patriarchal values that discourages ambiguity (e.g., in-between), emotionality, collectivism, receptivity,

and acceptance of difference and of “what is,” in favor of more valued, masculinized attributes such as certainty, homogeneity, forcefulness, either/or empiricism, critique, and a problem-solving approach to the self, so that we can “win” at what neoliberalism views as the competition of being a person. In sum, for Eli, porn could be associated with temporary pleasure and freedom, but it could not substitute for in-person sexual experiences that he longed for and it certainly could not “make him straight,” which is what his utterances here imply.

As participants got older, they described their relationship to porn shifting in myriad ways; however, for Eli, the notion of using porn as a proxy for attraction and thus sexuality remains present. Recall that the cultural context of “bisexual burden” renders bisexuality a stigmatized and far less visible identity (and thus not “as valid” as a possibility for participants) (Anderson, McCormack, & Ripley, 2016). At the time of the interviews, many participants were trying to “figure out” their sexuality, in the context of differing levels of certainty and comfort in their gender identity and/or expression. Eli continues discussing how this cultural context interacted with his own sexuality exploration in his earlier twenties:

...even people that I associate with that are queer or...fluid, I can tell there's...this hesitance to talk about the porn we watch because it feels like, “oh, I’m bi, but I watch lesbian porn. Oh, I’m bi, but I watch gay porn...” ...I remember hearing things...”okay, so you're bi, but — oh, you've had sex with men and women. Oh, but what kind of porn do you watch? You watch gay porn? Well, you're just gay. Come on, get around to it.” And so I’m still so nervous to share that with people...it gives people some — another weapon or another way to lock me down...

The consistency and ubiquity of the “sexuality hierarchy” implicit in cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity is clear in Eli’s utterances. His friends’ insistence that his sexuality is based upon the focus of his porn use discursively assumes

a binary nature of sexuality and works to delegitimize bisexuality (not to mention a woefully inaccurate understanding how porn preferences relate to sexuality). This example of “bisexual burden” impacts his feelings of freedom (“...another way to lock me down...”) and thus his emotional experience of his sexuality.

Eli goes on to discuss how his relationship to porn has shifted as he has grown older and presumably gained more security around his bisexual identity:

It’s, like — it’s evolved. I think once I stopped caring about what kind of porn I was watching, I was just watching what I wanted to watch; it felt really liberating. And I found myself watching things I never thought I was going to watch, like, all different genders, all different mix —...a whole buffet of stuff, so that was really exciting...

The majority of participants felt ambivalent about porn. They felt that it had been helpful in facilitating their realization that they may not be cisgender nor heterosexual.

Miles describes it helping him learn more about his gender in the following way:

I knew that I found both female and male bodies attractive, but m- -- like, and I looked at porn of all genders. But when I imagined myself in fantasies, it was always in the male role.

Shelton said something similar about how porn has influenced his understanding of his sexuality:

...But if you ask me now this question, now I would say that I’m more sexually attracted to men than women because I think I watch some porn... --I was more...attracted to males over females...I don't really know if I’m completely gay...when I was watching some porns, I don't feel anything to women’s body, but I used to have girlfriends...

Daniel describes his experience when asked how he came to identify as bisexual:

...it was mainly through pornography...I originally realized that -- I was questioning if I was gay for a while because I came across some pornography, and I was like, “oh, I like that!”

Regardless of its polarized, rhetorical positioning, porn *is* not and *was* not all “just one thing.” Nearly all participants noted its role in helping them learn about their gender and/or sexuality. And, as is typically the case, new learning shifted their self-schemas, complicating their understanding of their sexuality and/or gender in growth inducing and also disorienting ways.

### **Experiences within My Personal Relationships Shaping Who I Was and Who I Am**

Participants described a diversity of experiences within their personal lives and relationships shaping “who they were” or who they thought themselves to be in their younger years and how those experiences map onto their current identity.

When participants were asked about significant relationships that they had had in their lives growing up, many of them named close family members such as parents and grandparents, as well as peers. Further, when asked about who in their lives they saw as significant to their sexuality/gender identity development (as a part of their lives and development as a whole) most added specific peers (including bullies and “the other gay,” or another peer who identified themselves or was perceived by others to be non cis and/or non-heterosexual), close friends, and first and/or significant sexual partners.

The theoretical orientation herein necessitates that the reader interpret participants’ utterances through the lens of the *meaning* that participants are making of their experiences. Thus, what “happens” to participants is only part of their experience. They make meaning via having experiences and filtering those experiences through layers of context, including the relational layer, explored explicitly in this chapter. Thus, these “happenings” become significant not because of any empirical “truth” that they

represent. They become significant to participants based upon how affecting they are to them, and the *strength* and “*flavor*” of that affect is primarily determined by the ways in which important others respond to them *within, through, and as a result of* these “happenings” (Cozolino, 2014; van der Kolk, 2014).

### **Family Shaping Who I Am**

Parents and other caregivers were significant to participants. Attaching and attuning to caregivers is a critical step in healthy development and vital to the emotional and physical well-being of humans (van der Kolk, 2014; Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1965; Cozolino, 2014). Participants talked about their relationships to their caregivers and their feelings around their caregivers’ responses to their sexuality and gender identity in a diversity of ways. Ten of the fifteen participants grew up with their biological, heterosexual, cisgender, still married parents; three grew up with their biological mother as a primary caregiver, one grew up with his mother until age six, then mother and stepfather, and one with their father as a primary caregiver. Some were raised with their grandparents as significant influences in their lives. All except one participant continue to have a relationship with their biological parents. Most characterized their parents as generally supportive of them.

Joaquin talks about the ways in which his Mom has shaped him in the following quote:

My mom did a lot of art projects with me, and I see a lot of that resonating in my life with my creativity and openness to experiment and trying not to hold myself back creatively and artistically.

Later Joaquin talks about how his expressive and artistic “side” has been integral to his experiences throughout his life, from feeling belonging and verve in discovering

theater and now as a college student questioning his major. He describes his parents' approach to sexuality in the following way:

...I'm not scared to come out to them because..., I was educated early to be accepting of gay people because one of my Dad's best friends from college was gay, and we went to his wedding. And so then my parents talked to me {about it}. So they were always accepting of it, and so then I was always accepting and trying to be an ally. So I'm really openly accepting of who other people are, and I think that helps me be accepting of myself, whoever I end up being, whoever I find myself to be.

This last part of demonstrates a really flexible, open sense of allowance and acceptance of himself and how he is becoming. Joaquin's utterance aligns with this projects' theoretical assumptions of identity as shifting and malleable.

Their experiences of feeling supported in exploring their sexuality and gender identity and expression when they were younger were wide ranging. A few mentioned feeling very supported in exploring their sexuality and gender.

Miles, a 29-year-old trans masculine participant, who came out as trans masculine to his parents at 14, had a similar experience of support from his parents. He equates their openness and acceptance to their feminist and Unitarian values:

...And my parents were both feminists and Unitarians, and so they didn't really hide a lot of that stuff from me. It's not like I was, like, reading Andrea Dworkin in middle school or anything like that, but I at least had some social awareness, you know. It was the '90s, and people talked about that kind of thing...

However, most narratives centered on the consequences, real or perceived of participants diverging from traditional gender norms. The fears of anticipated rejection were talked about in the context of discriminatory experiences that they had with their parent(s). They made reference to the conservative views that their parent(s) espoused and how that was implicated in their own experience. Often participants had not

actually *had* negative experiences with their parents *specifically* around their sexuality, but they were recounting the experience of constraint and vigilance of living in a home where they felt like they needed to conceal parts of themselves, and they layered those narratives of constraint onto gender and sexuality as well. Consistent with minority stress theory, high levels of anticipated discrimination are associated with poor self-reported mental health (Lindstrom, 2008). Many participants talked about feeling shamed and hurt or being vigilant around their anticipated experiences of those feelings from family members.

Daniel described the “mental gymnastics” that he has done for much of the past few years around maintaining his “mask of heterosexuality” around his family, who he assumes will be not accepting of this sexuality. He talks about this in relationship to this sister, the person in his family he feels closest to—about how her responses to a friend of hers impacted his approach to coming out with his family:

...So I remember we were sitting out front of McDonald’s, like, for some reason. I can’t remember what. Maybe we were going to, like, the grocery store that was across from it, but she started talking about how one of her friends was bisexual... she was very derogatory towards it. She was like, “They just can’t choose,” and I remember thinking, okay, you were the one person in the family that I was actually genuinely considering telling, but if that’s the way it is, then that’s the way it is, and that closed the door for me as far as my family is concerned....{after that} I remember distancing myself...keeping to myself in the house...It just hurt...and I felt, like, some sort of pending trust was gone in a second, just because she said something careless.

Interestingly there is limited research assessing siblings influence in LGBTQAI2 youth and emerging adult experiences. Yet in this study, many referenced the importance of their siblings in feeling accepted or using the responses of their siblings as a proxy to gauge the response of other family members.

As discussed in Chapter 1 concerning cisheteronorms being perpetuated by extended families, many participants, especially participants of color, talked about their extended families being a significant part of their childhood experiences and by extension, implicated in their coming out. They discussed their bisexuality in light of those relationships. Andre talked about his anticipated rejection in the following way:

I grew up in a very conservative household, but I didn't really ever agree with conservative ideals, so — because they were — they're from {racially/ethnically/religiously diverse state in the southern U.S.}...their ideals are more — they're more old school, and I want to say bigoted. And because I was born up here and raised up here, I was raised in a culture and an environment that was more free and liberal and arts-based and, you know, free expression; do what you want. And so, because of that, I, kind of — when I realized that I am bisexual, I was like, this is going to be a huge clash between me and my family. And even though I had felt like it — I knew it all along, the confirmation was like, ah, crap, now I've got to confront it, you know.

Andre recognized that the place that his extended family lived provided a flourishing environment for homophobic views and feared what he saw as an inevitable confrontation between their views and his sexuality.

Like cisheteronormativity itself, these anticipated unsupportive responses from extended family members rest upon assumptions about masculinity and gender. Joaquin expanded on Andre's utterances about his extended family's anticipated rejection of his sexuality based upon ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. Joaquin talks about the limitations of those narrow gender norms in the following passage:

Yes. —my grandmothers are a big influence on me. And when I... realized how much impact they had in my life, I started thinking about... “maybe I was...raised as a girl,” or I thought those were the expectations and stuff. But then I was also thinking where — my uncle is —...I've never really liked him, and that's because I — he's always seemed very similar to people at school that I never liked...whenever ...I'm, with family and my Dad and grandpa and uncles are all hanging around, drinking beer and being men and stuff, it just seems boring to me. So I was thinking...about that and

then all the women are in the house or someplace else, not wanting to be outside being all cold, like, I would still want to be outside, but being active and doing something, where my grandma was always in the house cleaning the kitchen or cooking or everything or supporting the family. I'd rather being doing something like that...And I want to always be — like I was saying in the beginning, where gender is, kind of, how you want to be presented and stuff, I always want to be seen as a male, and I feel like I can be masculine. But I don't want to have the societal roles that come with that masculinity.

Joaquin's resistance to traditional gender norms is apparent throughout the passage.

The ending quote shows the dissonance between wanting to be masculine, but not wanting to re-ify a life that he sees as “stressful” and “boring” and synonymous with the expectations of masculinity. As discussed in Chapter 6, the dissonance of wanting to be perceived as masculine but not wanting to “take on” the attributes and expectations that they see as inherently tied to masculinity was common for participants. The men in Joaquin's life provide conflict for him considering they are significant models of “what a successful, masculine adult looks like,” and they have lives that look unappealing. Given the context of this passage and its focus on gender norms, it would seem that his comments are still based off of a binary understanding of gender, specifically his interpretation of his grandmothers' influence on him and then equating that with “being raised as a girl” (rather than approaching gender more expansively, i.e., “I was raised as a boy that liked to do things that women in my family did”). Joaquin had few models of what else was possible for him beyond what their lives looked like until he got older and began to engage with theater.

Chauncey describes opposing responses from the different sides of his extended family, responses that he attributes to different religions and cultural traditions. His Dad's family is Jewish, and he described their response to him as “super great,” but his Mom's Catholic side of the family has been much less accepting:

... she came, like, right up to me, and she was like, “Oh, we have like some, like, huge number of, like, genders in, like, Jewish history. And, like, I just — this is great. I don't care, like, whatever.” And she was so accepting and warm and loving...And all of my other Jewish relatives have done the same, whereas my Catholic relatives, stopped talking to me fifth or sixth grade, when they just, like, thought that I was gay...I hadn't even, come out or anything.. and I haven't talked to them since. And that was, like, years and years and years ago, so I just had, like, a very different experience with those two sides of the family.

### **Peers Shaping Who I Am**

Peers and classmates were another group of people who had a significant influence over participants' experiences of being able to be their “whole selves” in social spaces. Sometimes this looked like hypervigilance and managing their lives and emotions in anticipation of peer rejection, particularly focused on their sexuality and/or gender identity and expression. They experienced peers who reinforced cisheteronorms, which felt rejecting and isolating in various social spaces including school, athletic, and extracurricular spaces. Eli described the following experience on his baseball team:

There was an effeminate kid at my school who got beat up a lot...I felt a lot of fear...That — you know, I never was afraid of physical violence because I think I've been six feet tall since I was in, like, third grade it feels like, so, like, I never had that fear. But it was just the fear of having to... listen to the emotional and....verbal abuse. Like, it just weighed a lot because it definitely, ... would show up at school as well...{and} off the field and in the hallways and stuff.

The quote provides a rich intertextual picture of the ways in which hegemonic notions of masculinity collide with individual affective experiences within relationships and then how those affective experiences get written into individual histories. Eli described being bullied by teammates and how that bullying “showed up” at school as well and how that influenced his behavior to become more insular and isolated and the fear that that bullying generated for him.

These experiences of feeling ostracized caused many of the participants to describe a lot of difficult emotions. It was also these experiences that provided a catalyst for many of them to make changes in their lives that would support a more easeful experience and helped them to “find themselves.” The phenomena of emotional difficulty facilitating meaningful personal growth and change will be discussed later in this chapter.

Some felt safe being more expressive with their peers. Most participants peer-related experiences and feelings of acceptance came after they came out to them and will be detailed in the specific “coming out” section of this chapter. An example of a participant feeling able to stretch the limits of cisheteronormativity is provided by Collin in the following quote:

it wasn't that hard to express myself that way {through dress}. I definitely -- I got, ...more daring and felt a lot more comfortable doing that because that's...the identity that I had within that group...it's, kind of, become attached to my identity, is just this idea of stretching things...

### **Using Peers as Proxies to Shape My Experience**

Similar to Eli's experience, others described the powerful nexus of gendered social norms and belonging coming together. Eli uses his own personal experiences of bullying as well as witnessing bullying to inform his narrative. Many described a symbolic “other gay” as a proxy for “figuring out” how they would be responded to by peers regarding their sexuality or gender in the social context of their school for example. Participants often discuss cis gay males as the most visible proxy for gauging the social acceptability of gender and sexual minorities. This self-erasure is “natural” and expected given the cishomonormative context that these interactions are happening within. Their relating to this “other gay” was most often in the context of exploring the

possibility of coming out in that social space and was naturally, largely dependent on how supportive and open they perceived the macro culture of the community, as well as how they felt supported by those close to them (family and friends for example). The following illustrates the kinds of mental calculations that participants often went through often in middle and high school around being out about their gender and/or sexuality.

Chauncey talked about “just knowing” that his same sex desires (he was AFAB and wanted to kiss a girl from his youth group) were “not Ok” in the environment that he grew up in.

Chadwick talked about a similar experience of using peers as proxies to gauge the potential social consequences of being out as a trans man:

But we did have a guy in my class who was really, really big into theater, like, loved theater, and...he got into a production...he had to wear... stage makeup.

...the jock dudes in my class had this immediate association of... makeup on a guy equals gay man...and he's... straight as an arrow, but there became this thing at our school where people would say “oh, paging Dr. Faggot,” and that was... just...my first time hearing that out loud... I just started learning about these terms, and I just started...getting comfortable with thinking of myself... — trans was still something I was pretty, like, hard repressing, but... queer was something I was... “okay, yeah, I’m probably that. I’m not going to be loud about it, but, yeah, in whichever way that means for me, I would definitely consider myself queer.” And...hearing that was — just, sort of, like, reinforced the initial fears that I’d had of this is something you need to shut the fuck up about and... keep your head down and s- — keep yourself safe...

Chadwick’s quote makes clear the cisheteronormative ocean that participants are swimming in via the ways in which peers responded to his friends’ theater make-up. Note, his friend is “straight as an arrow,” and yet his sexual orientation does not save him from the experiences of discrimination and bullying provoked by peers’

assumptions about this sexuality. Given this context, Chadwick's anxieties around his safety and his commitment to "shut the fuck up about it, keep your head down and...keep yourself safe," is a reasonable response given his perception of the consequences of coming out.

Both Eli and Chadwick discuss the *safety implications* of not embodying hegemonic conceptions of normative masculinity. Many participants described the anticipated rejection and possible aggression that they thought they would experience in disclosing their gender or sexual minority status. Montell's strategy to avoid violence as a trans masculine person was to not physically transition as he said that even as a woman, in the context of cisgenderism and sexism, he'd prefer the frequent harassment that he experiences as being read as a woman to the possible violence that he could experience as a trans masculine person. Participants are not being hyperbolic, particularly given the high rates of violence perpetrated against gay and bisexual men and trans people in the United States. This vigilance around disclosing one's identity requires emotional and mental labor and implies real impacts that will be further explored in the Discussion chapter of this dissertation.

Sean talks about using a peer of his in middle school as a proxy in the following quote. Prior to this utterance, Sean had talked about how disappointed he was that he had to wear a skirt for his band concerts, which felt really inauthentic to him and was not required of a "tomboyish," cis female (at the time) peer of his. This comment also shows the importance of other supportive adults in the lives of LGBTQAI2 youth:

This person...she was also...tomboy-ish, and she was kind of like me. And we were both like..." how come that person gets to wear boys' clothes...and we don't, right?" We had this conversation, and I remember it... vividly because we had it while we were walking onto...the stage...years later... I found out that that person had come out as transgender in middle school

and told our band director, and that's why she got to wear boys' clothes. But she was now...identifying as a trans male...

### **Sexual Experiences Helping Me Explore My Sexuality and Gender**

Similar to the online spaces in which participants engaged to “figure out” their sexuality and/or gender (with online friends, and/or using online forums, with in-person friends to try on elements of sexuality and gender), many described engaging in sexual behavior with friends, which served in part, to help them “figure out” elements of their sexuality and/or gender. Participants used a variety of terms to characterize these relationships: best friends, close friends, casual acquaintance, “friends with benefits,” romantic and/or sexual partners. However, regardless of the semantics participants used, they affectively described them as significant to their sexuality and/or gender identity development. Eli provides a quote that is a useful example of a number of key topics:

I always remember {girl} from second grade because it was so pure. It was like — we just, like, had such mad little kid crushes on each other. ...she's the first girl that I think I loved...or really liked because I think it helps me level out my sexuality because I'm trying to keep my percentages... But, really, she's just the first person that I felt that way about. And then, a traumatic nonconsensual experience happened in third grade, and there was pleasure associated with that, so I had to consider that. I couldn't just move past it. I had to keep that, but I had no way to understand it.

A few participants had experienced non-consensual sex acts that both informed and complicated their understanding of their sexuality. Eli's experience of non-consensual sex being both traumatic and pleasurable and that holding both of those experiences together inspired confusion is reflected in the literature. Common for participants was recalling a childhood friend whom they had a crush on or sexually experimented with. It was also typical for them to describe “figuring out” their sexuality

by recalling prior sexual desires, interests, and experiences and their associated affect. For example, Eli recalls experiencing pleasurable feelings (albeit confusing) with both a girl and a boy when he was younger. He used those experiences to inform his conception of his bisexuality. Also common was participants' mentions of quantitative measures of their bisexuality, such as "keeping my percentages." Many said things such as "I am 80/20, like 80% of the time I like men and 20% women," or "I try to keep it 50/50." These utterances seemed to imply that they needed to "justify" their bisexuality to others and also to themselves.

### **Coming Out as a Bridge to Who I Am Becoming**

Oftentimes the act of coming out in person was really where the "rubber met the road" in terms of participants' affective experiences of acceptance from important others. For a variety of reasons, some of the participants were out about identifying as non-heterosexual, some were out about their bisexuality, some trans masculine participants were out about their gender, but not their bisexuality, and various other iterations of outness. Similar to many aspects of one's identity, most were out to *some* people about *some* element(s) of their sexuality and/or gender. Some described these parts of themselves as "no big deal" to themselves or to others in their lives, and others were constantly making mental calculations about whom to be out to and to what extent. Aligned with symbolic interactionist understandings of identity development and change, decisions about their levels of outness in different social contexts should be interpreted as strategic decisions designed to maintain connection to important others. All participants were out about their bisexuality and gender identity to at least one other person. All participants except two (Daniel and Joaquin) were out to one of more of

their primary caregivers growing up. For the majority of participants, coming out for the first time, either about their sexuality or gender identity was significant and will be detailed in this section. For many it provided a crucial bridge or turning point for them between acknowledging the influences of their socialization and stepping with self-determination into a more authentic, easeful future.

### **Coming Out to My Parents**

Participants had a diversity of experiences coming out to their parents. Two had had unambiguously difficult responses characterized by denial, shame, and misappropriated concern from their parents who responded to them based upon homophobic misinformation.

...my mom selectively — I've come out to my mom five times, at this point, as some — in different iterations as, like, queer or trans, and she selectively forgot the first four times, even though they all included her kicking me out of the house. And the most recent time that I came out to her as trans, she convinced herself that I had contracted HIV...I became HIV positive when I became trans. And so the i- — you know, and it's all — you know, it's class. It's education. It's language barrier stuff.

This utterance from Jordan explicitly notes how intersectionality plays out in his own, and his mother's experience of his gender identity (the aspect of his "self" that he is referencing coming out about). He ascribes her misinformed assumptions about his HIV status to education and English language ability (and access to resources in languages that she understands better), which connects to lower social class. Thus, these structural issues combined with cishetero cultural norms influenced Jordan's experience in coming out to his Mom. Shelton was the only participant who said that he regretted coming out to his parents. He said that his parent's initial negative reaction to

his coming out was informed by prescriptive gender norms and false information about sexuality that was typical in China:

I came out to my parents...last...March, and if I have another choice...I would tell myself don't come out to them because it was such a suffering...They both think it was some serious mental illness before, but now they just checking up some information online, and they would consider this as something (not just) mental illness. But they're still trying to persuade me to not be gay...{they} say, "Ah, you should find a girlfriend, like, in college or something." And I would say, "I will try, but I don't promise anything like that."

While these passages demonstrate misinformation about sexuality and health, more importantly they show how misunderstood, not believed, and not accepted participants felt in coming out about important parts of themselves, which then contributed to experiences of disconnection.

The last sentence in Shelton's utterance also demonstrates his caregiving of his parents' emotions and strategizing around what he would tell them and at what times. This kind of emotional labor is common for participants. For example, some trans masculine participants described coming out to their parents about their gender, but not about their sexuality and couched that decision in the semantics of protectionism. This could be interpreted in a number of ways. It is undoubtedly a strategy act of self-efficacy, presumably aimed at protecting themselves and their parents by avoiding the reality of their "non-normative" gender identity or expression and/or sexuality. It also could be seen as a more peer-like way of relating, which could mean a lot of things, namely that participants feel repressed by normative expectations, but need to "protect" their parents from their non-conformity. In this context it feels like participants are saying that they accept that their parents could use some support as well and/or it will go more smoothly for everyone if they are thoughtful about how, when, and what

information they deploy and at what time. They say things along the lines of Chadwick's statement below, which implies forethought and deliberation in attempt to ensure that telling their parents about their gender and/or sexual minority status goes smoothly:

I came out to my mom and Dad as bi at the time because that was the easiest way I could think to phrase it. They said ...I know, and I was like, "ah, okay...", and I'm not out to my parents as trans. I'm, actually... drafting up that letter now...but it's something that I feel like I have a deadline to tell them now because I'm getting top surgery this December.

Many of the participants who experienced high levels of anticipated rejection, even those who were embedded within transphobic and/or homophobic contexts, were actually responded to by their parents, siblings, peers, and other important people in their life (teachers for example) with acceptance. Of those participants who had come out to their parents about their sexuality, nearly all said that they experienced tremendous relief at coming out. Both this surprise at being accepted and relief are demonstrated by Liam's quote describing coming out about his bisexuality to his parents:

Generally, my family's actually surprisingly good at this. My parents, in particular, have been very wonderfully supportive of me, which is surprising because, again, they sent me to a conservative private elementary school, though they are apparently far more liberal than the school environment because, yeah, they've been fairly cool with that.

Shelton's experience coming out to his mom is remarkable. He described feeling despondent before coming out as trans masculine:

I didn't feel I — that I connected with anything... so I told her...because, I felt like, if I didn't, it would be either...me telling you (her) or me dying...she accepted me...right then. And she was like, "I want you to know that there is nothing wrong with you," and she was like, "I want you to tell me how you want to...what you want me to do and...how I can help you."

Shelton described his affective experience after she accepted him using beautiful metaphors:

...so I think after I came out to my mom, it was, like, a — you know how, in those castles, they have that bridge that comes down?...It...really felt like the Earth...was in negatives...in black and white — after I told her, it was just, refilled with color... after I spoke to her, I could...see my future unfolding...

His Mom's response is extraordinary, especially given the layered and pernicious influence of cisheteronormativity that he is embedded in. Her resistance to these norms aligns with poststructuralist orientations towards structure and agency in so far that it demonstrates peoples' individual capacity to resist the norms operating in specific environments and often in remarkably adaptive and strategic ways. This quote shows his Mom's capacity to create a narrative for herself and her son that is both supportive of him *and* aligns with her conception of, and her devoted relationship to Christianity and Korean cultural norms (after he came out, she continued to be involved in the Korean community and their church and systematically "got rid of the haters" as he put it).

His Dad's response was initially hurtful and not unexpected, until he realized that his Dad's support and dedication was present, but it just "looked" different than his Mom's. He then went on to detail his Dad's initial response to him coming out:

...he was thinking about surgery before I even had a chance — to think about it...he was doing a lot of investigation in the back without telling me, and we don't really discuss it, but, like, he tells my mom about it, and my mom's aware of it. And my mom wants me to know that he thinks about me...

Shelton's experience with his Dad demonstrates the often more nuanced ways in which parents were supportive. Andre described his experience coming out to his Mom's side of the family and how it was facilitated by his sisters' coming out first. This

is similar to the proxy experiences described previously in this chapter when participants would use the “other gay” at their school, for example, to gauge the responses of others:

...{my Mom} doesn't care...It was three words: I like boys. That's all I wanted to say, but it wouldn't come out, and then I said it, and then she was like — her response... “Okay, finally, I thought you were gay,” and then I was like, “okay, well, obviously not a big deal to you.”

...I'm used to having to be the eldest, to be the leader, to have to do stuff first to make sure it's okay, so the fact that my younger sister did it first kind of took that responsibility out of my hands...

These participants and others described generally supportive relationships with their parents and described multidimensional responses from their family about coming out about their bisexuality and/or gender identity. Like Andre, several participants described their families being accepting and responsive to their non-heterosexuality, but either invalidated their feelings or experiences or continued to ascribe to monosexual and cisheteronormative/cishomonormative notions of sexuality, gender, and relationship structures. This kind of epistemic injustice (Yoshino,1999) is demonstrated in the nuanced but meaningful semantics of erasure performed by Andre's Mom when she equates bisexuality with homosexuality.

For those who identified themselves as living in two parent, heterosexual families, their communication often fell along gendered lines. Aligned with hegemonic notions of family, mothers seemed to be the spokes in the wheel of family communication. In fact, none of the participants who had grown up in with two adults in their home and who had come out to their parents about their bisexuality reported telling their Dad first. Several participants noted implied acceptance from their Dad, who was almost

universally told about participants' sexuality or gender identity by participants' Moms.

An example of this is demonstrated in the following quote from Liam:

My Dad's generally cool with it, but we just, kind of, you know, shove it under the rug... (he is) a more traditional manly kind of guy, so talking about feelings isn't really his bag, ...he's never said anything mean or even, like, passive aggressive about it. He just prefers not to bring it up. So it's still tacit support, I suppose.

### **Coming Out to Siblings**

Many participants talked about the role that their siblings had played in shaping who they were when they were young and who they have grown into now. Andre said that he came out as bisexual only after his 14-year-old sister came out as a lesbian, and that his family on his Mom's side has been supportive throughout. After Andre mentioned the rejection that he anticipated in coming out to his extended family, he again noted the support that he has from his sisters and his mom:

Even family, it's sad to say... I'm not too worried about what — like, if my family disowns me... and I'm pretty sure they would, but I'm not really worried about it because I've got my mom, my sisters and any other positive relationships I make moving forward.

Sheldon described coming out to his brother just a few weeks before he was to start on testosterone to begin medically transitioning:

...we have to tell you something, like, to my brother. And so I told him, like, a snippet of what I told my mom when I came out to her, and then he was like, "Okay, okay," and then he started crying. And we were, like, "why are you crying?" And he's like... "I just feel bad that you couldn't tell me earlier and — that you had to...go through this all by yourself." ...he felt bad about how I've had to... go through...all of those downs alone.

### **Coming Out to Other Important Adults**

Many participants experienced a "mixed bag" of responses from other important adults in their lives. Again, the following quote from Eli makes clear that his non-

heterosexuality is “acceptable,” but only within binaried assumptions of sexuality. Eli provides an example of bisexual erasure written into the following microaggression perpetrated by an admired mentor:

He was like, “No, this is interesting because when we first — when you first told me you identified as gay,” and I was like, “I did not...and I was like, I told you I had a boyfriend, but that doesn't mean that I was — that I identified as gay.”

While well-meaning, Eli's mentor continues to re-ify cisheteronorms/ cishomonorms, and particularly hurtful is the assumption that Eli “doesn't know himself,” and the obvious negation of his capacity to self-determine and erasure of his bisexuality.

Other participants talked about adults in their lives that were unequivocally supportive of their sexuality and gender identity and expression. Chauncey talks about a beloved teacher from high school who surreptitiously helped him and his friends form a Gay/Straight Alliance at their school after reluctance from school administration:

... One of my friends in that group who was a trans guy — His Dad was my chemistry teacher, and so he was helping us...coordinate all this...secretly. So his Dad was someone who I really looked up to...he was great. He put this...little rainbow and this... poem in his email signature, and it was so... “fuck you, everyone”...number-one ally...it was great. I love him.

Miles talks about the importance of being taken seriously by other adults in his life when he said that he wanted to transition to trans masculinity. He had said that he was taken seriously by his parents, which was critical. He began medically transitioning soon after, and also felt that he was taken seriously by the vast majority of health care providers, another important affirmation. When asked if he had others in this life that he felt took him seriously, he said:

I feel like I was taken seriously...by lots of people...teachers...people at church...I also went to an after-school program called Just Us, which was staffed by three Western students who were queer. And it was for 14 to 20-year-old queer people, and that's where I first met other trans people my age. Some of them are still my friends

Miles' quote indicates the importance of personally being taken seriously by important adults. As well, the fact that there was a support group for queer people in the city where he lived where he could find further support suggests a more macro ethos of generally taking queer people and issues seriously. This deliberately convened space of likeness for Miles was enriching; he talked about feeling supported, being exposed to "a way to have normalcy and not be normal"; feeling included in fun social events; and creating enduring friendships, which will be the focus of the next section in this chapter.

### **Coming Out to My Friends**

The importance of peers and friendships in social and psychological development during emerging adulthood is well documented (Arnett, 2014; Barry, Madsen, & DeGrace, 2015; Barry, et al., 2009; Way, 2011). Friendships provide necessary support during the difficult transitions of emerging adulthood, facilitating identity development (Barry, Madsen, & DeGrace, 2015). Regardless of age, people tend to distinguish between best, close, and casual friendships, and such distinctions have been associated with differential experiences across friendships (Hays, 1988; Fehr, 1996; Fehr, 2008). The quality of best and close friendships is related to emerging adults' happiness (Demir & Özdemir, 2010). As well, these connected friendships exist within larger social networks that support well-being and also tend to shift as emerging adults experience the life transitions that characterize this decade (e.g., moving to a new place, having a stable, non-abusive romantic partner). For all emerging adults, friendships are critical,

but particularly for those who feel socially isolated, don't feel connected to family, or don't have a stable, non-abusive romantic/sexual partner, friendships in emerging adulthood seem to matter even more (Barry, Madsen, & DeGrace, 2015; Demir & Özdemir, 2010). This is particularly important given that LGBTQ emerging adults face wider societal stigma and report higher levels of family rejection than do their cisgender and/or heterosexual peers (Weinstock, 2000; Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, economic and demographic shifts over the last decade suggest that more people are choosing to be single than ever before, rates of cohabitation among emerging adults is high, and marriage rates are declining; thus, increasingly emerging adults are reliant on their friends for support and well-being (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010).

For nearly all participants, the first person that they came out to was a close friend. All participants were out to at least a few close friends and reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of coming out to friends. Aligned with literature on gender differences (based upon binary models) of emerging adults, men tend to achieve intimacy by sharing personal information and by engaging in activities together, and one third of the participants described coming out for the first time while playing video games with friends (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006). Fabian dispassionately describes his experience coming out to his friends in the following exchange:

...They were never, like, direct...about the subject...but it would sometimes come up...they were mostly friends who I played video games with, so...sometimes sexuality would come up, and...as a result, I was able to think more about it {when I came out} it didn't feel bad or weird or anything. I was just talking about myself regularly... it was just another part of me, another aspect of myself, so —...most...didn't care.

The following narratives describe participants' first coming out experiences to friends. Chadwick talks about his experience coming out to his friends and roommate in the following quote:

...I told what about first. I've got three, like, really good friends of mine...one of those was the roommate that I had last year, who was, like, amazing about it. She's also, like, queer-identifying, and so she was just, like, excellent about it...we really...love and care about each other, so we're able to, like, joke...about it....I still love you. We're still roommates. We're still friends. Nothing has really changed. And that was...huge to me.

Daniel's experience provides a window into a breadth of coming out experiences and the ways that participants made meaning of those experiences. The following exchange between Daniel and I takes place within the span of the ten weeks that he was actively involved in the study (interviews 1-3). He talks about using the term bisexual to describe himself and coming out as bisexual for the first time here:

I remember the first time I used {the term bisexual to describe my sexuality}, and that was when I told my then girlfriend that I realized that I was sexually attracted to guys, and — but I was also sexually attracted to females. And I said, like, “I'm bisexual,” and I came out to my girlfriend that way.

It did not go very well for me, unfortunately. She got very insecure about it, and she — it hurt. That's the best way that I can say it because...— she didn't really get what I was saying. She was just kind of like, “oh, okay, that means that I can, like, make fun of you now because of that.” And she was never very supportive of that, and then she got very jealous of all the friends that I was hanging out with who were male, and she would constantly ask me if I found them attractive.

He, then paused and we both became teary as he described what he imagined could have been a supportive response:

I think the best thing that could have happened would just be somebody saying “that's okay; that's just you.” And then probably, like, giving me a hug, something like that, where...they're not making judgments; they're just saying that they understand what I mean and that they still love me and accept me as who I am.

In this same exchange, Daniel then vividly described the kind of “mental gymnastics” that he performs to help him decide whether he will come out to someone or not. He talks about how exhausting this was for him and the other impacts that this kind of vigilance had on his mental health and his life. His response is indicative of the anticipatory rejection that many participants articulated in their interviews:

Actually, no, I haven't, but that's generally because I very rarely tell people, and there's only...a handful of people who know that about me...Well, the first thing that I do is I try to think of, like, the impact that it would have on my social life, so my parents do not know. My family does not know, but friends that are close to me I feel comfortable telling, but I would never tell anybody who was in my workplace or who would have some sort of authority over me because I don't want to deal with any repercussions that may implicitly or explicitly happen... they're going to either make fun of me or they're going to be uncomfortable with me afterwards.

...you realize, like, you're getting closer to some of your friends. And you're like, should I tell them? Should I not tell them? And then, kind of, go do, like, mental gymnastics to justify telling them or justify not telling them, and it's very stressful.

Yeah. It usually takes being around — well, it took me — the last time that I told somebody, it took me around two or three weeks before I was — I convinced myself that I was ready to tell them and that it wouldn't negatively impact me.

After his difficult experiences of hypervigilance, misunderstanding, and hurt coming out to others in his life about his bisexuality, Daniel described a contrasting experience:

... I went to a Halloween party...— we call it the gay house because there's a whole bunch of queer people, and they threw a queer Halloween party. And I remember feeling really welcome inside that house...I remember telling somebody...I'm bisexual. And they were like, “Oh, yeah, me too!” and then we high fived, and it felt really good knowing that there was somebody else out there...

These affective experiences of Daniels's various “coming outs” are evocative and moving. In opening our second interview, I asked Daniel to reflect upon the first

interview. He said that he had come out to his roommate between the first and second interview. This was an unanticipated occurrence that happened with relative frequency. In fact, Daniel was one of five participants who came out to someone significant in their lives while actively participating in the study. Daniel talked about coming out to his roommate in the following exchange during our second interview:

...thinking about...my reaction to it because I wasn't expecting it to have an emotional pull on me.. last time...I felt...a sense of...weight off my shoulders. ...

...I didn't realize that I was...secretive about who I tell and who I don't, and I don't necessarily like that. ...I feel way more accepted because my roommate knows that I'm bisexual now. I had a conversation with him. It turns out he's also bisexual, so that's another bag of worms. ...{he}feels like...{he} can be yourself around me, and, like, we hugged it out and w- — it was great.

Again, Daniel's sense of relief described using corporeal metaphors (“weight off my shoulders”) and using storytelling invoking Greek mythology is visceral and illustrative. Daniel's experience of “coming out casually” to someone close to him and then experiencing acceptance via their “no big deal” response was also typical. While not as explicit as in Daniel's case, most participants described feeling more connected to significant people in their lives after coming out to them. In Daniel's case, his coming out likely facilitated his roommate's coming out as well.

For many, coming out to their friends was a definitive marker in their lives; some said how the acceptance of their friends enabled them to feel more comfortable coming out to other important people in their lives (parents for example), and as Daniel articulated, helped them feel more open and connected in their relationships. As well, coming out continues to be a process that they are actively *engaged in* with their friends. Similar to their experiences of outness with their parents, participants were not out to

all their friends about their sexuality and/or gender. Many talked about the calculations they do that informs who they will come out to, how, and about what element of their identity. When asked what influences him coming out to people or not about his bisexuality Joaquin says:

With friends, it's if I know they're the type of people where that wouldn't change anything, where it wouldn't change the friendship dynamic...And then with theater people who I've talked to about it, and I've liked talking to them about it because then it makes me feel more inclusive. Like, I'm not just a straight cis male.

Joaquin's quote illuminates two common, crucial points: (a) participants often expressed fear around coming out to friends, (b) a chief driver of that fear was that it would change their friendships (presumably they would become less close or would somehow be treated with suspicion, directly in contrast with the actual experience that Daniel and others describe when disclosing to friends), and (c) aligned with theories of hybrid masculinities, distancing from hegemonic masculinity and adopting a marginalized, masculine subject position provides social capital.

Sean provides a striking example of support from his friend whom he came out to last year. She had been a close friend of his since middle school when they met at their "very conservative" Christian church. She started the Christian student club at their middle school. Given her commitments to Christianity, Sean described being anxious to come out to her and detailed her response below:

— she was like, "I don't care, like, what God says, and, like, I don't care what the church says. Like, I — like, you're still my friend... you're still, like, the same person," and so sh- — after that, she started using the correct pronoun. And she — the thing that I appreciated the most was... after I told her, she would... check in with me about telling other people... And so she also helped me pick out my new name when she moved up here...

### **Finding Myself...Who I Am Becoming**

When participants talked about coming out to both themselves and others they both showed and named significant affective responses (when some described the act of coming out as “no big deal,” they suggested that that was a presentation, “to make a big deal out of it, wouldn’t have been cool”). Much of the fear of coming out seemed like it could be reduced to “I can either hide this part of myself and belong, or express this fundamental part of myself and not belong.” Given that much of that affect was a product of their fears of rejection, and when they did come out, most people in most of their lives were accepting, they described relief and also a sense of acceptance and continued belonging;-they could now be closer to their “whole selves” and also be accepted and supported.

After they found acceptance and support, consistent with the theoretical orientation of this project, they were able to feel more comfortable in their own skin and explore other parts of their identities knowing that they are held in the safety of their relationships. Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental stage when people tend to reflect upon their own values and relationships, and begin building their life in relationship to the world that they want to live in (Arnett, 2004; Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

The following section will be devoted to their descriptions of “finding who I am becoming”: making a deliberate life filled with feelings of connection and meaning brought about through rich, intentional relationships (with communities and individuals), professional aspirations, personal growth, and acts of service to others. It will include sections on finding intentional spaces of likeness, which includes moving away from caregivers and often to urban centers; finding support and negotiating

conflict in LGBTQAI2 spaces; and connecting to activist and other communities that provide a sense of belonging, meaning, and sometimes dissonance and conflict for them. This section will also include participants' descriptions of personal growth and how they are making a deliberate life for themselves as they move through the world, and close with what they want that future world to look like and how they see themselves in it.

### **Finding Intentional Spaces of Likeness Offline**

Finding spaces of likeness included both LGBTQAI2 specific spaces and other spaces. LGBTQAI2 spaces, such as student groups or social services and advocacy organizations are often seen by wider U.S. culture and also by participants as spaces of active resistance to cisheteronormativity. Some participants described having a very uncomplicated and welcoming experience with LGBTQAI2 specific spaces and services, and for many this happened in high school. A few participants described taking an active leadership role in creating spaces of likeness where they and other sexual and gender minority youth could feel more supported.

Miles describes his high schools Gay/Straight Alliance in the following way:

But I was vice-president of the Gay-Straight Alliance at high school, and it was mostly — I was the only out transperson at the time, though three of my — people in my graduating class are now trans, who transitioned after graduating. And we just did fun stuff. We didn't really do a whole lot. We watched movies and made collages and posters and talked about being gay. And...it was a good support club for people who needed

For some, the catalyst for finding spaces of likeness came from living in, or moving to, a larger, urban center. Sometimes this move was explicitly tied with finding LGBTQAI2 specific resources and community, which enabled them to feel more comfortable and connected, and to explore and express other parts of their identities.

Participants overwhelmingly noted the positive impacts of moving to a socially and politically liberal urban center. For many that experience was connected to college, which along with the clear formal educational opportunities it confers, also offers a space to “try on and try out” different ways of being in the world. Both cities and typically colleges provide a wider, more diverse variety of individual and group-level social experiences, which is again an opportunity to learn about oneself and explore and connect with different aspects of oneself and community. In this vein, Seattle is a resource rich urban center with a lot of LGBTQAI<sup>2</sup> friendly and focused social, health, and community services and policies that support same-sex relationships.

Moving to a new place also offered a chance to get away from repressive or hurtful relationships and/or cultures or communities. A few participants saw moving as really imperative to their health and well-being. These participants had talked about the mental health impacts of feeling constrained within their families and communities and the freedom that moving to a larger more urban place offered. Chadwick talked about enjoying the anonymity of living in a large, urban, politically liberal city:

...one of the things I love about Seattle...no one knows who you are; no one knows your name; no one knows your life story, and no one gives a shit. And it really gives you this freedom...I just walk right by them. It's like, doesn't even register. So I really enjoy that...here...no one knows anybody else's business, and everyone's too busy to care...I can be...loudly queer or quietly queer...how visible I a...a trans flag as a cape around my shoulders, and...it'll fade from people's minds...

Chadwick's desire for and pleasure in anonymity is in contrast to what he felt was hypervisibility and the implied negative judgements that he perceived existed in the smaller, rural community that he grew up in. They went on to talk about their experiences since moving with a lot of positive affect, often associated with finding other people that they could related to in LGBTQAI<sup>2</sup> communities that were connected and

collaborative. Collin described his delight in moving to Seattle after living in other urban centers this way:

And the gay community and the lesbian community did not collaborate or work very well together as well, and I feel like that's — those problems are non-existent here...yeah, I feel like, when there's a flourishing gay community, there's a flourishing arts community, and there's...— it really helps support the infrastructure of the city.

Feeling connected to community often lead participants to talk more directly with others about norms of hegemonic masculinity and explore its impacts. One participant talked how transitioning from AFAB to a genderqueer masculine of center person forced them to negotiate the “kind of masc” person that they want to be. They said that they did not want to be a “bad guy” and see examples of how wounding masculine gender norms of dominance, competition, and emotional distance are to *everyone*. This is particularly relevant given adherence to hegemonic masculinity is correlated with violence perpetration, and this participant's professional life centers on violence prevention and response within queer communities. They also talked about the strategic ways in which they deploy their masculinity within certain geographic and social spaces to stay safe and/or to challenge sexism.

### **LGBTQAI2 Spaces Helping Me Find Myself**

This section will describe participants' experiences specifically within LGBTQAI2 spaces. It is deliberately positioned here because for many it was a space of likeness. For others, LGBTQAI2 spaces were not spaces of likeness, but nonetheless their engagement with them taught them something about themselves and that learning helped them “find themselves.”

Some participants had a more critical analysis and breadth of vocabulary and awareness around equity and justice related issues. This showed up around bisexuality in a number of ways; one of them centered on the idea of “authenticity” around policing of/within queer spaces. Some talked about trying to be the “subversive queer,” or feeling like one needed to live up to a certain expectations of non-normativity in order to be considered authentic or committed to progressive causes. Jordan describes recognizing this in his previous self and notes relief that that is no longer his experience. This kind of both/and recognition also indicates a level of security in his identity as an activist and within his sexuality; he doesn’t need to “prove” himself to anyone to feel confident that he belongs:

But in terms of those feelings {of being} queer enough, I think I feel mostly over those feelings now...I {don't} have to stay “subversive” enough to stay in that {subversive} community, and I am thankfully very over that. I’m very like, no, I’m going to go watch a movie. Capitalism is poop, and I’m still going to go watch this movie. And I’m not going to put a patch on my jacket. It was a nice jacket. I’m not going to do that.

This quote indicates Jordan’s awareness to accountability to some extent within LGBTQAI2 and other activist spaces. It also demonstrates the identity policing, which often occurs in activist communities via expectations of behavior or “symbols of subversion” (like patches on a jacket). Policing is a way in which normative assumptions of race and gender, including queer normativities are enforced, and these generally rest their “justification” on questions of presumed authenticity, such as having experienced certain forms of oppression or holding some particular sexual or semantic “credentials” (DeCosta, 2003; Hudson, 2012). For these participants, they often spoke of that policing in regards to an anticipated or lived experience of rejection from a group of people whom they were hoping would “get it” more than the non-queer general

population does. This could be particularly salient given that LGBTQAI2 youth experience more negative peer experiences than their cis and/or heterosexual counterparts (Higa et al., 2013).

Aligned with hybrid masculinities theory (and Jordan's comment on the expectations/social capital conferred via transgressing norms within activist communities), cis white men expressed the most reluctance to engage with LGBTQAI2 specific spaces and services. This reluctance can be primarily attributed to two reasons: (a) as Liam suggested, fear that they are not "allowed" or "queer enough" to be welcomed into those spaces, and (b) that cis white men experience greater social rights and less structural oppression than others who embody and/or are read as more marginalized identities. Thus, they may not feel like they would benefit from support. Building off of and connecting these two points, they may not have "felt" ostracized given the benefits of whiteness, cis-ness, and passing heterosexuality. However, given patriarchy's degradation of the body and emotions perpetuated in this case via masculine socialization, they also might not have the *skills* or *practice* to feel into and name their need for support, nor the capacity to (again over-ride hegemonic assumptions of invulnerability) to reach out to others to get support. Thus, even if they do feel into their emotions and realize that they need support, they could end up feeling further disconnected if they are in a social space with exclusionary norms around "who gets to suffer"; thus, it can be difficult to see a way out of that isolation. Therefore, although most cis white participants noted the benefits of freely moving through the world enjoying the privileges of how they are read, they suffered because the ways in which their sexuality was read was not authentic to them. They then realized that much of their suffering could be alleviated if they felt held by a community of people that they

could relate to, but didn't feel like it was appropriate or had not felt welcomed into gender/sexual minority spaces that could possibly offer that sense of connection because their privileged status made it impossible for them to suffer in their interpretation of who "belonged" in those spaces.

Others affirmed their fears by naming their avoidance of cis, white men specifically:

I tend to not feel like I can connect to cis men at all; especially cis, white men. In fact, I think that I just avoid them generally.

Similarly Joaquin, a mixed ethnicity cis man said poignantly:

I could go life as — I could go through life as a — just a privileged, straight, white male. But there's so many — I'd be so unsatisfied with that because I know there's so much more...

All of these ways of relating are indicative of the Othering that bisexuals experience, and also explicitly that white, cis straight men are difficult to connect to and live unsatisfying lives. These comments coupled with myriad others naming the fear of violence and bullying, sexism and homophobia, perpetrated by "bros" (white, cis, straight men) not only demonstrate the pain of their lived experiences with "real" and perceived white, cis, straight men, but also importantly, show a discursively constructed monolithic Other, "the white cis straight man," as symbolic and material oppressor. Thus, it makes sense that those participants who are "closer" to this Othered identity feel reluctance to engage with people and communities that may otherwise be supportive. Their pre-emptive avoidance and/or ambivalence can be seen as a strategic intersychic approach that allows participants to avoid the pain of being rejected (and in this case, the "double pain" of being rejected by people who it would be reasonable to think would be more accepting than heterosexual people). It is important to note that

there were four cis white men enrolled in the study and one cis ethnically Latino who passed as white; two of those five men experienced significant distress around their sexuality both in the past and currently, one felt like he was unequivocally welcomed within LGBTQAI2 spaces, and the other two rarely engaged in such spaces.

Conflict and opposing ideologies in gender/sexual minority spaces has been well documented (Weiss, 2004). Even when participants felt belonging within LGBTQAI2 spaces, their experiences of “community” were complicated. Montell expanded on the political infighting in LGBTQAI2 spaces through his description of the division that exists within trans communities:

I guess, the political meaning for me is more specifically centered around the word trans because I feel like, a lot of the times, nonbinary community is treated as separate from trans community because of — partially because of the idea of binary transition and because there’s, like, a hierarchy with that where people who pursue the most physical and societal transition are considered the most trans, not necessarily by other transpeople, but by society at large.

For participants that were not currently in college, finding LGBTQAI2 specific spaces was more difficult. Many belonged to online communities with an LGBTQAI2 focus (such as a Facebook group). As well, some said that they were a part of a bisexual specific Facebook group, which was initially heartening, but they expressed disappointment that most group members who engaged on the site were femme. Some describe this as adding to the sense of separateness that they experienced as being a bisexual man/masculine person. Formative research for this project revealed this as a distinct experience for masculine people, who are not in college, in this particular region: i.e., the paradoxical confusion, and waves of excitement, disappointment, and pain associated with living in a politically liberal city, well-resourced for LGBTQAI2 people and finding few bisexual specific resources (which they speculated would be

make a meaningful contribution to their lives) or the sense of welcoming that they hoped for. Eli described hope and excitement when he started a Facebook group then disappointed when it “didn’t go anywhere”:

I actually started a group on Facebook of bisexual guys...six of us got together once just to talk about our experiences...it was great and it seemed like other people thought it was great too, but it just hasn’t gone anywhere. I wish it had, I’m bummed that it didn’t...

While both Eli and informants in formative interviews described disappointment at the low engagement of bisexual men on public forums like Facebook, he also identified his bisexuality as a political identity and used it to seek connection, meaning, and social change within other spaces, such as in activism. This was uttered by several participants, who suggested that bisexuality had provided them with meaning, purpose, and a community.

Some had found this community within LGBTQAI2 specific spaces, and others had found it within activist enclaves or social groups that did not focus specifically on gender and sexuality. Some talked about how associating with people engaged in social and political action had importantly provided them with *language* and a sense of solidarity to process and express their experiences with gender and sexuality. Further, some noted that engaging with activist communities had provided them a critical consciousness around white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy to “be able to see the world more clearly,” which, in turn, had enabled them to feel more deeply connected to others and work towards the common aim of compassionate resistance, rather than “oppression Olympics,” which some said that they could easily fall into. This active, service-oriented engagement helped them feel like they were a part of something beyond themselves and that they were making *the*

*self* and *the world* that they wanted to live into! Eli talks about his bisexuality as intimately connected to his identity as a political activist:

...bisexuality has really taken on... a political identity for me...I felt so liberated when I first identified as bisexual and was open about it.

Talking about activism and noting it as an important part of one's identity was a common experience for participants as many discursively positioned themselves as activists and a few were working professionally in social-justice-oriented organizations.

For nearly all participants, part of "finding themselves" involved engaging with spaces of likeness and interacting with LGBTQAI2 specific spaces (sometimes one in the same and sometimes not). While these quotes demonstrate a diversity of experiences particularly within dimensions of connection/isolation and how important LGBTQAI2-specific spaces were in one's life, they are also critical elements to "finding yourself," for several reasons in that they offered many participants critical spaces of belonging, a necessary component of being human. As well, they forced participants to grapple with the complexity of their experience and, in many cases, acknowledge their own wounds and the wounds that they have perpetrated.

In many ways their varied experiences within LGBTQAI2 spaces can be seen as microcosms of the larger U.S. culture. Via negotiating the politics of belonging and not, participants had to exist within the gray space of feeling connected in some ways and not in others, *and* know that they were OK, not because the group that they were identifying with were unequivocally accepting and without conflict, but that they (a) are inherently "enough" already and some people will understand their experience(s) or some elements of their experiences and some people won't (and that that has no value judgement on them or the other person), (b) that people are messy and complicated,

and (c) within that complicated, in-between, ambiguous, paradoxical, uncertain, and often uncomfortable gray lies the possibility for richer, more meaningful relationships and experiences, which (d) requires reflexive, introspective, emotional work to understand and accept themselves and others in all of their wholeness.

### **Introspection as a Way of Finding and Becoming Myself**

Consistent with developmental literature on emerging adulthood, as well as the methodology used for this study, participants “took stock” of their own values and reflected on the kind of world that they wanted to live in (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Arnett, 2004). The next section of this chapter will delve deeper into the personal growth work that they had done/were doing to get to a place of greater ease and connection to themselves and others through their direct relationships and personal growth practices.

Given the theoretical orientation of this project, which posits that we are always becoming who we are in relationship to others, part of that “finding myself” for many participants came through their affective experiences within the communities that they already identified with (cultural or faith-based community for example), or their community of friends. Jordan expanded upon this in his reflection of the Korean drumming circle that he is a part of in the following quote:

I am not out to them...they have different expectations of me and think I am so nice and polite because they think that I am a cis man...(aside from) misogyny and the masculinity thing, this is a space where I'm very much affirmed as a masculine person, and, like, it's — I'm very much seen as...a young man, which I have — I don't have any other Korean spaces that see me as that, and that's really affirming.

Jordan narrates a mix of feelings similar to the dissonance or ambivalence that many participants named in relationship to LGBTQAI2-specific spaces. On one hand,

Jordan feels both belonging and affirmation in a place where both his cultural heritage and gender identity as masculine can be expressed. On the other hand, feeling discomfort around the exclusion or implicit messaging of misogyny and gender hegemony (both the assumptions about his gender, and also, he goes with his friend who is a cis woman, and the people in the drumming circle, who are all older cis women, are far less welcoming of her and hold her to higher expectations). His utterance also shows the selective and strategic ways that participants negotiated their decisions to be out, about what, and to whom. And by virtue that he is continuing to put his body, as it is read, into this space that he finds affirming, demonstrates the pleasure that he derives from this community of drummers. In essence, Jordan is saying, “I can’t be all of myself with these loving and imperfect people, and that is OK because this space affirms me in other ways.” Thus, Jordan chooses not to be out about being a trans masculine person, and also feels disappointed by the misogyny normalized by the group, and also has joined it and feels affirmed in his masculinity and connected to his Korean culture as a part of his participation.

Joaquin described the importance of his “theater friends.” He had mentioned that he discovered theater when he was in high school and that he found a space in which he felt both included and encouraged to be “weird” and expressive. He talked about the friends that he met through theater in juxtaposition to his other, non-theater friends whom he described as more traditionally masculine, and he talked about feeling that those friendships felt more constrained, that he felt less comfortable in them, and was less freely able to talk about issues such as sexuality in them. He also contrasted the personal attributes of friends from the two groups when he described his traditionally

masculine friends as choosing “safer” professional paths such as engineering, and attributed that to their lack of willingness to self-reflect:

And I’ve never talked about it with my roommates, but if they do care about having self-awareness. Or I would never even talk about gender with them. And I don't know if they just found it comfortable to be in the norms and what's expected out of them, and they did find themselves in that... And I don't even know if they are still...happy doing engineering. It just seems like they came to school with that, and then they were happy...

When I asked if his relationship with his “theater friends” had influenced his understanding of gender in any way, he responded:

...last quarter, I did a -- one of my anthropology projects was about vogue dancing, which is big in...the drag scene...it’s men who are being very feminine and sexualized. And so I took some vogue classes, and I looked into it, and I was like, “oh, I didn't feel that. I don't feel feminine, I guess,” and so there was more exploration there. And then the people that I meet are always more interesting, and I’m like, “oh, they are happy with who they are.” And maybe my masculine male friends who are on that path are happy with who they are. But, gosh, it just seems like people who I’ve met who’ve gone through a lot and have truly found themselves at the end of it, whether they're -- they've just comes to term with their sexuality, with being gay, or they're like, “oh, no, I’m actually transgender”-- they seem more happy and more content with it.

For Joaquin, it was feeling connected to a community of people who modeled that kind of self-exploration that inspired and supported him to do the personal work necessary to both explore and come to a more secure place in his sexuality. For Joaquin and others, that place was a more relaxed and curious relationship to the *in-between* and being ok with “not knowing” and not defining themselves based upon societal conceptions of who they were “supposed” to be. It’s evident in his utterance about taking a vogue class; he was actively questioning his gender and sexuality in relationship to the gendered cultural context that he lives in and did not show affective distress at that class not giving him “an answer” about either. He took the class because, among

other things, it provided him with information that suggested to him that he did not feel feminine and thus, in his interpretation, may not be trans and regarded that with non-attachment and suggested that he still had exploration to do. Joaquin understands his identity as fluid, dynamic, and multidimensional and is accepting of its nature.

Participants both implicitly and explicitly discussed the “personal growth” that they had done to be more self-accepting and to construct the lives that they wanted to live. Much psychological research would conceptualize their utterances as resilience, and, in the face of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity, their capacity even to own a “non-normative” sexuality and defy gender norms is certainly resilient. But to *only* call it resilience is to reduce their lives and experiences to their reactions to a wounding social world. Participants used agency to *actively make* the world that they wanted to live into to have a more positive relationship to their gender and/or sexuality. Chadwick enthusiastically described his feelings about his sexuality in the following quote:

I'll have these...moments where I'll just...text...my roommate...and I'll say, “God damn it, I love being gay,”...I'm laughing at myself for...being so afraid of it... — repressing it so much and just... being like, “no, fuck it; this is something you can enjoy! This is something I'm going to enjoy, God damn it, because I can!”

Both trans and cis participants experienced freedom and ease in expanding their conceptions of and relationships to gender and sexuality. Collin, a cis participant, followed up with a similar quote and continued to say that this expanded conception of gender and sexuality came with his own personal learning and development:

I feel like they are, really, deeply related and intertwined because it's — you can't just have...the political conversation about trans people...without bringing in sexual orientation because they are so closely knit...I feel like when you get a more expansive idea about gender and you get more in the know about it and you realize that it is a construct and that there's not a lot

of — that you really have to worry about, then it expands your sexual orientation as well; it goes both ways...

... those two things do need to be learned about together, gender and sexuality...

The emotional and material space to be able to reflect on one's own history and experiences that inform one's values is clearly important for the participants. Having class privilege provides an opportunity for that space (recall Jordan's and Daniel's quotes about the stress of poverty taking precedence over thinking about his gender and sexuality). However, deliberate reflection enabling one to "figuring out" one's values can also come from struggle (as Joaquin noted in his comment above).

Experiencing struggle in all the ways that it can show up implies distress and discomfort, and those feelings forced participants to "rub up against their own stuff," and reflect upon, work through, and talk about those difficult emotions and experiences with the support and care of loving others. Engaging with that difficult emotional work illuminated their own emotional capacities and the capacity of others, as well as helped them become more clear on their own priorities and values as they looked to the future.

Montell talked about the deliberate approach that he is taking to the active construction of "the self" moving forward. His reflections require both an empirical understanding of the structural ways that cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity and attendant gender roles "work" in the world and how those were implicated in one's own life. His utterances also demonstrate a high level of self-awareness and desire to integrate and move into a future self that is intentional and authentic, identifying the parts that he wants to keep through his transition because they are aligned with "who he is" including his priorities and values (rather than gendered socialization). He describes this process of self-making in the context of transitioning in following way:

...it does matter to me a little bit because... — it's important for me to work out what I want to hold on as part of myself — and what I want to do away with as part of transitioning.

Joaquin echoes the agentic, curious stance that most participants took to construct meaningful lives. Joaquin is directly challenging the default assumptions of cisheteronorms in the following response when asked about how one learns about their gender:

Identifying your gender comes from a self-awareness which happens through a lot of digging deep into yourself and looking at things from your past that can affect you now...But I've never been one to — I've always...go against the norms... I don't want to do that because everyone else is or because I'm being told to do that. I'm going to do the opposite...even if I go through that introspective work and get to the point where I'm...I'm just a straight cis male, I'll be a lot happier than being a straight cis male because that's what's expected of me.. I wouldn't want to just accept that; I would want to know that for sure, myself.

Jordan summarizes this section concisely when he talks about realizing his capacity to self-actualize and choose his life and relationships based upon his values.

...learning to, like — what is the word I want? I think the phrase is...self-actualize, to be like, “oh, this is who I am, and this is what I want for myself, and this is like — these are the values that I have, and these are values that I actually have, not that...I'm being told to have.”

The capacity for both introspection and to view identity as fluid and dynamic provided most participants with a sense of self-determination, important in feeling agency in one's own life and relationships. Their ability to self-reflect on their gendered socialization was painful. However, that self-reflection also allowed them to both empathize with their younger “selves,” who had experienced those hurts (often with less coping tools like support from others or a sophisticated analysis of structural gender oppression), and to “take stock” of who they wanted to become, based upon what was important to them.

## **Giving Back As a Way of Finding Myself**

Emerging adult and adult developmental theories often discuss the importance of finding meaning and purpose (Levinson, 1980; Levinson, 1986; Arnett, 2014). Many participants found this through their professional or volunteer work. Joaquin says the following about seeking a “mission” that will feel both authentic and fulfilling to him:

...as much introspective thinking as I have because it — I needed to go through that to be comfortable and, like, to actually find myself and get on a trajectory of where I’m going now...And so I need to find, like, my own path, I guess— like, what I want my mission to be or who I want myself to be.

Eli talked about his activism work in a similar way when enthusiastically remarking (quoted previously in this chapter):

...bisexuality has really taken on... a political identity for me...I felt so liberated when I first identified as bisexual and was open about it.

Participants talked about creating the kinds of relationships that they want to have with family and friends, and with sexual and romantic partners. Jordan talked about his job supporting LGBTQAI2 people in creating their own values-based relationships rather than identity-based relationships and the sense of obligation that he feels to model that kind of approach to relationships in his own life given his philosophical commitments. He talks about this both as a professional act of service and as it relates to his own life and approach to relationships:

I’m part of this organization that...says that we believe in anti-violence values, specifically around domestic violence for queer and trans people, that means I want to be the... best version of myself I can be, right?

Like others, when asked about LGBTQAI2 spaces, Jordan commented on the social capital implicit in being “the most subversive queer.” He also critiqued cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity throughout his interview. He reflected on the

philosophically opposed relationship between dominant norms and aspirations of “the most subversive queer.” He says that in response to oppressive norms, he used to want to enact a subversive sexuality, but after learning more about himself he now says that the monogamy norm of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity feels authentic to him and allows him to “be the best version of himself” in his romantic relationships:

And, like, monogamy is how I know how to have healthy relationships, and it’s more important to me to have...healthy, values-based relationships, rather than messy polyamorous relationships where I also don't feel like I’m living out my values anymore. Like, it seems like a lot of things to sacrifice for this idea of being... “queer enough,” when having a healthy relationship seems like a pretty great goal.

This quote demonstrates the deliberate work that Jordan has done to know himself better and become more secure in his capacity to name and enact relationship structures that are “healthier” for him, even if they don’t advance his social capital, and importantly, modeling that for others knowing that he is admired as a visible person working for an organization striving to help people create values-based relationships to build more loving, compassionate communities. He continues to say:

...my idea of a liberatory future involves not colluding with... systemic injustice as it is...so, that’s part of my thought, “if this is what I envision the future to be, how do I live — how do I get there?” And...part of it is... — living as if I’m already there and recognizing that there are realities that — that the reality is that I’m not there yet in terms of...the way the rest of the world works. And...what can I do to...build communities around me that are — that...have the same values as me or similar values as me?

This quote demonstrates recognition of our inherent interconnection. It also shows the developmental capacity to be able to hold multiple truths. Jordan acknowledges the long history of structural and systemic oppression and the material consequences of that, while also holding an aspirational vision for a more equitable world. This capacity to hold the complex, multiple truths of individuals, communities, and systems is

incredibly important for participants to be able to make meaning from their experiences and provides the reader with a foundation to make sense of the results presented over the last two chapters.

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have presented data within the theme of *Finding Myself: Who I was, who I am, and who I am becoming*. This includes participant's affective experiences of exploring their sexuality and gender in the multiple and layered contexts of place, space, online and offline relationships, and through their own introspection. Aligned with the theoretical orientation of this project, which understands identity as malleable and dynamic and reality as subjective, throughout the analysis it became clear that the meanings that participants made of their experiences were constructed via these layered contexts (social/cultural/political context, then relational context, then affective experience, which produces meaning making in the form of narrative). Acceptance and connection were necessary for the kinds of exploration that resulted in feeling more comfortable in their own skin, and that increased comfort allowed for more intimacy with others. This feeling of belongingness is relational, participatory, and embodied (Hudson, 2012).

This chapter has described the direct ways in which the societal (as always influencing) interacted with the self in identity construction and change (McClean & Seyd, 2015). I also detailed participants' relationship to, and experiences of, coming out and by extension *being out* as active, agentic subjects "in defiance of fixed identities" (Spurlin, 2006, p. 11). For many exploring their sexuality and/or gender identity and expression and feeling accepted was critical to constructing a personal narrative that

provided coherence across the life course. That love ethic (hooks, 2000) provided them the necessary security to take risks that offer the opportunity for meaning and purpose.

Throughout this chapter there is a tension between the developmental journey taking place for the participants through formative years and communities (such as theater in high school) and the still present navigation of whom to disclose aspects of their identities to and whom to keep it from. The fluidity involved in this development alludes to the evidence that development occurs throughout a lifespan, and that these participants are still on a journey to finding whom they will become tomorrow—which may be different the day after that, and so on.

The lens of multidimensionality and self-determination can help us reflect on the results documented in Chapters 6 and 7. Undeniably, the context of white supremacy and misogyny and its manifestations in cisheteronormative/cishomonormative practices is powerful, pervasive, and ubiquitous, and works on participants in multiple ways. And, in the face of those repressive norms, participants' capacity to reflect on their earlier life experiences, feel supported by others, and view identity as malleable resulted in a more agentic, authentic, and easeful experience of gender and sexuality and of their lives as a whole.

## CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

*Its only in relation to other bodies and many somebodies that anybody is somebody. Don't get it into your mind that you are somebody in yourself.*

*—Jimmy Boggs the Detroit movement ancestor,  
as quoted in Emergent Strategy by adrian maree brown*

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the results and their implications for policy and social work practice and education. Next, I will offer suggestions for future research. Then, I will detail a few relevant limitations of the study and finally, finish with the study's conclusions.

Bisexuality necessitates confrontation of gender stereotypic socialization in different ways, with differing intensities, largely based upon social location. In taking up bisexuality as an identity, the men and trans masculine people in this study have had to directly grapple with their relationship to cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity in ways that carry ambiguity, dissonance, and uncertainty. It is within the liminal, contradictory space, that gender, as a “structural property of society,” (Risman, 2004, p. 128), or an “identity,” or even the idea that it is “just one thing,” becomes shaky. And within this shakiness (that often feels exclusionary, uncertain, uncomfortable), the possibility for an expansive, liberatory way of being exists, if we can imagine it. And that *imagination* for an emancipated relationship to rigid gender structures needs to be collective for it to be equitable and enduring. Thus, the discussion of this study will center on the gifts that participants shared within this research and their implications for the *collective* of stakeholders within policy, practice, and social work education, and future research.

While I set out to explore how emerging adult bisexual men and trans masculine people construct/desconstruct their sexuality and gender identity and expression in the context of shifting masculinit(ies), I was not able to “answer” that research question. Or rather, like identity itself, the “answers” are slippery and undefined. The results provide partial insight into a few critical areas for understanding bisexual and trans health disparities; the influences of sexuality and gender identity construction and how they *experience* and *feel* about their gender and sexuality. Their abilities to explore and understand their sexuality and gender are intimately enmeshed with “how well” they are doing. As noted previously in this dissertation, in order to explore and take risks necessary to learn more about ourselves, it is critical that we feel held and supported by important others in our lives. Thus, the richness of participants’ affective experiences, which infuse this study on identity construction, is unsurprising given the methodology, specifically the design and structure of the interviews and the somatic and arts-based methods and the content of the questions therein, which included items aimed to elicit affect and felt experiences. The discussion herein will reflect material in both of these realms.

A diversity of social science research uses critical narrative methods to explore lived experiences of sexuality; however, this study was unique in that it centered the experience(s) of bisexuality with participants who held a diversity of “identities” within the traditional conceptualization attended to in social work (race, class, educational attainment, etc.). This was not intended to reduce or essentialize “bisexual experience” for men/masculine people, but rather to better understand the ways in which nuanced experiences of identities synergize and “play out” in the context of newer conceptualization of masculinit(ies), salient in this particular epoch. The study

benefitted from the narratives of participants whose positionalit(ies) enable them access to, or exclude them from particular health promoting resources, including material supports like therapy and top surgery, and relational supports like acceptance and belonging within both micro and macro spaces (see Hudson, 2012, for examples).

This dissertation was born of my distress at the implications of a gendered socialization structure, which privileges binaried conceptions of identity and ascribes value to attributes labeled as male/masculine over female/feminine resulting in myriad negative health and well-being outcomes for everyone (Risman, 2004). Said another way, I am hurt and angry at the profoundly costly ways in which misogyny continues to be a normative aspect of U.S. society. While gender and social science literature has often appropriately focused on the individual implications for others regarding positive links between masculine socialization and health outcomes (such as increased violence perpetration against women and sexual and gendered minorities for example), my interests are rooted in questions around “what kinds of wounds are we asking men/masculine people to take on that result in this kind of wounding of others across the social ecology?” Western, empirical science has just recently realizing what many spiritual and technical traditions, as well as some artists/poets, have known for millennia: that personal and collective wounds become implicated in the body/mind (as one organism) and are expressed within relationships (to self, others, and the natural world).

Diverse fields such as social work, public health epigenetics, and neuropsychology can inform an understanding of those processes as well as how those wounds can be healed. Social work is well positioned to both bring together these seemingly disparate disciplines and explore socializing structures and practices across the social ecology,

including how they become implicated in individual and collective health and well-being. By integrating elements of critical race, queer, and symbolic interactionist theories within a feminist, poststructuralist epistemological and theoretical framework, employing theoretical pluralism and multiple methods to “get at” more complete data, I was able to begin to tease apart some of the nuances and complexity in the participants gendered experiences. These frameworks guided all areas of the research. They were vital, in that they allowed for a conception of identity as at all times socially situated, malleable, and dynamic.

This conception of identity aligns with social work’s focus on strengths and non-pathologizing of individuals’ experiences (i.e., acknowledging that if one chooses not to come out to their parents, for example, it is not necessarily that they are “repressed”), as well as a more complicated understanding of intersectionality and how it “works” on particular bodies. Given that all identity is socially constructed (including by social workers as a part of the social world and people that hold positions of power in many institutional structures, including my own here), and also attached to real, material consequences, it is the responsibility of social workers and other practitioners to interrogate the ways in which their own practices, policies, and education influences the experiences of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals to best support their health and well-being. In this chapter, I analyze and situate the findings of this current research project within a social work relevant discussion, focusing on their contribution to a better understanding of sexuality, gender, and identity for emerging adult bisexual men and trans masculine individuals. Some of the implications for this study are relevant for LGBTQAI<sup>2</sup> people generally and some are specific to bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine people.

### **Implications for Policy**

The results of this study have implications for policy, practice, and social work education. Discrimination against LGBTQAI2 people is deeply ingrained into the social and cultural norms of U.S. society and manifests in myriad overt and covert expressions of cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. Given that bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine people are included in the “umbrella” of LGBTQAI2 people and thus have some of the same constraints on their social rights, cultural shifts towards increased acceptance coupled with policy changes that support LGBTQAI2 people generally could benefit them as part of the overall group. Although policy changes at the macro level in no way represent broad or uniform social change, as is evident in the current backlash of “freedom of religion” laws and “bathroom bills,” they can represent values of equity and inclusion. However, to the extent that policies represent the social and cultural norms of a “place,” the social valuing of LGBTQAI2 people can also be expressed through anti-discrimination policies in institutional settings (like higher education) and local, state, and federal policy.

Given this project’s intersectional lens, it is critical to note the discrimination that participants of color experienced and how that impacted their experience of their sexuality and/or gender. Similarly, the chronic stressors of growing up with financial strain were detrimental to participants’ capacity to explore their sexuality and/or gender identity and expression and for many trans masculine participants, their capacity to access gender-affirming interventions (such as top surgery). Sexuality and gender are always “happening” in a context, and the context of white supremacy and classism that pervades U.S. culture also impacts the participants of this study. Thus, policies that support racial/ethnic and economic equity would also support bisexual emerging adult

men and trans masculine people. This could be particularly critical in rural locales where, consistent with other research findings, participants in this study who had lived in rural locales as children reported greater fear of rejection and homogeneity, or a “more conservative culture.”

Social workers work in a variety of institutional settings. Institutions such as religion (both doctrine and physical structures like “the church”), the military, and higher education play a role in determining the social culture of “a place” and can provide relational and material opportunities and constraints. Although religion isn’t in and of itself a legal entity, it is a powerful cultural and social institution nonetheless, and alienation from “the church” can be a strong deterrent for “non-normative” behavior, particularly in places where affiliation with other social groups is limited (i.e., “the church” can be the only place available to feel connection and belonging, which are imperative to human flourishing). The findings of this study suggest that participants involved with religious institutions that espoused more overtly accepting attitudes towards LGBTQAI<sup>2</sup> people experienced less anticipated rejection and had more freedom to explore their sexuality and gender and also felt less distress at coming out.

The military and higher education can also play important roles in a number of ways. While the military was only a significant part of one participant’s experience, it is critical to note that (a) given its social, historical, and material power in U.S. culture (and hypermasculine social culture), (b) many of those involved in the military become involved in emerging adulthood, and that (c) it provides tangible benefits and constraints, and (d) often sets policy- and practice-related precedence for other institutions with large populations of emerging adults (notably higher education).

Many of the participants are currently involved in higher education or had been in the past and noted that being in college had played a significant role in helping them feel more free to explore their sexuality and gender identity and expression. All participants in this study had gone to college in Seattle or the suburbs of Seattle, and thus, their experiences in higher education are intimately enmeshed in the larger sociopolitical culture of Seattle. Being in a city and affiliated with an institution of higher education that espouses “liberal” views of gender and sexuality as well as provides services and resources targeted towards LGBTQAI2 people can provide space for emerging adults to better understand their sexuality and gender and also help them expand their imagination of what is possible for their sexuality and gender. Further it can help them feel more at ease and accepted in those elements of their identit(ies).

While being in a city and affiliated with an institution that espoused “liberal” values was named as important, it also was seen as having the potential to disempower through a diversity of microaggressions. Participants noted the pervasiveness of “labels” in higher education spaces and almost universally described feeling averse to “being put in a box.” Institutional policy that creates rigid bounds of inclusion/exclusion (presumably that necessitate this kind of categorization) could be interrogated and eradicated. Furthermore, participants noted the ubiquity of “coupley” language and practices in higher education sponsored social events. Institutional policies and practices that are not informed by monosexual assumptions, nor the primacy of coupled relationships (over other kinds of relationships) could help support participants in this study. Particularly institutional policy and practices that promote values-based relationships (like Jordan noted) could help participants feel more connected to others and reduce the hyper focus (read: singular importance) of being

involved in a monogamous romantic and/or sexual relationship. This could help participants “do” better by reducing isolation and loneliness and supporting a diversity of relationships, which is important for all men/masculine people whose health disparities have been linked to these variables, but particularly important during emerging adulthood and for bisexual men who noted a sense of disconnect in higher education spaces in which they had anticipated more acceptance. As noted in Kerrion’s quote earlier alluding to the messaging that he got that women were not to be friends with, but to have sex with, institutional policies and practices could promote gender equity in supporting friendships between people of multiple genders, possibly reducing sexual assault and relationship violence, which are endemic on college campuses.

Myriad institutional policies have impacted the lives of the trans masculine participants. Policies that enable trans participants to change their name with the registrar or use a changing room at the gym that they feel comfortable in, or live in a “gender diverse” floor in a dorm can support them in feeling free to explore and express their gender any way that they choose. And both the military and higher education had relevance to the kinds of gender-affirming resources that helped (or could have helped) many trans masculine participants feel better in their own skin—namely informed, affirming health care providers and health insurance that paid for interventions and support services for participants and their families.

In addition, importantly, given the gendered “ocean” that all of these institutions swim in, and their symbolic and structural power, any policy that promotes gender equity (on which cisheteronorms rest) and a diversity of masculinit(ies) can support efforts by gender and sexual minorities, including the men/trans masculine people in this study, to explore, understand, and feel ease in their sex- and gender-related

experiences. It is important to note that gender equity promotion policies have also been suggested to reduce other harmful and costly problems in higher education settings such as violence and aggression perpetration and victimization, alcohol overuse, and mental health decrements (Coker et al., 2002; DeKeseredy, Schwartz, & Alvi, 2000; Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015).

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study have myriad implications for social work practice. Given the social and biological importance of emerging adulthood, the health disparities experienced by LGBTQAI2 and specifically bisexual people, and the increasing prevalence of bisexuality in the population, it is critical that social workers develop competency around issues specific to supporting LGBTQAI2 emerging adults generally and specific knowledge and skills to be able to better understand the contexts of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine people.

The importance of peer acceptance and friendships for emerging adults is significant (Arnett, 2014; Kimmel, 1994; Bridges & Kimmel, 2009; Way, 2011). Finding “spaces of likeness” where participants felt accepted and also were able to move more fluidly within, around, and between gender were critical to their identity development and their well-being. Many described feeling that sense of acceptance as well as the capacity to break free of rigid gender norms in spaces such as theater and anime. Movement and singing in groups has long been important to spiritual and cultural traditions across the world for various reasons, including building collective solidarity and a sense of belonging and has been suggested to be therapeutic for LGBTQAI2 youth (Alrutz, 2014; Halverson, 2005; Halverson, 2007; Irazábal & Huerta, 2016; Wernick,

Woodford, & Kulick, 2014; Wernick, Kulick, & Woodford, 2014). Furthermore, arts- and creative-based modalities have been shown to support health and well-being for emerging adults. Using theater, dance, role play, and other arts-based tools in therapeutic group or individual settings could help emerging adults explore different ways of being, particularly around gender, which participants described as critical to them understanding and affirming their sexuality and providing a more expansive sense of masculinit(ies). Institutional and governmental policy should create and sustain supports including designated time and funding for creative programming in youth-centric spaces such as schools and community centers. This could be in obvious forms such as drama courses in high schools, but could also be infused into the everyday, academic curriculum as well, fostering creativity and the capacity to “be a wierdo,” and explore different parts of the self within “normal” spaces such as academic high school classes. While anime and role playing was named as a supportive space for participants, many of them also off-handedly mentioned that anime “communities” (as symbolic of a larger culture) perpetuated sexist norms. Participants confirmed extant literature that suggests that anime has an idiosyncratic mix of trans and queer enthusiasts who tend to hold pro-feminist ideals and cis gender men (generally) who hold more hegemonic notions of gender and/or are outright antagonistic to women/femme people (Nisbett, 2018; Vázquez-Miraz, 2017). Interventions could target gender equity within online and in-person anime spaces.

While it is true that the internet can sometimes be a treacherous and unkind place, it is also important to note the critical and positive role that the internet played in the lives of this study’s participants. Consistent with other scholarship, participants characterized the internet as a vital space of connection, representation, information,

acceptance, sexual and gender exploration, and identity development (Craig & McInroy, 2014). This was particularly critical for participants who had lived in rural and/or socio-politically conservative locales. Another resource provided by the internet was the available pornography, which participants reported using at various times in their lives. Myriad literature describes the links between porn use and sexual health for emerging adult populations, and an adequate discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, important for this discussion, internet porn use, with friends, whom subsequently made meaning out of the types of porn, and participants' subsequent distress over their own and others' attributions, was prevalent. Or said another way, participants watched porn with their friends, all of whom made meaning out of their porn use (i.e., "I think I am bisexual, but I must be gay because I like gay porn" and "you say you are bisexual, but you must be gay because you watch gay porn"), and then they felt confused and upset at their own and others' attributions. Adding to the importance of centering interventions on internet porn use, emerging adults (including this sample) tend to have limited in-person sexual experiences, thus porn, often misogynistic and aggressive in nature, has the potential to play a primary role in their development of sexual scripts (Braithwaite, Coulson, Keddington, & Fincham, 2015; Peter & Valkenberg, 2010; Wright, 2013). Taken together, it is clear that internet pornography use is an important site for social work interventions.

My suggestions for intervention are similar for both the internet in general and internet porn use in particular, and center pleasure and connection. Given that pleasure (sometimes in the form of sexual pleasure) is a vital part of being human (Diamond, 2006; Krug, et al., 2002; Tolman & McClelland, 2011), and the fact that porn use can enable *exploration of* and *connection to* pleasure (Penley, Shimizu, Miller-Young, &

Taormino, 2013), social workers working with emerging adult men and trans masculine people could provide crucial internet and porn literacy skills aimed at providing psychoeducation and developing criticality, discernment, and plans for avoiding harm. This kind of intervention could potentially reduce sexism and misogyny as well as monosexism among emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals (as Montell noted, who are “not immune to developing those ideas”), and help support a less judgmental stance, thus reducing distress towards their own porn use.

Consistent with the findings in other developmental literature, this study’s participants talked about the importance of “giving back,” and building rich relationships, which have worked synergistically with “personal growth” work that they have done to build self-awareness, self-acceptance, and resilience, all aspects of well-being in LGBTQAI2 youth (Higa et al., 2013). Sometimes this was related to their sexuality and/or gender identity and expression and sometimes it was not. Supporting emerging adults as they practice “taking stock” of their lives (typical at this developmental stage) to identify and support the relationships and service related experiences that help them find meaning and purpose could be an important space of intervention for social workers.

Social workers are often charged with assessing well-being in a variety of institutional, social service, and educational settings. Although it was not reported in the results of this study (given that it was not directly related to the research question), participants spontaneously mentioned alcohol and/or drug use, aggression victimization (from peers and partners), and mental illness. Given the health and educational disparities associated with bisexuality and trans identities (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Feinstein & Dyar, 2017; Mustanski et al., 2014; Paul, 2014; Purcell et al.,

2007; Testa et al., 2012; Goldblum et al., 2012; Reisner, et al., 2015; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014), it is important that assessments include comprehensive and routine screening for mental health and substance use issues and aggression victimization and perpetration.

Participants described exploring their gender/sexuality, their attitudes about gender/sexuality, receiving messaging about their gender/sexuality, or coming out about their gender identity or sexuality to peers and friends. As social workers working in institutional, community-based and/or individual service provision settings, developing and implementing universal programming that supports prosocial skill development such as empathy, emotional attunement, and compassion could support study participants to feel connected to peers and develop deeper intimacy within friendships. Implementing universal interventions aimed at promoting prosocial skills could result in a more supportive peer culture, more connected friendships, and a more easeful, less critical relationship to oneself. All of these things could help people feel more supported in exploring aspects of gender and sexuality and mitigate loneliness and isolation, ultimately promoting well-being.

Social emotional interventions that center somatics, arts, and contemplative practices, sometimes called “mindfulness based interventions,” have shown promise in a number of clinical applications including several relevant to emerging adulthood such as depression, anxiety, substance use, and aggression (Baer, 2003; Heppner et al., 2008; Gallagher, Hudepohl, & Parrot, 2010). Mindfulness has been described as “paying attention, in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness based interventions aim to develop emotion regulation, accurate appraisal and discernment of situations (e.g., less

perception of experiences and feelings as negative or threatening), and a non-judgmental, self-aware, compassionate stance towards self and others (Davis & Hayes, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Burney, & Sellers, 1987; Samuelson, Carmody, Kabat-Zinn, & Bratt, 2007; Neff & Germer, 2013). In fact, mindfulness based programs have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing physical aggression, psychological aggression, and sexual coercion among emerging adult men (Heppner et al., 2008; Gallagher, Hudepohl, & Parrot, 2010; Giancola, Josephs, DeWall, & Gunn, 2009). Given the health disparities prevalent in the population this study evaluates, particularly higher rates of substance use, mental illness, and aggression victimization (all spontaneously referenced by three or more participants), these are all relevant and important issues for social welfare practice with emerging adult bisexual men and trans masculine people (Feinstein & Dyer, 2017; Harding, 2017; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Furthermore, the persistent hypervigilance reported by participants around coming/being out in certain spaces (fear of rejection) and also around their physical safety is connected to the mental health issues, substance use, and later chronic health impacts (Lea, de Wit, & Reynolds, 2014; Feinstein & Dyar, 2017; Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

In sum, interventions need to take a group approach to address the structural inequities of misogyny as well as provide individual tools for young people to best manage in their environments. Thus, liberatory, social-justice oriented mindfulness-based interventions could both create an environment in which LGBTQAI2 youth are less vulnerable to aggression and discrimination from others and at the same time provide them with valuable social and emotional tools to better manage emotional distress. Said another way, this type of interventions could improve both “what happens” to them and *their experience* of “what happens” to them, likely improving

proximal and distal health and well-being. Social workers could play a vital role in developing and implementing the aforementioned programming, supporting LGBTQAI2 emerging adults at micro and mezzo levels, helping to improve their inner experience as well as the social environment.

However, to be truly effective, interventions must go beyond the individual. The study's results made clear the nested layers of influence that are always operating on participants and the significant role relationships play in well-being. Thus, it is vital that social workers look beyond supporting individual LGBTQAI2 youth to working directly with important others in their lives. Recall the conceptual model that supports the results of this study; it is not necessarily "what happened" to study participants, but *how they were responded to* that influenced *their experience* of "what happened." Or said another way, "how well" (or poorly) they do is directly related to the responses of the important others in their lives. This is echoed in the literature on attachment and trauma-related experiences (Hargrave & Zasowski, 2016; van der Kolk, 2014; Ogden & Minton, 2006; Tatkin, 2012). The previously discussed social-justice oriented, mindfulness-based interventions implemented universally in school-based settings for example are aligned with this suggestion. However, beyond that, it is critical to develop and implement programs targeted at parents, siblings, peers, other important adults (like coaches, mentors, and teachers), and friends providing them with resources for how to best support emerging adults in their sexual- and gender-related exploration generally, and specifically in situations that could evoke distress, such as coming out.

Given participants experiences of parents' lack of accurate public health information (such as equating same-sex attractions or trans identities with mental illness or HIV positivity), it is clear that accurate and culturally appropriate public

health information could support participants in this study by providing valuable information to important others. However, simply providing accurate information is inadequate, education does not equal belief or behavior change. Peoples' responses are driven by their own histories and experiences. The context of patriarchy and cisheteronormativity is the fertile ground on which harmful gender norms flourish, thus, any interventions would need to address those often unconscious processes, biases, and assumptions that become conditioned and embodied, and inform discriminatory or fear-based responses.

Social workers working in children, youth, and family settings could partner with institutions like schools and churches as important arbiters of social norms and already existent "gathering" places for community.

In addition, given that some participants felt "double discrimination" in LGBTQAI2 centric spaces, such educational components could be especially important in emerging adult LGBTQAI2 centric spaces such as social clubs or queer student groups on college campuses and community and social service organizations. Rather than a cohesive imagined community, people within these spaces (who also have their own wounds and are socialized in the same world) sometimes perpetuate the harmful and exclusionary practices that necessitated the formation of their affinity groups. Building relational skills and solidarity is not only useful to promote individual well-being, but can also support and grow sustainable political power to advocate for increased social rights for sexual and gender minorities, a critical step to improving long term health and well-being in sexual and gender minority populations. However, such an intervention must address both the wounds perpetrated by living in a cisheteropatriarchy as well as develop critical skills to not perpetrate those wounds onto another (i.e., both heal their

own hurts and address the internalized and reactive ways in which we wound others and learn tools to engage with ourselves, others, and the larger world in a more compassionate way) (Lueke & Gibson, 2014; Makransky, 2002).

In addition to connecting the suggestion of supporting important others in the aim of improving participants' well-being, a meta capacity to strengthen is the ability to hold complexity and ambiguity in one's own experience and the experiences of others. This is relevant to both participants and the important others in their lives. For example, to be able to reconcile the dissonance and ambivalence between powerful cultural institutional values and those of individuals is critical. For instance, Sean's Mom being involved with a church that espoused homo and trans phobic views and also responding to her son with love and acceptance when he came out to her as trans is connected to Sean's improved mental health and sense of self-acceptance. This capacity to think critically about the values of a macro culture (normalized misogyny and monosexual bias in United States for example, or Korean gender norms, or Seventh Day Adventist homophobic views) and to reconcile them with one's own experiences and values seems like a critical developmental skill that came through particularly in Chapter 7 of the results. For instance, Jordan's capacity to reconcile his connection to, and gender affirmation experiences within his Korean drumming circle, which also included members who encouraged gender stereotypic behavior, and then integrate that all (the "goods" and "bads" and all of the in-betweens) into his conception of his identity is critical to his well-being. However, the ambiguity and uncertainty implicit in this gray space of the in-between is uncomfortable, particularly for those who have grown up within cisheteronormative cultures (all participants in this study) that support binaried notions of reality.

Relatedly, having the capacity to “take what works and leave the rest,” is a useful interpsychic skill. Almost universally, participants talked about wanting to be masculine, and also not wanting to adopt the harmful elements of hegemonic masculinity. This was evidenced in Montell’s explicit statement describing what elements of masculinity he wanted to deliberately “take up” and what parts he didn’t. This thread was woven through participants’ individual relationships as well. For example, Eli being able to “take in” some advice from his mentor, and also “leave” his monosexism helped him hold onto the elements of that relationship that are useful and supportive and not the parts that felt hurtful. Again, holding that most people, communities, institutions, policies, places, structures, and so on are never “just one thing” is a compassionate approach and necessitates critical discernment, introspection and attunement that can be cultivated. Helping to develop and implement social emotional programming that supports these capacities (such as a social-justice oriented, mindfulness-based approaches) could be a useful space of intervention for social workers (Hick & Furlotte, 2009; Kahneman & Egan, 2011; Makransky, 2002).

Thus, before even programmatic “content” to support LGBTQAI2 emerging adults is considered, two important skills need to be deliberately addressed: a clear-eyed, critical understanding of history and the ways in which gendered social constructions have and continue to shape every aspect of the social world and the capacity to exist with the discomfort, paradox, and contradictions implicit across the social ecology (including our own). Ultimately, any intervention will fail if those involved in it are not able to open to the possibility of a different, more equitable reality, and to be able to do that, we must be able to hold this complexity of human experience.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

The ability to hold the contradictions and complexity of human experience given our nested, multidimensional context is also a vital skill to developing discerning, just, responsible social workers, who are able to sustain themselves within this difficult profession. These competencies can be cultivated, along with others in social work education. This requires intersectional feminism approaches, beyond lip service or discrete topic area, to critically interrogate the ways in which individual experiences can become occluded or diminished in anti-oppressive pedagogical spaces such as social work education. While white and white-passing, cis and cis-passing, straight and straight-passing bisexual men are privileged in myriad ways, including “getting to” pass, how are they left out? How are their other identities and experiences recognized or not? And what do we miss when we treat bodies as monolithic, especially, in this case, in the context of newer theorizing on masculinities? How does that play out in activist, educational, and everyday contexts (such as participants’ experiences within LGBTQAI2 specific spaces)? And what are the consequences of operationalizing and policing identity based upon perceived judgements on visible characteristics? These are all relevant to social work education certainly as conceptual topics, but also happen on real, material bodies within social work classrooms.

Social justice and liberatory pedagogical frameworks, on which social work education rests, are significant sites of this kind of identity policing. Thus, social work education and the activism that it promotes would be served in exploring ways to create an ethics of activism in social work and aligned spaces (Cannon, 2016; Lee, 2018; Oluo, 2018) that recognizes and is compassionate (which includes holding accountability)

towards the multiplicity of collective and individual experiences. As writer, Ijeoma Oluo said:

...no one wants to wake up five years from now and learn their progress made them an oppressor. But if you don't examine your privilege, that what will happen. Movements must have values, not just goals, and no social justice movement can have values without intersectionality. (2018)

Intersectional ethics relies on the capacity to recognize and hold the complexities of one's own experience and that of others in one's attention, all at the same time. This inherently opens us up to the possibility that we have been wounded and perpetrated wounds to others, which are painful experiences. Thus, I would add to Oluo's assertion, that an ethics of activism needs to be intersectional and also needs to incorporate increasing neurological research on stress responses and interconnectivity to ensure that social work students are able to become open to the possibility of approaching their own pain, power, privilege, and oppression. It is developmentally and biologically (as a function of our limbic systems) normative for people to "other" those that they see as different from them (Brach, 2018; Hermans, Henckens, Joëls, & Fernández, 2014). Given our fundamental human desire for belonging, our bodies become activated and emotional capacities diminish at threats to that belonging (such as the othering that is part and parcel to identity policing), thus people are not even able to be open to the possibility of another experience if they feel like they are actively "othering" someone or alternatively, having to defend their sense of self in an attempt to stay connected to the collective. As Jon Kabat-Zinn notes, "when we find ourselves clinging to the certainty that we are right and others are wrong,...our very lenses of perception can become distorted and we risk...doing violence to the truth of things" (2005). These polarizing practices are common in social-justice oriented educational spaces and are not

productive (we are our biological/emotional responses first, and if our organism feels threatened, it will do what it can to defend itself often by “digging heels in”).

Thus individual and collective movement towards justice can only happen if one feels safe enough to take the emotional risks necessary to do the hard work of unpacking the ways in which they benefit and are also harmed (and harm others) because of socially constructed hierarchies (Hick, 2009; Turner 2008; Shapiro & Carlson 2009; Garland, 2013; Boone, 2014). Social work educators should extend these analyses to also include the ways in which social hierarchies harm those in positions of power by asking them to take up a dominant position, and importantly, should work to both not overemphasize and also not diminish individual experiences. Illuminating and holding this complexity opens up the possibility for those wounds to get recognized and healed.

Importantly, taking up an intersectional and compassionate approach to social-justice oriented education also means that we disrupt the binary narrative of the monolithic “marginalized” as “just one (broken) thing”. This reductionism (common, particularly around race/ethnicity in often white majority spaces like higher education) denies peoples’ full humanity and is detrimental to genuine equity work. Black Lives Matters movement leader Patrisse Cullors put it this way:

Black Lives Matter is a rehumanizing project. We’ve lived in a place that has literally allowed for us to believe and center only black death. We’ve forgotten how to imagine black life. Literally, whole human beings have been rendered to die prematurely, rendered to be sick, and we’ve allowed for that. Our imagination has only allowed for us to understand black people as a dying people. We have to change that. That’s our collective imagination. (2017)

Thus many potential allies in the movement for gender equity (white cis male/masculine social workers for example) are walking around wounded and running the risk of those wounds becoming implicated in their personal lives and professional

social work practice (and as the saying goes, “hurt people hurt people”). Furthermore, the movement for equity will benefit from having those in power who understand and embody social work values “on our team”! Identity policing reduces people to visible subjectivities, robbing *all of us* of the fullness of our own humanity by creating and maintaining a culture narrative that renders all of us as “just one thing” (in this case, the oppressor or the oppressed), re-ifying hierarchy and not allowing space for movement towards mutual liberation. As Francis Lee says:

I think that we’re all gonna find ourselves  
 At this existential crisis of meaning if we keep  
 Holding on to the ruined<sup>2</sup>  
 Reversed hierarchy of  
     Belonging,  
                     Identity,  
                             Rightness  
 Granted through shared oppression

Yes, speak openly about your harm  
 And seek redress, but do not let  
 That be your whole story. Otherwise there will  
 Be nothing left to do, nobody left  
 To be once society has been  
 Transformed and justice and equality  
 Has been restored. (2018, p. 45)

Buddhist scholar John Makransky calls the ethic and capacity to hold both/and “confrontational compassion,” which he explains saying, “unlike self-righteous anger, which hates the ‘bad ones’ on behalf of the ‘good ones,’ confrontational compassion protects all by challenging all differently—those suffering injustices and those inflicting them. It upholds all in their fuller humanity and potential for greater freedom from fear, hatred, and suffering” (Tricycle, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to the frustratingly accurate statement, “the grids used to define the intersections for identity are already in ruins.” From the editors introduction of the Spring 2017 *Critical ethnic Studies Journal*, co-edited by Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang.

Social work education can play a critical role in both troubling this unidimensional approach to identity and helping social work students heal the wounds that they have experienced (and the discomfort and sadness of perpetrating harms to others) as a product of internalizing and perpetuating the norms of a white supremacist, misogynistic, cisgender normative world. But to do this effectively and sustainably, it must come from a place of compassion, by first asking one another, as black elder activist and theologian Ruby Sales asks, “where does it hurt?” and showing up with tenderness for the response, however uncomfortable (Tippett, 2016). We must be deliberate, kind, and do “our own work” as individuals and as a collective profession to create and sustain an equitable world.

This is another space in which mindfulness and (what are often called) contemplative practices can help. In addition to the aforementioned benefits, mindfulness and contemplative pedagogical approaches can interrupt this process of “othering,” common in social work spaces. Social workers are caring people who want to help alleviate suffering. Humans “other” when the pain of other people’s suffering becomes unbearable (thus, social workers as deeply caring people who are also engaging with suffering as a part of their profession are likely more vulnerable to feelings of unbearability). When someone is in the distress of unbearability, they are unable to access the frontal cortex of the brain, in which more advanced aspects of executive functioning lie (Porges, 2011). This leaves one responding from a default place (societal and personal conditioning, often “fight/flight/freeze”), rather than a more open-hearted compassionate place. As psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach says, “when we wake up the frontal cortex, we cannot help but be touched by the realness of people’s

suffering,” and connecting to the realness of others is antithetical to “othering” (Brach, 2018).

The use of contemplative practices, including mindfulness and compassion practices, is increasing in Social Work and allied professions. These practices have historical roots in spiritual traditions, most prominently in Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and practice (Goldstein 2013; Hanh 2013; Kornfield 2009; Salzberg 2013; Siegel et al., 2008; Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2013). In recent decades many of the concepts and practices from these traditions have been adapted and combined with western psychological insights to create new therapeutic approaches and interventions for physical, emotional, and behavioral problems (Hick, 2009; Turner, 2009; Shapiro & Carlson 2009; Garland, 2013; Boone, 2014).

Relative less attention has been paid to the relevance of these practices for engagement with diversity and difference and commitment to social justice – two of the nine professional competencies for the Social Work field articulated by the Council on Social Work Education. Some observers critique the current “mindfulness movement” for lack of attention to social justice, a focus on individual benefits, and failure to reach oppressed and marginalized communities (Cannon, 2016; Heffernan, 2015; Purser & Loy, 2013; Walsh, 2016). As Lynn (2010) observes; “in social work education the challenge is to present and establish the practice of mindfulness in the context of social justice and emancipation and to integrate both inward and outward practices that link quiet contemplation with active engagement” (p. 300).

A handful of scholars have begun to articulate how the historic foundation of these practices in personal liberation, transformation, and compassion are linked to contemporary social justice concerns (Cannon, 2016; Hick, 2009; Wong, 2004).

Empirical researchers have also begun to identify the links between contemplative practices and the knowledge, values, and skills required for culturally competent and socially just social work practice, including critical self-awareness, unbiased and nonjudgmental presence, emotional regulation, psychological flexibility, empathy and intra- and inter-personal resonance (Epstein, 2010; Kang, Gruber, & Gray, 2014; Khoury, Sharma, Rush, & Rournier, 2015).

A small but growing body of literature has addressed the integration of contemplative practices into social-justice and anti-oppression pedagogies in Social Work education (Berila, 2015; Birnbaum, 2008; Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011; Hick, 2009; Lynn, 2010; Wong, 2004). The field still lacks, a clear conceptualization of how personal contemplative practices support social work commitments to engagement with diversity and advancement of economic and social justice. However, given the evidence, mindfulness and contemplative practices can help support a compassionate stance towards the self and others, which is imperative (as the data of this dissertation supports) for being able to explore, challenge personal assumptions and biases, and take emotional risks critical to developing social workers who embody equanimity and justice and are able to sustain themselves within a suffering-heavy profession.

This starts with institutions prioritizing teaching in material ways (rather than a common privileging of research productivity). Next, implementing these practices includes (a) investing in the time and emotional energy required to learn and personally engage with practices and pedagogical approaches (this is not just something that you “do” in a classroom), (b) practice regularly, and (c) develop skills to translate practices in social work educational spaces in a way that is safe, trauma and culturally informed,

and understandable. Schools of Social Work and other fields interested in critical and anti-oppressive curriculum would benefit from investing time and energy into these pedagogical approaches.

Social Work education would benefit generally from an increased emphasis on gender and sexuality and specifically from critical feminist intersectional approaches. Again, social workers deal with a range of issues that relate to binaried systems of gender socialization, including educational and health-related outcomes across the social ecology. Given social work's explicit commitment to equity and justice, centering cisheteropatriarchy's impacts, specifically the intersectional ways in which misogyny and binary conceptions of gender are implicated in inequities is paramount to Social Work education.

Social workers engage with a variety of other practitioners and are heavily represented in health, education, and social service settings with LGBTQAI2 populations (Knight, Shoveller, Carson, & Contreras-Whitney, 2014; Mallon, 2017). Given the values of social work, including centering social justice, the importance of human relationships, and dignity and worth of the individual (National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, 2018), social workers can play a vital role in orienting themselves and other practitioners and educators towards sexuality and gender affirming professional practices. This includes two important and inter-related elements: (a) building competencies around sex and gender related issues and (b) emphasizing the importance of reflecting on one's own experiences and how those could be implicated in their work with colleagues and patients/consumers of services via conscious and (most often) unconscious attitudes and biases and engaging in deliberate practices to "work through" those issues. Social workers, having been steeped in

knowledge that environment matters in regards to health outcomes, can play a crucial role in developing and implementing curriculum in clinical and educational settings such as schools and hospitals (if they are given the power and resources to do so) that addresses both of these elements, ultimately improving the well-being of LGBTQAI2 young people.

### **Future Directions for Research**

Research that focuses on particular populations of LGBTQAI2 individuals is imperative for accurate interpretation of results and relevant and sustainable interventions. However, similar to previous sections in this chapter, this section will include suggestions for research that would be relevant to sexual and gender minorities generally and to bisexual men and trans masculine individuals specifically.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The importance of supporting diverse sexual and gender narratives and increasing the legibility and representation of subjects through dynamic, intersectional, and relational conceptions of identity is an important theoretical implication derived from this project. Further, the use of theoretical pluralism and bricolage enabled a study design that captured more nuanced and comprehensive data (Borden, 2010; Mehrotra, 2010; Denzin et al., 2008; Kincheloe, 2001). Social work researchers, and the equity projects in which they aim to serve, would benefit by incorporating this approach into their research.

The importance of critical, feminist intersectional theories exploring identity development cannot be overstated. Research on sexuality and gender should take into account the multiplicity of social forces that impact the shifting and dynamic nature of

identity. Further, ecofeminist and embodiment theories align with social work frameworks as they recognize the importance, interdependence, and generativity of bodies in relationship (to self, others, natural world). This dissertation, coupled with recent theoretical and empirical neuroscientific work, suggests that incorporating these theories into sexuality and gender research (or research on any sensitive social scientific topic) would be beneficial.

Using queer theory, which interrogates the taken for granted binaries that structure the social context of the United States, could benefit sexuality and gender research in critical ways. Research into bisexuality (and diverse expressions of masculinity) implicitly confronts the “epistemic injustice” (Yoshino, 1999) of a binaried gender system endemic to cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity. Thus, sexuality and gender research that does not use queer theoretical assumptions runs the risk of reifying harmful norms.

### **Methodological Implications**

This study makes several contributions to social science and social work research, as both a methodological model and a crucial step toward better understanding of how bisexuality and experiences related to this specific identity may influence the health and well-being of emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals throughout the life course. As Gergen (2015) suggests, the dualistic, presumed objective, structure of traditional scientific inquiry is epistemologically and ontologically limiting and has contributed to the inequitable world that we live in by not properly recognizing the discursive “work” that research does in the world. The primary concern of any research endeavor should center questions of interrogating the nature and intention of the

research itself. Why is this being done? Who is it benefitting? Who is harmed? Who decides benefit and harm? Who is included/excluded in the discussion? And so on. Methodologically orienting our research towards the world that we want to live in could provide new insights and also contribute to shaping a future, more equitable world, which is a fundamental goal of social work research and practice. This study, grounded in the socioecological life course perspective, explored the past, present, and future conceptions of self with this orientation in mind.

In addition, methods that incorporate somatics and art can have myriad benefits. Aligned with feminist methods, using elements of contemplative and somatic practices recognizes the body as an important source of information (Winnicott, 1956; Damasio, 1999; Cope, 2018) and enables greater attunement and connection with “me” as the researcher, allowing for a safer “container” within the interview space (Berrol, 2006; Cirelli, Einarson, & Trainor, 2014; Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014). Further, engaging the body and creativity allows access to other ways of knowing and being than simply relying on words (Johanson, 2009; Weiss, Johanson, & Monda, 2015). Thus, using contemplative and somatic practices can ultimately glean richer, more comprehensive data.

Additionally, these practices have been suggested to provide therapeutic benefits to participants and supports researcher reflexivity (van der Kolk, 2014; Levine, 2010; Ogden & Minton, 2006; Knowles & Cole, 2012; Bhattacharya & Cochrane, 2017). Both are important elements of conducting responsible, just social work research, certainly, and also provide a paradigmatic shift away from “do no harm,” to turning towards the potentially positive impacts of research participation.

Methodological suggestions for future research that centers the potential benefits of study participation for sexual and gender minority emerging adults came from the following surprising findings of this study through the research process. First, during the course of the study, five participants (and one roommate/close friend) came out to someone important in their lives, and all reported that they felt more at ease and “good” about having done that. While participants’ experiences of “goodness” was certainly predicated by the fact that they were responded to in a supportive way, it also suggests that study participation (which included talking about their experiences, putting their history and experiences in a context of their life course, feeling unconditional positive regard from me as a researcher, and so on) supported a shift towards further disclosing their sexuality to someone important in their lives, which has been suggested to be therapeutic and supportive of sexuality identity development (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Mallon, 2017; Morgan, 2013).

Participants had several “aha” moments throughout the interviews. These moments were likely influenced by using a critical narrative perspective and conducting multiple phenomenological interviews that supported relationship building and safety between myself and study participants. As well, the interviews provided necessary time and space and skillful, deliberate questions intended to inspire reflection upon their experiences, which can support such “aha” moments. Participants reported that both talking through their lives within the interviews and also having their experiences reflected back to them (via the participant summary) enabled them to construct a framework to make sense and meaning of their experiences, reducing distress. Using this methodology could not only elicit more meaningful data, but also provide therapeutic benefit to participants.

Another finding, indicative of the potential benefits of study participation was the number of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine people contacting the study and expressing interest in participating. Initially, the research team, including myself, was concerned about recruiting sufficient study participants; however, sixty five people contacted us in the space of 2 months! Clearly, there is substantial interest in research participation from this population. Multiple study participants said that they had been seeking spaces to discuss their experiences and that they appreciated that the study provided such a space. Along those lines, many said that they wished there were more, accessible spaces to have conversations and feel supported with others that they could relate to. This was particularly relevant for cis gender men who, more often than trans participants did not feel comfortable in LGBTQAI2-specific spaces, and as this study suggests experienced unique issues around their bisexuality.

Gender identity, expression, and socialization are inextricably linked to sexuality and are deeply embedded within the ubiquity of cisheteronormativity. A further methodological suggestion echoing other recent sexuality scholarship is to design studies that explore gender and sexuality together and within the context of the social world. Social research that delimits individual variables from the social context in which they are embedded reduces its potential contribution. While it can be useful and is certainly “cleaner” to disaggregate individual variables from their macro context, that method of study can reinforce pathologizing ideologies and is acontextual, potentially limiting the effectiveness of interventions. Gender and sexuality are both discursively produced and materially felt and experienced (Butler, J., 1990). Critical sexualities and gender research is hindered by not using intersectional approaches that incorporate *affect* and center *experiences* of identity, particularly in the contemporary context of

shifting notions of masculinit(ies) (Anderson, 2010; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Ryalls, 2013). Identities are multidimensional and socially situated and *experiences* are made up of the context-dependent ways in which these subjectivities are embodied and read/engaged with by others in the social world (Crenshaw, 1991; Hudson, 2012). Sexualities researchers could benefit the field by using intersectional approaches to studying gender and sexuality together, and making important corporeality, affect, and emotion. This also includes building and supporting a research team of members who represents diverse identities and experiences. A strength of this present research is that the team included members with diverse gender identities and expressions, sexuality identities, race/ethnic identities (including trans, bisexual and queer and mixed racial/ethnic identities), ability status, and class backgrounds (although all held Master's in Social Work degrees).

Empirical literature and popular culture are rife with raced conceptions of bisexuality (which almost always center bisexual behavior rather than identity specifically, perpetuating misconceptions and limiting a deeper understanding by collapsing differences in the two) (Collins, 2004; King & Hunter, 2004; Millett, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005; Pitt, 2006). Considerable literature has been devoted to black bisexuality (or actually, Black men's "down low" same-sex behavior), far more than other racial/ethnic groups and will be discussed here as well for its connections to colonial discourses, similar to the ways bisexual discourse has been constructed (Eisner, 2013; King & Hunter, 2004; Millett, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005; Pitt, 2006). Although literature and interventions addressing "down low" sex are critical to sexual health and gender equity, this behavior is often coded as black,

an individual choice, and pathological (repressed same-sex desire, shame, dangerous) (Eisner, 2013; Pitt, 2006; Storr, 1997).

The logic of colonial discourses that characterize black male sexuality as savage and primordial (and therefore transitive and “curable”) has also been applied to bisexuality (Eisner, 2013; Storr, 1997). Richard Krafft-Ebing, a preeminent German sexologist presented monosexuality as “civilized” and thus for “civilized races,” whereas bisexuality is associated with “less civilized races” (Krafft-Ebing, 1931). Further, as critical race theorist Merl Storr (1997) has said, “the dynamic of bisexuality itself is articulated...in the language of conquest and racial struggle. A conflict of opposing forces properly ends in the conquest of one by the other (as quoted in Eisner, 2013, p. 268). Thus, bisexuality is a primitive phase and the “problem” of bisexuality can be “cured” with the same antidote as the “problem of uncivilized races,” via “superior” white monosexuality. This implies that bisexuality in the context of whiteness could be less acceptable given its racialized connotations.

On the other hand, the literature on increased acceptance of sexual minority identities and the adoption of possibly more expansive masculinities detailed previously along with comments made by the participant Shelton (coding U.S. depictions of same-sex sexual behavior as white) suggest that bisexuality as an identity category is possibly *more accepted* for white people or those read as white if one can “take on” other elements of idealized sexuality (for example monogamous coupling, parenting children) (Anderson et al., 2012; Curtice & Ormston, 2012; Dean, 2010; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; McCormack, 2011; Mustanski et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 2006; Lea, de Wit, & Reynolds, 2014; Rich, 1980; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). In cultural depictions of white bisexuality via same-sex sexual

behavior (the mode through which bisexuality is often approached, heterosexuality is assumed, until *same-sex behavior* is introduced), the characters are pitied and depicted as constrained by societal expectations (not “their fault”) (Pitt, 2006). Both of these depictions are reductive, but the equivocation of Black sexuality with danger re-ifies racial stereotypes.

Given this study’s intersectional focus, it is interesting to note the lack of specific importance that participants placed on race/ethnicity shaping their experiences around gender and/or sexuality. Maybe that is exactly the point. Parsing out what elements of one’s identity are impacting one’s sexuality and/or gender and at what times is impossible and not useful. Furthermore, that is how race (and other social constructs) most often operate: imperceptibly, unconsciously, and as Heidegger reminds us, always already happening. Given the ubiquitous, pernicious nature of racism, participants could only have the possibility of speculating about the myriad ways in which race/ethnicity (as both embodied and read by others) was implicated in their experiences. Thus, although race may not have been discussed as explicitly as one would have expected given its role in identity, race and racism were operating all the time; thus their life experiences are refracted through that prism. This dissertation’s intersectional approach takes into account those realities and thus the interview guide originally did not pointedly ask about race/ethnicity (nor other specific categories such as social class). However, after completing a few interviews and race/ethnicity was not expanded upon by several participants, upon consultation with members of the dissertation committee, I shifted the interview guide to more directly address those identities and experiences.

Most participants, particularly white participants, discussed race in reference to the social capital/class privileges entailed in whiteness/being read as white. They tended to talk about whiteness as a construct that exists outside of themselves, with social forces that enable access, rather than as an embodied, material reality of their lives. Fabian referencing that he had “never had to think about it” some would say is exactly the privilege that whiteness affords; a gauze of access that overlays all of one’s experiences and interactions, but which can’t be “held” as a possession (DiAngelo 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Lipsitz, 2006). For white participants, consistent with other literature on whiteness and identity, this detached approach to whiteness seemed less appropriately called an “identity” to them (especially given several participants’ discursive distancing from it), and my questioning around it seemed to elicit more of a historical social-justice narrative, rather than a visceral, felt experience (DiAngelo, 2013). They supposed that the historical benefits accrued to them (via their lineage as a white person) had enabled them to move to Seattle or attend college, and in those ways, they felt race played a role in their capacity to explore and feel accepted in their sexuality and gender identity and expression. Some, similar to Chauncey’s statement, further referenced the experiences of other trans and queer friends of color as more difficult than their own experiences and attributed that to less acceptance of those identities in communities of color. However, that was not necessarily the case in this data.

Participants of color tended to reference race/ethnicity and identity in the context of an idealized cisnorms in dating (either fetishized or degraded) or difficulty finding a same-sex partner (given that, as Shelton noted, most people date within their race and he did not commonly see Asian masculine same-sex couples together, thus his likely further assumption that there must be limited Asian men/masculine people

interested in a same-sex partner), black masculinity in the context of the church, and/or conservative cultural gender norms (gender roles in Korean culture for example). Participants of color generally did not offer as many comments about structural, institutional and systemic oppressions perpetrated by white supremacy (the social justice stance that white participants tended to take), but rather more of their comments related to personal stories and experiences (which more closely “answered” the questions posed in the interviews).

These responses are both surprising and not. They are surprising in that racism is happening all of the time (thus, one could imagine a plethora of stories related to racialized sexuality/gender identity and expression within the data), and race/ethnicity has been suggested to be significant to identity in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014; Buckingham, 2008; Hansen, 2012). However, their responses are not surprising in that myriad literature does associate cultural practices, religious affiliation, and/or sociocultural attitudes with race/ethnicity; thus, it would make sense that participants of color would couch their comments on the topic within those cultural contexts (Fiske, 2017; Spring, 2016). And white participants might not have talked about race in those ways given whiteness’ default status; “the white church” or “white cultural practices and/or traditions” are not a concept in the United States for a number of reasons, beyond the scope of this study, but which include (a) whiteness has been both reduced and amplified to a monolithic identity, thus nuance and heterogeneity of practices has been lost; and (b) given the dominance of whiteness in U.S. culture, “white people” (as a monolithic identity) have not felt the “need” for specific spaces that would allow for their identity to be affirmed (such as a church) (Alcoff, 2005; Spring, 2016). This is similarly not surprising in that even though the interviews were designed to elicit this

rich, intersectional data, I can imagine that participants, like anyone might, found it difficult to select out the ways in which their race/ethnicity, experiences of their race/ethnicity, and how those aspects are read specifically impacted their experiences. Again...the racialized ocean that we swim in...

I discuss this here because it seems most relevant as a topic of methodology. Reasons for the ways in which participants discussed race/ethnicity should, like all data here, be perceived as strategic and adaptive. Reasons for less direct discussions of race/ethnicity certainly could have more to do with my unintentionally white-centric conception of race/ethnicity in the study design. Maybe changing the interview questions to deliberately ask about race/ethnicity and positioning those questions towards the beginning of the interviews was a poor choice of methods. Further, their comments on race/ethnicity could have been impacted within the space of the interviews themselves with me being (and being read as) a white, cis woman. While this research team included members with diverse gender identities and expressions, sexuality identities, race/ethnic identities (including trans, bisexual and queer and mixed racial/ethnic identities), ability status, and class backgrounds (although all held Master's in Social Work degrees), we still may not have captured important race/ethnicity related (and other) experiences.

This discussion regards the importance of naming the limitations of doing research with/about a community of which the researcher is not a part. While I identify with many of their experiences, I don't identify as masculine, nor do I identify as bisexual. There are benefits and challenges to being "outside" of the participants' experience (and whether and to what extent they saw me as "outside" is variable). I discussed this in Chapter 4 in the section about positionality. While this study is not about my

race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or any other identity related constructs, those things (and participants' assumptions about those things) are always in the room. I think that most participants likely assumed that I was a white, cis femme person; however, they certainly could have made assumptions about my sexuality that invariably would have influenced the data.

This discussion of researchers' positionality underscores the critical importance of including people with a diverse range of experiences and identities in all aspects of the research process. I had originally planned on all members of the research team conducting interviews (which at that time included Gina, a queer Black and Filipino man who'd prefer to go unnamed, and myself). However, the logistical challenges became too difficult, thus I ended up conducting all of the interviews. There are benefits to this approach in so far as this creates consistency within and amongst the interviews. Further, given that I am the primary investigator on the study, it has been useful to be able to recall and connect aspects of the interviews for analysis and follow up with participants in a way that may feel more comfortable with them (given that they all know me from the interviews). However, it is inevitable that data would have been different, particularly around race and ethnicity, had a non-white person conducted the interviews. Methods like critical discourse analysis could "get at" the nuanced political and social meanings (including those regarding race/ethnicity) ascribed to participants' utterances and would be a powerful analytic tool for data such as this (Fairclough, 2013).

In an effort to recruit participants with diverse experiences, the phone screen asked potential participants if they would identify as a person with a disability. Interestingly, four participants spontaneously stated that they had mental health issues

in response to that question. Two participants described themselves as currently living with a disability. These participants, both trans masculine and white, described their experience of disability (one had autism, ADHD, and chronic pain, and the other had ADHD) as impacting their peer-related and socialization experiences growing up and likely their access to and/or interest in sex and sexual partners. One of them described their chronic pain as being connected to being a masochist. Further intersectional research that includes more participants with disabilities and/or chronic health issues would benefit the field.

Many participants discussed past and/or current mental health issues, most commonly anxiety and depression. During the interviews, without provocation, two participants said that talking about their mental health was far more difficult than talking about bisexuality. Just like all identities and experiences, mental health issues (and all of their attached connotations) are always occurring within socially situated contexts and experienced differently by participants. Participant discussions of this were not surprising, given the extant literature suggesting increased mental health issues with LGBTQAI2 individuals, and further still with bisexual men/masculine people (Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Dovidio, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Mustanski et al., 2014; Purcell et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2018).

It was interesting that the data here suggest that several of the cis, white men in particular seem to share a sense of separateness and/or anticipated rejection in not bodying, being read as, or adopting a more marginalized subject position. This was specifically seen in sections of data on masculinity (e.g., distancing selves from hegemonic masculinity, participants of color or trans masculine participants feeling

leary of white, cis gay men), and experiences within LGBTQAI2 specific spaces, where white cis men talked about feeling fear that they would not be welcomed or had the experience of not being welcome. Further, participants whose identities more closely conformed to white cisheteronormativity/cishomonormativity described feeling more confined in that identity, and described their experiences using a lot of difficult emotions, as well as explicitly naming mental health issues that they had experienced. Miles (a trans masculine participant) named the experience around social class, saying that others that he knew with greater wealth felt social pressure connected to their wealth and also tried to distance themselves from that (presumably in an effort to garner increased social capital and more closely relate to what they perceive as their peers' experience of social class and/or a more "valued" social class). This could have also resulted from moving through life always expecting to be all of yourself (because of your whiteness, presumed cisgender and heterosexual identity, current able-bodiedness) and that all of those parts of you would be seen, understood, and made important; then when, for possibly the first time, you are not seen or understood, that is particularly distressing. Possibly people of color and those in other marginalized groups (religious minorities, immigrants/refugees, those with a disability, femme people) learn and internalize that some aspect of their selfhood is threatening to others (those committed to cisheteronormative and white supremacist ideals) and learn to strategically deploy certain aspects of themselves in different situations at an early age so that they don't find that kind of "concealment" distressing, given that it has been a normalized part of their socialization process throughout their lives. The challenges that participants who "almost" conformed reported echo literature associating proximity to hegemonic masculinity norms and mental health decrements (Magovcevic & Addis,

2008). Literatures on white fragility, precarious manhood, and fragile masculinity (discussions of which are beyond the scope of this dissertation) could add to the social work field's understanding of topics such as this (Blazina & Watkins, 2000; DiAngelo, 2018; 2011; Gilmore, 1990; Mykietiak, 2016; Vandello & Basson, 2013).

Future research could use feminist intersectional approaches to explore the connections between gender, bisexuality, and mental health. Given that it was mentioned in this section as participants connected mental health to disabilities, it is vital that more research be devoted to exploring the experiences of bisexuality for men/masculine people with disabilities (and that that research disaggregate people with intellectual and emotional disabilities from that of those with physical disabilities). In addition, more research is needed to better understand how contemporary masculinit(ies) and femininity(ies) are valued, constructed, and incorporated into one's identity and the social consequences for taking up those subject positions.

The poststructuralist feminist framework informed by critical and queer theories offered a conceptually rich context for disrupting the socio-spacial differences of self/other between the researcher(s) and participants while simultaneously attempting to amplify experiences of Otherness in a broader context. As seen in the study results, liminality can be a useful heuristic to explore how individuals construct and nurture "the self," communities, and other spaces of belonging that are "in-between" (Hudson, 2012). In that sense, liminality, in regards to the liminal "self" and liminal space as always "becoming," can be seen as both a position *and* a process. Thus, liminality can be a helpful sensitizing construct to characterize the experiences of those "who look in from outside while looking out from inside to the extent that both inside and outside lost their

defining contours,” or the state at which the borders of belonging become blurred (Hall, 1994, as cited in Kavoori, 2007, p. 55; Hudson, 2013).

Although this project dislocated the positivist notion of the distant, objective other, it did so with limited participatory or action-oriented elements. I engaged in formative research with emerging adult bisexual men and trans masculine people and health and social service organizations that work with emerging adult and masculine bisexual and queer people, and did two public, community discussions about the research (one intended for participants and one for clinicians and relevant organizations). These were no doubt aligned with my theoretical and ethical commitments, but I grapple with the extent that this work contributed to a bisexual body of knowledge or the material, pragmatic concerns of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine people and others that may work with and/or care about them (e.g., parents, health care providers, etc.). Anti-oppressive research on “otherness” is fraught—precariously positioned between representation, knowledge generation, and exploitation—and is an issue that I have struggled with (and will continue to) in academic spaces. This tension is important; it is vital that researchers, including myself, who produce work that “works” in the world examine, sit with, and compassionately hold colleagues accountable to the complexity and paradox and potential consequences of that work to best approximate justice. As Hudson (2013) notes, “while I intended this research to speak truth and shed light, the unknown, yet somewhat predictable, consequences of doing so loomed” (p. 109).

The liberal injunction to listen to the Other can turn out to be *access for dominant groups* to the thoughts, cultures, and lives of others (see also Boler, 1997; Roman, 1997, 1993). ...the powerful require those on the margins not to be silent, or to talk alone, but to open up their territory and

share what they know. The imperialist resonances are uncomfortably apt. (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 480)

Throughout this study, I engaged with this tension through critical reflection, consultation with peers and colleagues, and open and direct conversations with study participants about the contradiction and occasional cruelty that academic research contexts entail. Feminist frameworks lend themselves to this kind of critical reflexivity and could support social work in engaging in a number of practices essential for just research. First, advance a social justice imperative that allows for agency and self-determination while maintaining a structural analysis and critically interrogating the field's commitment to narrating and defining oppression(s). Second, and related to defining "outsider/insider," "Outsider-Within" experiences typical in social work research (see Daniel, 2007) should be acknowledged by considering the space social work scholarship has (and purportedly seeks to emphasize) for those who have typically been the subjects in knowledge building projects such as research. Third, believe in the power of liminal spaces as capable of providing vital spaces of collaboration within and between communities (Hudson, 2013).

Some of these practice ends could be reached through community-engaged research. Given the constraints of this study, I was not able to approach this work from a community-based participatory research (CBPR) frame. That approach certainly would have been helpful and aligned with my philosophical commitments (Israel, et al., 2010). Barring a CBPR approach, researchers could incorporate community discussions into their research designs (and thus timelines and budgets). Community forums provide unique opportunities for feedback from community members and clinicians, are a more accessible, relevant way to disseminate research findings, and are a useful tool

for collaboration regarding policy and practice recommendations, all of which are justice imperatives for social work researchers. Institutions and organizations that employ researchers should provide the time, infrastructure, and material resources necessary to engage in community work, and journal editors (as oft arbiters of the currency of academia) could support researchers committed to community-engaged work by publishing more of it.

### **Substantive Implications for Research**

The evidence is clear; more people are identifying as bisexual, particularly in emerging adulthood (GSS, 2017; Gallup, 2017). Further, research to serve this population is limited compared to that which focuses on other sexual minority populations and research that includes trans masculine participants is scant. That which does exist suggests worse health outcomes, likely linked to cisheteronorms/cishomonorms (Meyer, 2003; Feinstein & Dyar, 2017). Thus, social scientists should undertake more intersectional research on bisexual *identities* generally, and given the biological and social vulnerability of early life and its implications for later health decrements, adolescence and emerging adulthood specifically (Andersen & Teicher, 2008; Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, & Heim, 2009; Arnett, 2000; Romeo & McEwen, 2006; Romeo, 2013; Shern, Blanch, & Steverman, 2014).

Men experience a disproportionate amount of a diverse range of health outcomes that have been linked to norms of hegemonic masculinity (Kendler, Prescott, Myers, & Neal, 2003; Sullivan, Annet, Luo, Simon, & Dahlberg, 2013; Evans, Frank, Oliffe, & Gregory, 2010; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Courtenay, 2000). Given the voluminous

literature that suggests that children, women/femme people, and sexual and gender minorities are also harmed by beliefs, behaviors, norms, and institutional and social policy linked to hegemonic masculine norms, it is evident that sexism hurts everyone and should be a concern paramount to social work and other equity-focused researchers.

Research interested in masculine gender norms and health impacts has historically explored individual variables and their connections to health and well-being decrements such as aggression perpetration (Baugher & Gazmarrian, 2015). This research, although useful, is limited for two main reasons. First, continued focus on micro-level variables such as interpersonal and/or individual relationships can pathologize certain people/groups and perpetuate the notion that those micro-level variables are the primary drivers of beliefs, behaviors, opportunities, and constraints. While individual agency is important, people are only able to choose from available options, which are always already provided or limited by their social position. Continuing to focus on the micro level is dangerous. It is one of the ways in which social research perpetuates the assumptions of neoliberalism and American Exceptionalism (centrality of the individual, even playing field, and “everyone can make it if you work hard”). This dissertation contributes to the literature that shows the structural elements that perpetuate norms, thus impacting individual experiences. Future social science research should focus on macro-level variables such as structural and institutional sexism and how they contribute to a range of topics relevant for Social Work including but not limited to health and well-being outcomes for everyone.

Second, focusing only on the pathological manifestations of masculinity perpetuates the equivocation of masculinity with dominance. As evidenced in this

dissertation, all participants wanted to be masculine but struggled with not wanting to “take up” the norms of hegemonic masculinity. The intervention implications suggested in previous sections of this chapter could help. Cultural level interventions that promote a diverse range of masculinit(ies) (and femininities) could expand popular conceptions of gender. Mindfulness-based interventions could support the capacity to notice when beliefs and behaviors did not match those which individuals wanted to manifest (i.e., when they were doing something aligned with hegemonic masculinity) and help them develop critical capacities to sit with experiences of ambivalence.

Many participants in this study expressed views aligned with feminist values of gender (as well as racial/ethnic and economic equity). Thus, future research could explore the ways in which feminist men/masculine people are developed, sustained, and supported. Researchers could ask questions such as “what are the sociocultural, community, interpersonal, and individual structures and practices that enable men/masculine people to adopt a feminist approach to gender/sexuality? To the social and natural world? In their individual relationships?” and so on. This strengths-based approach is aligned with the values of Social Work and could help inform policy, education, and practice in a range of settings and practice foci including institutions such as schools and within micro ecologies such as families.

As evidenced from Chapters 5 and 6, cisheteronormativity/ cishomonormativity is the contextual ocean that participants are swimming in. Both “what happens to them” and their experiences of “what happens to them” are profoundly impacted by the rigid norms implicit in that social context. Aligned with the minority stress and health disparities literature (Feinstein & Dyar, 2017; Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013; Meyer, 2003; Schmitt et al., 2014), participants in this study reported that it was not *actual*

experiences of alienation within their individual relationships that they found distressing (although that certainly showed up), but more their fear and *anticipated* rejection linked to existing within a place and/or culture (including geopolitical location or religious culture) that espoused unaccepting views. Sometimes those macro cultural narratives of discrimination were consistent with hurtful attitudes from important others and sometimes they were not.

Sexuality concealment is connected to minority stress experiences (Meyer, 2003) and health disparities (Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013). Participants described fear and hypervigilance around identity disclosure and policing (including using the “other gay” or a sibling to gauge the potential responses of important others). For most participants, that hypervigilance was “unnecessary” (i.e., when they came out, they were accepted). Thus, exploring the ways in which bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals decide to disclose aspects of their identity or not seems like a potentially fruitful area for future research. This could shed light on the similarities and differences between anticipated rejection and actual experiences of rejection in cisheteronormative contexts. This is particularly salient given that identities (and thus behaviors based upon identities such as concealment and disclosure) are context dependent and socially situated. Emerging adults’ modal form of communication and a large part of their social lives and identities are online, which is a more contextually diffuse environment. This makes managing online identities more complicated and unintentional disclosures more common. Recently coined “context collapse,” this leveling of the temporal, spacial, and social boundaries that would otherwise separate in-person audiences are part and parcel to many social networking sites (boyd, 2011). Unintentional disclosures could result in anticipated and/or actual rejection and that

actual rejection could be more humiliating given the scope of the internet and its unparalleled power to shame and shame in potential perpetuity (Ronson, 2015). Studying the ways in which younger LGBTQAI2 people negotiate identity online is a timely and relevant topic for future research.

Adding to the social work and public health significance of this work, communities with LGBTQAI2 individuals reporting higher levels of minority stress (which was not formally assessed, but participants' affect and the language that they used to describe their experiences—such as “fear,” “vigilance,” “aversion,” “keeping my head down,” and so on—leads me to believe that they were certainly experiencing distress related to their sexual and/or gender minority status) also have higher levels of morbidity and mortality regardless of the sex/gender status of residents (Hatzenbeuler et al., 2014). The participants in this study who reported and showed more distress around their sexuality and/or gender identity and/or expression very often grew up within conservative and/or religious communities and cultures. All of which brings to light two important areas for future research. First, what are the structural and community level supports that could create and maintain a safe and supportive sexual culture? Responses to this question could not only improve the health and well-being of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals, but, as Hazenbeuler and colleagues (2014) research suggests, could benefit all community members.

Second, how do individuals embedded within conservative and/or religious cultures reconcile the teachings of those places/cultures with their own feelings when they are incongruent? This would be a useful area of research towards developing the interpsychic capacities referenced previously. Sean's Mom, provides an illustrative example. She was steeped in what Sean described as homophobic teachings typical in

South Korea and within Christianity, then immigrated to the United States and settled on a military base in a state in the Southeast known for its conservative politics. Sean described her social life revolving around “pretty much all Korean people at the church” (a desire to maintain connection to those communities by adhering to their norms would be reasonably expected). Her social context would suggest that she would respond in a rejecting way to Sean coming out about being trans, and yet she is supportive in many ways. Sean’s family provided essential emotional and material supports that both “saved his life” (as he says) and helped him get closer to the physical body and presentation that he wants. Myriad research suggests that there are beneficial elements of religious affiliation (Oman & Lukoff, 2018; Regnerus, 2003; Seybold & Hill, 2001). Another body of literature also suggests that religious affiliation is harmful to LGBTQAI2 people (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Frabel, Wortman, & Joseph, 1997; Meyer, 1995; Miranda & Storms, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1990; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Wagner, Brondolo, & Rabkin, 1997; Walters & Simoni, 1993; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). Either way, given that religion was both a significant feature of several participants’ lives, and also that formalized Christian religions and their commonly conservative values and norms are not going away anytime soon, future research could explore the necessary psychological and social scaffolding that helps to support individuals living within conservative contexts in their own and/or their loved ones’ sexuality and gender identity development and change.

Gay men were often referenced as a proxy group for which participants gauged their expectations for their own social experiences around issues of disclosure or gender expression, for example. Given the context of cisnormativity and the ways in which its discriminatory norms were implicated in participants’ narratives, future

research could ask questions such as how are cis gay men, continuing to reify white supremacy and cisheteronormative/cishomonormative ideologies within cultural spaces such as dating, school, and work? Consistent with other literature focused on gay men, this was especially evident in Chapter 6, which detailed the ways in which white cishomonormativity reified experiences of racism, degradation of femininity, and expectations of wealth and a muscular, “masculine,” body (Abraham et al., 2017; Carlson, 2018; Murgu, Huynh, Lee, & Christler, 2017). The racist, misogynistic ideologies endemic in cispatriarchal contexts like the United States that undergird these performative practices are often referred to collectively as masculine capital (Anderson, 2010; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). These characteristics of masculine capital coupled with bisexual-specific discrimination (Anderson, McCormack, & Ripley, 2016; Eisner, 2013; Yoshino, 1999) could contribute to feelings of disconnection and loneliness empirically and theoretically implicated in poor health outcomes and could help explain health disparities disproportionately experienced by bisexual people; however, more research is necessary to evaluate these issues.

Most historical scholarship that included bisexual men and trans gender participants aggregated them with gay men and centered on sexual behavior and risk reduction (e.g., STI's/HIV) (Graham et al., 2011; Hoff, Campbell, Chakravarty, & Darbes, 2016). While these are undoubtedly critical areas of study, not all sex is risky, and an exclusive focus on sexual risk both pathologizes sexual behavior and further pathologizes the sexual behavior of sexual minority men/masculine people. In addition, given the tendency for researchers to focus on *behavior*, less is known about bisexual *identity*. This is particularly salient given the complexities of intersectional identities, especially the gender identity variability within this sample. The study's participants

described enormous variability in their number and types of in-person sexual experiences. However, consistent with recent literature on emerging adult sexuality identity development, many of them adopted a bisexual identity prior to engaging in sexual activity (Brewster & Moradi, 2010; Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011). Thus, while some participants had “completed” many traditional milestones of sexuality identity development prior to emerging adulthood, some were still grappling with self-identification and identity disclosure or just becoming aware of same-sex sexual attractions. This points to the significant variability of sexual experiences within this developmental period, which is critical for both practitioners and researchers to keep in mind (Arnett, 2014; Morgan, 2013; Vasilenko & Lefkowitz, 2018; Wade, 2017). Participants self-identifying as bisexual prior to engaging in both same and other sex sexual behavior could suggest that emerging adults could be privileging attractions, desires, orientations, or other elements of sexuality *over* behavior in constructing their sexuality identity (Morgan, 2013). It could also suggest that, consistent with recent theorizing in masculinities, taking up a non-heterosexual identity could confer social capital within cisheteronormative spaces (Anderson, 2010; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Ryalls, 2013). These are important areas for future research.

Although participants experienced diverse levels of “quality” in their sexual and/or romantic relationships, most who had had those experiences noted the positive role that in-person sexual attractions and experiences had played in “figuring out” their sexual orientation and sexuality identity and gender. They also said that other non-sexual relationships that were “values-based” were more important to them than sexual/romantic relationships that lacked congruent values to their own. In fact, consistent with recent literature on the sexual practices of emerging adults, many

described having had limited sexual/romantic experiences with others and avoiding these kinds of relationships for a variety of reasons, even in short-term or “hook up” contexts (Braithwaite, Coulson, Keddington, & Fincham, 2015; Wade, 2017).

Putting this all together, three points come to mind. First, placing import on the value-added benefit of a diversity of meaningful relationships, having relationships that are deliberate and nourishing, in whatever form is a strength and should be encouraged as an interpersonal intervention and a feminist project! Like most people, the participants are seeking meaning and connection from their relationships. Many types of relationships can provide the richness, intimacy, connection, and personal growth that many look for from sexual/romantic relationships (and has been culturally supported, particularly for men/masculine people) (Nordgren, 2004). Supporting men/masculine people by emphasizing and helping them build skills to actualize a deliberate and expansive approach to relationships (one that has been termed “relationship anarchy” by Andie Nordgren) could help them get their social, psychological, and emotional needs met by a variety of people and diminish reliance on sexual/romantic relationships for those experiences (de Botton, 2016; Nordgren, 2004; Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017).

Second, sexual and romantic exploration is an important and normative part of development generally, and sexual activity should not be imperative to sexuality development or seen as on any particular timeline (Diamond, 2006; MacNeela & Murphy, 2015; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Not engaging in partnered sexual practices can be socially costly for emerging adults, particularly masculine emerging adults, and is a perfectly acceptable way to move through life (e.g., “virgin shaming” Gilmore, 1990; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Vandello & Basson, 2013). Further, solo sexuality can support

learning about and enjoying oneself as a sexual being and is also a useful strategy for risk prevention (as famously noted by former Attorney General Dr. Jocelyn Elders [Jehl, 1994]). In fact content around solo sexual practices such as masturbation has been incorporated into many curriculums in other countries that have lower rates of negative sexual outcomes than that of the United States (Lamb, 2015; Ragonese, Bownman, & Tolman, 2017). Particularly given the pervasive norms of hypersexuality for masculine people in emerging adulthood, more research is needed to learn about the experiences of emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals who don't engage in sexual activity (Arnett, 2014).

Third, emerging adulthood is a typical time to explore partnered sexuality and gender identity and expression and integrate new knowledge into existent identit(ies). Sexual behavior has been linked to well-being in adults and short-term positive affect in emerging adults (Vasilenko & Lefkowitz, 2018; Muise, Schimmack, & Impett, 2016). Thus, while risk prevention is important, it is also critical to ask, "are emerging adults losing something in not engaging in a partnered erotic or romantic life?" If so, what? And relatedly, how might those "losses" manifest over the life course?

Given that most emerging adults will continue to engage in partnered sexual and romantic experiences regardless, how can efforts support skill building and self-efficacy to negotiate those relationships in pleasurable, egalitarian ways? Consistent with other recent sexuality scholarship, future research could explore these questions, possibly enabling a sexual culture that is kinder, more equitable, and more aligned with individuals' genuine desires and expressions (rather than social conditioning) (Wade, 2017).

Many participants of this study referenced the importance of sibling relationships; however, surprisingly little scholarship exists exploring the roles of siblings in participants' sexuality and/or gender identity and expression related experiences (e.g., such as coming out). Given participants' siblings were referenced throughout the study (using them as a proxy for how family will respond to their bisexuality, siblings coming out first, siblings being supportive after coming out, siblings feeling distraught at "not knowing" sooner so that they could support them and so on), the role(s) of siblings in identity development seems like a critical area for researchers to explore. Further, research could focus specifically on the siblings of bisexual emerging adult men and trans masculine individuals. Particularly given the important role that they seemed to play in participants' lives, the significance of important others in "how well" people do when going through difficult experiences, and the potentially disorienting experience of having a sibling come out as bisexual and/or identify with a different gender, exploring sibling-related experiences seems like a fruitful area for future research.

### **Specific Implications for Trans Masculine Individuals**

Implications for further research with trans masculine participants are myriad. Given the discrimination endemic in cisheteronormative contexts (which includes the distinct and interrelated forces of transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny) coupled with the limited research on trans masculine individuals, future research should take an intersectional approach to explore multiplicative ways in which trans masculine people experience bisexuality. For example, how do trans masculine people's experiences of discrimination differ from those of cis gay men (as an oft defaulted to proxy group)? Do they differ based upon other identities or the ways that other identities are read by

others (i.e., their level of “passing” or not)? Minority stress theories could explore whether these experiences of discrimination are embodied and manifest in the same ways (as chronic stress for example)? If not, what are the differences? How is “passing” implicated in their experiences? How has their inner experience of themselves (as a masculine person) been congruent and incongruent with the ways in which the social environment interacts with them and how have they negotiated that dissonance (Montell’s assertion that one might not internalize misogyny in the same ways since they don’t see themselves as femme points to this). Social work’s person-in-environment framework enables social work scholars to be well-positioned to take up this research.

Given the importance to most participants of medically transitioning and the necessity of health insurance and/or the high income that transitioning entails, research could explore how access to health insurance and/or social capital and the resources that they provide impact the lives of trans-masculine participants? Further, for many trans masculine participants, coming out was intimately connected to medically transitioning (as they relied on parental involvement to enable medical transitions and other supportive resources such as therapy). The coming out process was distinct for trans masculine participants in that it typically included more steps than it did for cis gender participants who said things like “I needed to figure out my gender before I could figure out my sexuality.” This supports the suggestion that studying gender and sexuality *together* is vital to a rich understanding of both. Future research could explore experiences of coming out between cis gender and trans masculine bisexual individuals, which is important given the reach and complexity of managing identities in the internet age (boyd, 2014).

It is impossible to divorce this research from the historical context that it is situated in. The voracity and ubiquity of sexism is the very foundation on which this dissertation rests, rendering disaggregating “nature vs nurture” extraordinarily difficult and not useful. Using critical, intersectional feminist frameworks to guide gender and sexuality research in the context of a cisheteropatriarchy is imperative for an accurate understanding of phenomena and importantly, also as a critical justice project. Without recognizing the importance of social forces, researchers re-ify the normative assumptions of post-colonial American Exceptionalism by taking an individual (victim-blaming) approach to people’s experiences in a variety of ways including sexism, monosexism, and trans phobia. Given this, how are these synergistic oppressions experienced by trans masculine individuals (i.e., trans masculine individuals lived part of their lives being read as and possibly experiencing themselves as femme), how does that interact with their experiences of sexism, misogyny, and its direct and indirect effects such as gender-based violence? And related to this, what are the mental health impacts of microaggressions as a part of a femme identity, for example?

This study’s trans masculine participants espoused feminist views on gender. Other recent scholarship has found non-heterosexual sexual orientation (and possibly sexuality identity) as a proxy for liberal social attitudes (Schnabel, 2018). Might gender identity be as well? How does identifying as trans masculine influence one’s social attitudes on gender? These are interesting and topical areas for future research.

Future research could further investigate the particularly complicated implications for trans masculine people transitioning in cultural contexts that have more rigid gender norms or where public health misinformation is more prevalent (such as in Jordan’s case). Research has only recently begun exploring trans masculine

experiences generally, and thus little is known about how this influences identity, functioning, and roles within individuals' families and further, how those shifts might be differentially experienced in diverse cultural contexts.

Of note, Bostwick and Hequembourg (2013) provide a useful guide for researchers conducting research with bisexual populations.

### **Limitations**

In addition to the limitations already discussed, this study included three sample-related limitations. First, significant variability existed between ages of the participants. While this was not a population-based study and thus its aim was not to make generalizations, the range of ages collapses distinctions during a developmental period that includes significant variability. Other sample-specific limitations include the possible "type" of person who may participate in sexuality studies. Literature to date has suggested that traits such as extroversion, higher erotophilia, and sex-positive attitudes predict willingness to participate in sexuality studies (Bouchard et al., 2012). Other research has suggested that volunteers for sexuality studies are generally more sexually experienced, hold less traditional sexual attitudes, score higher on measures of sexual esteem and sexual sensation seeking, and indicate greater tendencies toward interpersonal exploitation and self-monitoring of expressive behavior (Wiederman, 1999). Furthermore, it is difficult to say how participants' experiences would have been different had this study not been conducted in Seattle, a large, urban center historically known for its liberal sociopolitical attitudes and policies. Replicating this work in diverse contexts would add important and necessary insights to this scholarship. Finally, the subtheme of "who I am becoming" was less developed than others. I think

that given the “heavy lift” of the interviews and the fact that questions of an imagined future self were at the end of the interview schedule, there was not enough time or energy to expand further upon questions of futurity.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation integrated theories used across diverse disciplines and represented a theoretical pluralism intended to interpret stories of lived lives, material realities, and possible futures. In the two analytic chapters of this dissertation, I explored experiences of rupture and connection and the myriad liminal spaces that participants negotiated as in-between and how they are making meaning of those experiences as they move into *their* emerging adulthood. In different ways and with different intensities, participants modeled the ways in which ever-shifting and fluid identities show up and are experienced. The charge now if for researchers and practitioners is to recognize the both/and aspects of these experiences, that the in-between can be both a distressing and liberatory space, and take material steps to support young bisexual people in their early life experiences so that the possible futures they imagine can become a collective reality. To revisit a quote from Elizabeth Grosz, “This is not the abolition of history or a refusal to recognize the past and the historical debt the present owes to it, but simply to refuse to grant even the past the status of fixity and givenness. The past is always contingent on what the future makes of it” (Grosz, 2001, p. 103). It is my hope that this study might inform future social work practice, education, and scholarship that embraces this fluid and liminal approach for a more emancipatory, equitable future.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Somatic Practices Incorporated into Interviews**

Opening practice (dowel activity and reflection and 1-minute sit)

- Dowel activity intentions: build rapport (it is silly and collaborative); requires being attuned to self and other person (being responsive and iterative and knowing what you need/how you feel and articulating that to another person “I can’t turn around with it,”); process of co-making the experience together; gets us into our bodies as another way of knowing and being (both in activity and reflection of it); challenges assumptions of what this interview will be like (they will likely say something that alludes to not dropping the dowel or not being “good” at it, etc., in that case you can say “you reasonably assumed that we were meant to keep the dowel in the air, but did I ever say that explicitly? Ok, makes sense that you assumed that...might there be some assumptions or expectations that you have for this interview? Just ask yourself that and notice without judgement. Let’s both do our best to drop any assumptions about what this will look like or what you think I might “want” from you in terms of your responses.
- 1-minute sit just recognizes that we both came from somewhere and we will be going somewhere after this, but for now, we are in this room together. Helps ground both me and possibly participant. Again, emphasis in being in the body and just noticing what is

there. ALWAYS use the language of invitation for this, such as “you can choose to close your eyes or not, you can choose to focus on your breath or not,” I always make a little joke/comment that “you could be making your grocery list for all I know, it doesn’t need to matter, you do what feels best to you.” Start the timer for 1 minute. When timer dings, take a big breath and check in with participant again to see how they are doing and if they need anything (water, snack, etc.). Then proceed with interview.

## Appendix B: Interview guides

### UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON INTERVIEW OUTLINE; INTERVIEW ONE “*Sexuality Identity Development in Bisexual Emerging Adult Men*”

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General notes on the interview structure/script: This script is a general guideline of the possible questions, clarifications, and topics to be addressed. The participant should guide the interview as much as possible. The interviewer should make every effort to use the language that the participant uses in describing their identity, history, relationships, etc. so as not to introduce or interfere with their language use.

- I. Introduce consent document and give participant time to read each page: *This is an informed consent agreement; it is three pages long. Please be sure to read it thoroughly and feel free to ask any questions about the document or the study.*
  
- II. Give opportunity for questions and answer them thoroughly: *Do you have any questions about the informed consent document or the study procedures?*
  
- III. Interviewer and participant sign document: *If you are comfortable with me keeping your demographic information from our phone conversation on file, please check here. If you are comfortable with allowing me to audio-record this interview, please check here. If you are comfortable with me potentially contacting you in the future to clarify your answers, please check here. If you are comfortable agreeing to participate in the study please sign here.*
  
- IV. Remind participant that they may refuse to answer any questions and can stop participation at any point: *Before we begin, I would like to remind you that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions and you can stop participating in the study at any time. You will receive \$30 to compensate your time regardless of how long the interview lasts. I have also brought some water and snacks if you get hungry or thirsty. Please let me know if you would like to stop and take a break at any time.*
  
- V. Introduce the interview: *The interview will focus on the story of how you arrived to this point in your life. I will interject as little as possible. I may ask you to clarify some specific pieces of your story, to provide more context, or to reflect on your story as a whole. At the end, I'll also make sure we have some time for you to raise any additional things I didn't ask about. I am going to ask you questions that are in two different but related categories; gender and sexuality. In those two main categories, I will ask about things like race/ethnicity, class status, things about your upbringing such as the location of where you were raised or where you live now and your class status or religion growing up, important relationships, and other things that might have played a part in your gender or your sexuality or how you feel about those things. Are you ready to begin?*

## VI. Interview

### 1. Opening practice (dowel activity and reflection and 1-minute sit)

- i. Dowel activity intentions: build rapport (it is silly and collaborative); requires being attuned to self and other person (being responsive and iterative and knowing what you need/how you feel and articulating that to another person “I can’t turn around with it,”); process of co-making the experience together; gets us into our bodies as another way of knowing and being (both in activity and reflection of it); challenges assumptions of what this interview will be like (they will likely say something that alludes to not dropping the dowel or not being “good” at it, etc., in that case you can say “you reasonably assumed that we were meant to keep the dowel in the air, but did I ever say that explicitly? Ok, makes sense that you assumed that...might there be some assumptions or expectations that you have for this interview? Just ask yourself that and notice without judgement. Let’s both do our best to drop any assumptions about what this will look like or what you think I might “want” from you in terms of your responses.
- ii. 1-minute sit just recognizes that we both came from somewhere and we will be going somewhere after this, but for now, we are in this room together. Helps ground both me and possibly participant. Again, emphasis in being in the body and just noticing what is there. ALWAYS use the language of invitation for this, such as “you can choose to close your eyes or not, you can choose to focus on your breath or not,” I always make a little joke/comment that “you could be making your grocery list for all I know, it doesn’t need to matter, you do what feels best to you.” Start the timer for 1 minute.

### 2. Start recording and interview.

### 3. Introduction

- i. *How are you doing?*
- ii. *Why did you answer my ad?*
- iii. *What pronouns do you want me to use?*

### 4. Gender Related Questions (it might be easiest to do the sexuality related questions right alongside these Q’s as they bleed into one another so much...not sure if that would be more confusing or not)

- i. *When I say the word GENDER, what do you think of?*
  - a. *What does GENDER mean when you are talking about yourself?*
  - b. *How do you act or show that you are \_\_\_\_\_?*
- ii. *How did you come to know that about your gender?*
- iii. *What relationships of any kind have you had that were significant to you? (parents, friends, formative sex partners etc.)*
  1. *Did that relationship affect the way that you think about your gender at all?*
    - a. *In what ways?*
  2. *Have you had any romantic or sexual relationships?*
    - a. *If no, ask the following then go to Demographic questions.*

- i. *IF NO: is there any particular reason why you have not had sexual relationships?*
  1. *How do you feel about not having had sexual relationships?*
  2. *What does not having sexual or romantic relationships mean to you?*
- ii. *IF NO: is there any particular reason why you have not had romantic relationships?*
  1. *How do you feel about not having had romantic relationships?*
  2. *What meaning do you make of those feelings?*
- b. *IF YES, continue below.*
3. *Have you had more than one sexual or romantic relationship?*
  - i. *If no, have them respond to questions below just relevant to that one relationship, if yes, continue.*
    1. *Thinking about your **first** sexual or romantic relationship, did it affect the way that you think about your gender at all?*
    2. *In what ways?*
    3. *Did your understanding of your gender influence that relationship?*
      - a. *In what ways?*
    4. *Did that relationship have meaning for you in any way?*
  - ii. *Thinking about your **most significant** sexual or romantic relationship, did it affect the way that you think about your gender at all?*
    1. *In what ways?*
    2. *Did your understanding of your gender influence that relationship?*
      - a. *In what ways?*
    3. *Did that relationship have meaning for you in any way?*
  - iii. *Thinking about your **last** sexual or romantic relationship, did it affect the way that you think about your gender at all?*
    1. *In what ways?*
    2. *Did your understanding of your gender influence that relationship?*
      - a. *In what ways?*
    3. *Did that relationship have meaning for you in any way?*
- 4. Demographic Questions**
  - a. *How would you describe your race/ethnicity?*
    - i. *How did you come to know that?*
  - b. *How do you think your race/ethnicity influences your gender?*
    - i. *In what ways?*
      1. *How do you feel about that?*
      2. *What does that mean for you?*
    - ii. *How do you think the way that others read your race/ethnicity influences your gender?*

1. *How do you feel about that?*
  2. *What does that mean for you?*
  - c. *When I say the word "SOCIAL CLASS" what does that mean to you?*
    - i. *How would you characterize your social class growing up?*
      1. *What does that mean for you?*
    - ii. *How did you come to know that about your class status?*
    - iii. *How do you think your class status growing up influenced your gender?*
      1. *How did your class status influence your understanding of your gender?*
        - a. *Or how you feel about your gender?*
        - b. *Or the meaning that you make of your gender?*
    - iv. *How do you think the way that others read your social class growing up influenced your understanding of your gender?*
      1. *How do you feel about that?*
      2. *What does that mean for you?*
  - d. *How would you describe your social class now?*
    - i. *Does class influence your gender in any way now?*
    - ii. *Does it influence the way you present as it relates to your gender or behave in your gender in the world?(reference language that they used in Question #1b for behaviors).*
      1. *What does that mean for you?*
5. *How would you describe the environment that you grew up in?*  
(PROBE: urban vs rural, small town, school environment; if moved around, be sure to explore all environments)
    - a. *How do you think the environment that you grew up in influenced your gender?*
    - b. *How did your childhood environment influences your understanding of your gender?*
    - c. *Or how you feel about your gender?*
    - d. *What parts of the environment that you grew up in were most meaningful in influencing your gender?*
      - i. *Or understanding your gender?*
  6. *Thinking about the environment that you live in now, if it is different than the one that you grew up in...*
    - a. *How would you describe it?*
      - i. *How do you think it influences your gender?*
        1. *Were there specific parts of it that are more influential than others?*
      - ii. *How does it influence your understanding of your gender?*
      - iii. *How does it influence your experience of your gender? Or in other words, how you feel about your gender?*
      - iv. *How does it influence the meaning that you make of your gender?*
  7. *Has religion or spiritual practices been a part of your life?*
    - a. *In what ways?*

- b. *What does religion or spiritual practices mean to you?*
  - i. *For you, what has that looked like?*
- c. *How has your experiences with religion or spiritual practices influenced your gender?*
  - i. *What about your understanding of your gender?*
  - ii. *Are there specific parts of it that are more influential than others?*
- d. *How has it influenced your experience of your gender?*
  - i. *Specific parts of it that are more influential than others?*

### **8. Feelings about Gender Questions**

- a. *What are the “good” things about your gender?*
- b. *What are the “difficult” things about your gender?*
- c. *Is there anything that you wish were different for people about gender?*
  - i. *What about things that you wish were different for people who identify in their genders in the way that you do?*

### **9. Peer Questions**

- a. *How do you think other \_\_\_\_\_ like you learn about their gender?*
- b. *What do your friends say about it? If they say something along the lines of “we don’t talk about it” or “no one talks about it), skip down to question c.*
  - 1. *Are those online or in person friends?*
    - a. *Do those two groups say different things about gender? (online vs in person)?*
      - i. *What is the difference between how you think of those friends?*
      - ii. *How you feel about those friends?*
      - iii. *What they mean to you?*
- c. *Why aren’t others talking about gender? (PROMPT: “sometimes people feel selfconscious talking about gender, or sometimes people just don’t reflect on it as a topic, might those be things you can relate to?”)*
- d. *Relating back to the first question in this series, what meaning do you make of the ways in which others or your friends for example learn about their gender?*
- e. *Do you have any feelings around that?*
- f. *If they mention someone/something specifically in their life or a group of people (parent/peers or porn for ex), ask questions below.*
  - i. *What or who is most influential?*
  - ii. *Whose opinion matters most?*

### **10. Sexuality Related Questions (much of this could have already been covered in the Gender section, but all questions are here for comprehensiveness)**

- a. *When I say the word SEXUALITY, what do you think of?*
  - i. *What does SEXUALITY mean when you are talking about yourself?*
  - ii. *What does that term mean to you?*

- b. *When did you start using that term?*
    - i. *Where?*
    - ii. *When?*
    - iii. *With who?*
    - iv. *Who else uses that term to refer to your sexuality?*
    - v. *How do you act or show that you are \_\_\_\_\_?*
  - c. *How did you come to know that about your sexuality?*
  - d. *Compulsory heterosexuality: if they go into how they knew that they were “not straight” ask them more about that. For example, “I noticed that you have only talked about how you knew that you were interested in men...”*
    - i. *Why is that?*
    - ii. *Is there a reason that you did not talk about being interested in women?*
    - iii. *When did you know you were interested in women?*
    - iv. *How did you come to know that?*
  - e. *What relationships of any kind have you had that were significant to you? (parents, friends, formative sex partners etc.)*
  - f. *Did that relationship affect the way that you think about your sexuality at all?*
  - g. *In what ways?*
11. *Have you had any romantic or sexual relationships? REFER BACK TO WHAT THEY SAID IN THE GENDER SECTION ON THIS. IF THEY SAID NO BEFORE, SKIP TO DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS BELOW.*
- a. *If NO, ask the following then go to Demographic questions.*
  - b. *IF YES, continue below.*
  - c. *Have you had more than one sexual or romantic relationship?*
    - i. *If no, have them respond to questions below just relevant to that one relationship, if yes, continue.*
      - 1. *Thinking about your **first** sexual or romantic relationship, did it affect the way that you think about your sexuality at all?*
      - 2. *In what ways?*
      - 3. *Did your understanding of your sexuality influence that relationship?*
        - a. *In what ways?*
    - ii. *Thinking about your **most significant** sexual or romantic relationship, did it affect the way that you think about your sexuality at all?*
      - 1. *In what ways?*
      - 2. *Did your understanding of your sexuality influence that relationship?*
        - a. *In what ways?*
    - iii. *Thinking about your **last** sexual or romantic relationship, did it affect the way that you think about your sexuality at all?*
      - 1. *In what ways?*

2. *Did your understanding of your sexuality influence that relationship?*
  - a. *In what ways?*

### **12. Demographic Questions**

- a. *Now going back to your race/ethnicity...*
  - i. *How do you think your race/ethnicity influences your sexuality?*
  - ii. *In what ways?*
    1. *How do you feel about that?*
    2. *What does that mean to you?*
  - iii. *How do you think others read your race/ethnicity?*
  - iv. *How do you think the way that others read your race/ethnicity influences your sexuality?*
    1. *How do you feel about that?*
    2. *What meaning does that have for you?*
- b. *And thinking about social class...*
  - i. *How do you think your social class growing up influenced your sexuality?*
  - ii. *How did your social class influence your understanding of your sexuality?*
  - iii. *Or how you feel about your sexuality?*
  - iv. *Or the meaning that you make of your sexuality?*
  - v. *How do others read your class status?*
  - vi. *How do you think the way that others read your class status growing up influenced your understanding of your sexuality?*
    1. *How do you feel about that?*
    2. *What meaning do you make of that?*
  - vii. *Does social class influence your sexuality in any way now?*
    1. *Does it influence the way you present as it relates to your sexuality or behave in your sexuality in the world?(reference language that they used in Question #1b for behaviors).*
- c. *Thinking about the environment you grew up in...*
  - i. *How do you think the environment that you grew up in influenced your sexuality?*
  - ii. *How did the environment you grew up in influence your understanding of your sexuality?*
  - iii. *Or how you feel about your sexuality?*
  - iv. *Or the meaning that you make of your sexuality?*
  - v. *Were there parts of your environment growing up that were more influential than others in influencing your sexuality?*
    1. *What were they?*
    2. *Describe how or why they were meaningful.*
- d. *Thinking about the environment that you live in now...*
  - i. *How do you think it influences your sexuality?*
    1. *Specific parts of it that are more influential than others?*
      - a. *Describe why or how they are meaningful.*

- ii. *How does it influence your understanding of your sexuality?*
- iii. *How does it influence your experience of your sexuality? Or in other words, how you feel about your sexuality?*
  - 1. *And what about the meaning that you make of your sexuality?*

**13. Thinking about religion...**

- a. *How has your experiences with religion or spiritual practices influenced your sexuality?*
  - i. *What about your understanding of your sexuality?*
  - ii. *Are there specific parts of your experiences with religion or spiritual practices that are more influential than others?*
- b. *How has it influenced your experience of your sexuality?*
  - i. *Are there specific parts of it that are more influential than others?*
  - ii. *What meaning do you make of that?*

**14. Feelings about Sexuality Questions**

- a. *How do you feel about your sexuality?*
- b. *What do you think influences the way that you feel about your sexuality?*
  - i. *What about that/those things influences how you feel?*
- c. *What are the “good” things about your sexuality?*
- d. *What are the “difficult” things about your sexuality?*
- e. *Is there anything that you wish were different for people your age about sexuality?*
  - i. *Is there anything that you wish were different for bisexual men? If they talk about stereotypes here ask...*
    - 1. *What do you mean by stereotype? (Or ideas or whatever word they use to describe).*
    - 2. *How do those stereotypes/ideas show up in your life?*
      - a. *Do you believe those ideas?*
      - b. *Is that something that you have experienced personally?*
      - c. *In what ways?*
      - d. *When?*
      - e. *Has it impacted your sexual/romantic relationships?*
        - i. *In what ways?*
      - f. *Has it been related to conflict in any way?*
        - i. *When?*
        - ii. *How?*

**15. Questions Related to Outness**

- a. *Are you “out” about your \_\_\_\_\_ sexuality at all?*
  - i. *What are you “out” about?*
  - ii. *With who?*
    - 1. *Describe your life before coming “out” and after?*
- b. *What influenced your decision to “come out” to those people or about those parts of you or...*
  - i. *To stay in the closet to others?*

- c. *What is your experience with those you are “out” to and with those you aren’t “out” to?*

### **16. Peer Questions**

- a. *How do you think other \_\_\_\_\_ like you learn about their sexuality?*
- i. *What do your friends say about it? If they say something along the lines of “we don’t talk about it” or “no one talks about it), skip down to question ii.*
    1. *Are those online or in person friends?*
      - a. *Do those two groups say different things about gender? (online vs in person)?*
        - i. *What is the difference between how you think of those friends?*
        - ii. *How you feel about those friends?*
        - iii. *What do they mean to you?*
    - ii. *Why aren’t others talking about gender? (PROMPT: “sometimes people feel self-conscious talking about sex and sexuality, or sometimes people just don’t reflect on it as a topic, might those be things you can relate to?”)*
  - b. *Relating back to the first question in this series, what meaning do you make of the ways in which others or your friends for example learn about their sexuality?*
  - c. *Do you have any feelings around that?*
  - d. *If they mention someone/something specifically in their life or a group of people (parent/peers or porn for ex), ask questions below.*
    - i. *What or who is most influential?*
    - ii. *Whose opinion matters most?*

### **17. Closing Reflection**

- a. *What is one thing that you’d like people to know about what it means to be a \_\_\_\_\_ man?*

### **18. Ending the interview:**

- a. *We have reached the end of the questions I had prepared. Are there any additional topics that you want to talk about or that you feel are important that I did not ask about? If you have nothing else to add, **I will turn off the recorder.***
- b. *Would you like to receive the final study results when they are complete? Make note of preferences and if participants would like to be contacted.*
- c. *Close the interview*
  - i. *If you think of anything you would like to add or any questions you have in the future, my contact information is on the copy of the consent form I gave you earlier. Please feel free to contact me at any time. If you asked to receive any study results, I will send them to the address you indicated. My study should be complete by June 2018. Thank you very much for your time and participation.*

### **19. Closing practice**

- a. *1-minute sit to close the interview; same language of invitation.*

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**  
**INTERVIEW OUTLINE; INTERVIEW TWO**  
***“Sexuality Identity Development in Bisexual Emerging Adult Men”***

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General notes on the interview structure/script: This script is a general guideline of the possible questions, clarifications, and topics to be addressed. The participant should guide the interview as much as possible. The interviewer should make every effort to use the language that the participant uses in describing their identity, history, relationships, etc. so as not to introduce or interfere with their language use. **THIS WILL BE ALL PARTICIPANTS SECOND INTERVIEW**, so they should be familiar with the format. **ALSO, GIVEN THIS, STEPS 1-3 BELOW ARE OPTIONAL.** Have two copies of transcript from previous interview printed off. As well, have art materials ready for participant.

- I. Introduce consent document and give participant time to read each page: *This is an informed consent agreement; it is three pages long. Please be sure to read it thoroughly and feel free to ask any questions about the document or the study.*
- II. Give opportunity for questions and answer them thoroughly: *Do you have any questions about the informed consent document or the study procedures?*
- III. Interviewer and participant sign document: *If you are comfortable with me keeping your demographic information from our phone conversation on file, please check here. If you are comfortable with allowing me to audio-record this interview, please check here. If you are comfortable with me potentially contacting you in the future to clarify your answers, please check here. If you are comfortable agreeing to participate in the study please sign here.*
- IV. Remind participant that they may refuse to answer any questions and can stop participation at any point: *Before we begin, I would like to remind you that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions and you can stop participating in the study at any time. You will receive \$30 to compensate your time regardless of how long the interview lasts. I have also brought some water and snacks if you get hungry or thirsty. Please let me know if you would like to stop and take a break at any time.*
- V. Introduce the interview: *The interview will focus on reflecting on the story of how you arrived to this point in your life; many of the things that you talked about in your first interview. I will interject as little as possible. I may ask you to clarify some specific pieces of your story, to provide more context, or to reflect on your story as a whole. At the end, I'll also make sure we have some time for you to raise any additional things I didn't ask about. Are you ready to begin?*

## VI. Interview

### 1. Opening practice

- i. **1-minute sit**; intended to recognize that we both came from somewhere and we will be going somewhere after this, but for now, we are in this room together. Helps ground both me and possibly participant. Again, emphasis in being in the body and just noticing what is there. ALWAYS use the language of invitation for this, such as “you can choose to close your eyes or not, you can choose to focus on your breath or not,” I always make a little joke/comment that “you could be making your grocery list for all I know, it doesn’t need to matter, you do what feels best to you.” Start the timer for 1 minute.

### 2. Start recording and interview.

### 3. Introduction

- i. *How are you doing?*
- ii. *What pronouns do you want me to use?*

### 4. Reflection on previous interview

- i. *Have you thought at all about our last interview?*
  1. *What have you thought about?*
  2. *What was that experience like?*
  3. *Was there anything that really stuck out?*
- ii. *Did you talk about it with anyone?*
  1. *What did you talk about?*
  2. *What was that conversation like?*
  3. *Did anything stick out for you?*

### 5. Gender Reflection

- i. Intro for reflection: We talked about a number of things that you mentioned in different ways had an influence on your gender. I am going to ask you to specifically reflect on some of those things to see if anything has changed for you or if you are thinking about things in a different way now. I will do the same for sexuality later in the interview.
  - a. *The term GENDER; what do you think about when I say that term to you?*
    - i. *Has that shifted at all from our previous interview?*
      1. *In what ways?*
  - b. *We talked about important relationships and how they may have affected how you think about gender as it relates to you. Thinking about any important relationships that you have had, are you thinking any differently about how those have affected your gender identity or expression?*
    - i. *Or how you experience or feel about your gender identity or expression?*
  - c. *What about any romantic or sexual relationships, are you thinking any differently about how those might have affected how you think about gender?*
    - i. *Or how you understand gender as it relates to you?*
    - ii. *Or how you feel about your gender identity or expression?*

- ii. Demographics
  - a. *We talked about race/ethnicity and how that may have influenced your gender.*
    - i. *How do you think that your race/ethnicity influenced how you identify in your gender?*
    - ii. *How you experience gender?*
    - iii. *How you feel about gender as it relates to you?*
    - iv. *Has any of these things shifted since our last interview?*
      - 1. *In what ways?*
  - b. *We talked about class status growing up and now. How do you think that your class status growing up influenced how you identify in your gender?*
    - i. *How you experience gender?*
    - ii. *How you feel about gender as it relates to you?*
    - iii. *The meaning you make of the word "GENDER?"*
    - iv. *Has any of these things changed since our last interview?*
      - 1. *In what ways?*
    - v. *What about social class now; are their ways that your social class now affects your gender?*
      - 1. *How you understand it?*
      - 2. *How you feel about it?*
      - 3. *The meaning that you make of gender as it relates to you?*
  - c. *We talked about the environment that you grew up in and now. How do you think that the environment that you grew up in influenced how you identify in your gender?*
    - i. *How you experience gender?*
    - ii. *How you feel about gender as it relates to you?*
    - iii. *The meaning that you make of gender?*
      - 1. *What about that environment is most influential?*
        - a. *How or why?*
    - iv. *Has any of these things changed since our last interview?*
      - 1. *In what ways?*
    - v. *What about your environment now; are their ways that your environment now affects your gender?*
      - 1. *How you understand it?*
      - 2. *How you feel about it?*
      - 3. *The meaning that you make of your own gender?*
  - d. *We talked about religion and spirituality; how has religion or spiritual practices influenced your gender?*
    - i. *Have you reflected on that since the past interview?*
      - 1. *Has that changed at all?*
- 2. *We talked about your feelings about gender a bit and how others might learn about their gender.*
  - a. *What is "good" about your gender?*
    - i. *Have you reflected on that at all?*
      - 1. *What came up in that reflection?*
      - 2. *Has that shifted at all since our last interview?*

- b. What is “challenging” about your gender?
    - i. Have you reflected on that at all?
      - 1. What came up in that reflection?
      - 2. Has that shifted at all since our last interview?
  - c. What would you change about your gender if you could?
    - i. Have you reflected on that at all?
      - 1. What came up in that reflection?
      - 2. Has any of those ideas shifted in any way?
3. We talked about your ideas on how you think other people like you learn about their gender.
- a. How do you think other people like you learn about their gender?
  - b. And what your friends might say about gender?
    - i. Or why they might not talk about gender?
    - ii. Has that changed at all from last time we talked?
    - iii. In what ways?

## 6. Sexuality Reflection

1. Intro for reflection: We talked about a number of things that you mentioned in different ways had an influence on your sexuality. I am going to ask you to specifically reflect on some of those things to see if anything has changed for you or if you are thinking about things in a different way now. I will do the same for sexuality later in the interview.
  - a. The term *SEXUALITY*; what do you think about when I say that term to you?
    - i. Has that shifted at all from our previous interview?
      - 1. In what ways?
  - b. We talked about important relationships and how they may have impacted how you think about sexuality as it relates to yourself. Thinking about any important relationships that you have had, are you thinking any differently about how those have affected your sexuality?
    - i. Or how you experience or feel about your sexuality?
  - c. What about any romantic or sexual relationships, are you thinking any differently about how those might have affected how you think about sexuality?
    - i. Or how you understand sexuality as it relates to you?
    - ii. Or how you feel about your sexuality status?
2. Demographics
  - a. We talked about race/ethnicity and how that may have influenced your sexuality.
    - i. How do you think that your race/ethnicity influenced how you identify in your sexuality?
    - ii. How you experience sexuality?
    - iii. How you feel about sexuality as it relates to you?
    - iv. Has any of these things shifted since our last interview?
      - 1. In what ways?

- b. *We talked about class status growing up and now. How do you think that your class status growing up influenced how you identify in your sexuality?*
  - i. *How you experience sexuality?*
  - ii. *How you feel about sexuality as it relates to you?*
  - iii. *Has any of these things changed since our last interview?*
    1. *In what ways?*
  - iv. *What about class status now; are there ways that your class status now affects your sexuality?*
    1. *How you understand it?*
    2. *How you feel about it?*
- c. *We talked about the environment that you grew up in growing up and now. How do you think that the environment that you grew up in influenced how you identify in your sexuality?*
  - i. *How you experience sexuality?*
  - ii. *How you feel about sexuality as it relates to you?*
  - iii. *Has any of these things changed since our last interview?*
    1. *In what ways?*
  - iv. *What about your environment now; are there ways that your environment now affects your sexuality?*
    1. *How you understand it?*
    2. *How you feel about it?*
- d. *We talked about religion and spirituality; how has religion or spiritual practices influenced your sexuality?*
  - i. *Have you reflected on that since the past interview?*
    1. *Has that changed at all?*
    2. *If YES: What does that shift mean to you?*
- e. *Is there any additional meaning that you can make of those shifts?*
3. *We talked about your feelings about sexuality a bit and how others might learn about their sexuality.*
  - a. *What is “good” about your sexuality?*
    - i. *Have you reflected on that at all?*
      1. *What came up in that reflection?*
  - b. *What is “challenging” about your sexuality?*
    - i. *Have you reflected on that at all?*
      1. *What came up in that reflection?*
  - c. *What would you change about your sexuality if you could?*
    - i. *Have you reflected on that at all?*
      1. *What came up in that reflection?*
  - d. *Has any of those ideas shifted in any way?*
  - e. *Do you make any meaning out of those shifts?*
4. *We talked about your ideas on how you think other people like you learn about their sexuality.*
  - a. *How do you think other people like you learn about their sexuality?*
    - i. *Has that changed at all from last time we talked?*
    - ii. *In what ways?*

5. *We talked about how you feel about your sexuality, can you describe how you feel about it?*
  - a. *Is that different than how you described your feelings last time?*
    - i. *In what ways?*
    - ii. *If YES: What does that shift mean to you?*
  - b. *What are some “good” things about your sexuality?*
    - i. *Is that different for you than last time we spoke?*
      1. *In what ways?*
  - c. *Are there some “challenging” things about your sexuality?*
    - i. *Are you thinking about those differently this time?*
      1. *What has shifted?*
  - d. *Are there things that you wish were different for \_\_\_\_\_ people like you?*
    - i. *What?*
    - ii. *Has your thinking on that shifted from our last interview?*
      1. *In what ways?*
    - iii. *If they brought up stereotypes about bisexual people in the last interview, ask...*
      1. *You mentioned stereotypes about bisexual people in the last interview, what were those stereotypes that you mentioned last time?*
        - a. *Have you reflected on those at all?*
        - b. *Has your thinking shifted at all on those?*
        - c. *Have you been impacted by those personally?*
          - i. *Have you been thinking differently about the ways that you have been impacted by those changed?*
6. *We talked about being “out” or not in our last interview.*
  - a. *Are you out to all in your life?*
    - i. *Has that changed since our last interview?*
      1. *In what ways?*
      2. *If they came out to someone, ask...*
        - a. *Describe that experience*
        - b. *How did you make that decision?*
        - c. *How did that go?*
        - d. *How are you feeling about that?*
  - b. *What are you out about?*
    - i. *Has that changed since the last time we spoke?*
  - c. *How do you feel about having come out to those folks?*
    - i. *Has that changed since our last interview?*
  - d. *How do you feel about staying in the closet about that thing or with those people?*
    - i. *Has that changed since the last time we spoke?*
7. *We talked about how other people like you might learn about their sexuality.*
  - a. *How do you think that happens?*
  - b. *Is that any different than how you were thinking about it in our last interview?*

- i. *In what ways?*
- c. *Or the way that your friends talk about sexuality?*
- d. *Or why not people might not talk about sexuality?*
- 8. *Is there anything else that you had reflected on since our last interview that you wanted to mention?*
  - a. *Why is that meaningful?*
  - b. *How are you thinking differently about that?*

## **7. Future sexual self**

- i. *Now I am going to ask you to respond to something by making a visual representation. We will talk about it after you have finished.* Pass art materials to participant and just gauge their timing, try to go no more than 10 minutes.
- ii. Before telling the prompt; remind them that all of the other study participants have done this and that this is a supportive sexual culture that you are all building together. The intention behind how we are setting this up is twofold: a. recognizing that THEY ALONE are not responsible for doing that “world making” (i.e., recognizing that structures exist that provide opportunities and constraints) and b. that they are connected to others and connected to their own imagination and creativity.
- iii. *If you could create a supportive sexual culture, what would it look like and how do you see yourself in that world?*
  - 1. **STOP THE RECORDER HERE!**
    - a. Leave the room and suggest to participants that they turn on music that they might want to listen to or anything else that might help them feel more comfortable.
  - 2. **RESTART THE RECORDER HERE!**
- iv. *Can you tell me about your picture?* Be sure to focus on how they are responding to the questions posed and if they are not, allow them the space to describe without interruption and then direct a question along the lines of the questions to focus them back to question.
  - 1. *What feels meaningful about this picture to you?*
  - 2. *What about this picture feels like it would be ideal to you?*
    - a. *What would it feel like to be in that supportive sexual culture?*
    - b. *Where are you in that supportive culture?*
      - i. *Why are you there?*
      - ii. *What feels meaningful about that?*
- v. *What was the process of imagining and creating that world like for you?*

## **8. Review with summation of previous interview**

- i. Hand summation to participant and ask them to look it over, allow plenty of time for this (5-10 minutes)
- ii. *Is there anything here that strikes you?*
- iii. If they bring something up
  - 1. *What about that strikes you?*
    - a. *What feels meaningful about that?*
- iv. *What does it feel like to have this reflected back to you?*
  - 1. *Does this reflection make you think or feel any differently about your experience of your gender?*

- a. *What has shifted?*
- b. *What feels important about that?*
2. *Does this reflection make you think or feel any differently about your sexuality?*
  - a. *What has shifted?*
  - b. *What feels important about that?*

#### **9. Ending the interview**

- i. *We have reached the end of the questions I had prepared. Are there any additional topics that you want to talk about or that you feel are important that I did not ask about? If you have nothing else to add, I **will turn off the recorder.***
- ii. *Would you like to receive the final study results when they are complete? Make note of preferences and if participants would like to be contacted.*
- iii. *Close the interview*
  1. *If you think of anything you would like to add or any questions you have in the future, my contact information is on the copy of the consent form I gave you earlier. Please feel free to contact me at any time. If you asked to receive any study results, I will send them to the address you indicated. My study should be complete by June 2018. Thank you very much for your time and participation.*

#### **10. Closing practice**

- i. *1-minute sit to close the interview; same language of invitation.*

## CURRICULUM VITAE

**KATHERINE A. QUERNA, MSSW**4101 15<sup>th</sup> AV NE, Seattle, WA. 98105 | (646)285-8146 | Kquerna@uw.edu**EDUCATION**

University of Washington School of Social Work; Seattle, WA  
 PhD 2018

*Dissertation:* “Whoever I Find Myself To Be”: Past, Present, and Future Selves of  
 Bisexual Emerging Adult Men and Trans Masculine Individuals

Columbia University School of Social Work, New York, NY  
 Masters of Science in Social Work 2008  
 Concentration: Advanced Generalist Practice and Programming; focus on mental health,  
 substance use, and sexual health

Linfield College, McMinnville, OR  
 Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education 2003  
 Minor: Spanish

**AWARDS, HONORS, GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

University of Washington School of Social Work Travel Award 2018  
 Alene Moris NEW Leadership Institute Fellow 2017  
 Community Service Award, Susan G. Komen Puget Sound 2017  
 Smith Clinical Research Institute, Dissertation Award for LGBT Violence Research 2016  
 Graduate School Fund for Excellence and Innovation Travel Award 2016  
 Graduate and Professional Students of UW Travel Award 2016  
 University of Washington School of Social Work Travel Award 2016  
 TL1 Multidisciplinary Pre-doctoral Clinical Research Traineeship 2015-2016  
 University of Washington School of Social Work Travel Award 2015  
 Inter-professional Education Teaching Fellow, University of Washington 2014-2015  
 National Institutes of Health/Institute of Translational Health Science  
 Clinical Research Translation Award 2014  
 Mae L. Wien Award for Excellence in Reproductive Health and Family Planning 2007-2008

**RESEARCH INTERESTS AND EXPERIENCE**

Gender, Sexuality and Health; Aggression and Violence; Stress Embodiment;  
 Mindfulness-Based Interventions; Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices and  
 Pedagogy in Social Work Practice and Curriculum; Mixed Research Methods; Feminist  
 Research Methods; Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR).

**Principal Investigator: Gender and Sexuality Identity Development and  
 Change in Bisexual Emerging Adult Men and Trans Masculine Individuals**

UW School of Social Work 2017-2018

	400
<b>Research Assistant: ALMA Project</b> UW School of Public Health	2016-2017
<b>Research Assistant: Greenwall Study</b> UW School of Social Work	2016
<b>Principal Investigator: Controlling Behaviors and Psychological Aggression: A Mixed Methods Exploratory Study</b> National Institutes of Health Multidisciplinary Clinical Research Trainee, UW Institute of Translational Health Sciences (ITHS),	2015-2016
<b>Research Analyst: Guys Turn Study</b> Collaborative Health and Prevention Research Group, UW School of Social Work	2012-2016
<b>Research Assistant:</b> MSW Program and Social Justice Curriculum, UW School of Social Work	2014
<b>Research Scientist:</b> Health Research Associates, Mountlake Terrace, WA	2010-2012
<b>Qualitative Research Consultant/Technical Writer</b> Mt. Sinai School of Medicine	2010-2010
<b>Research Consultant/Co-Author: SEED/SUUBI Research Program</b> Mt. Sinai School of Medicine and Columbia University School of Social Work	2008
<b>Research Assistant/Technical Writer:</b> Violence Against Women Project Columbia University School of Social Work	2007-2008
<b>Research Assistant:</b> Social Intervention Group, Columbia University School of Social Work	2007-2008

### **TEACHING INTERESTS AND EXPERIENCE**

Experience: Social Work Research and Evaluation (MSW, 505/506); Intellectual and Historical Foundations of Social Work (HUB, 500), Contemplative Practices in Higher Education; Introduction to Social Work Practice (200); Social Work Practice with Groups; Qualitative Research Methods; Sex, Love, and the Internet; HIV/AIDS. Interests: Human Sexuality, Gender, and Development; Stress Embodiment; Social Work Micro and Macro Practice; Interdisciplinary Studies; Translational Research; Feminist History, Theory, and Methodologies; CBPR.

### **Social Work and Higher Education Instruction**

<b>Instructor, MSW Program</b> University of Washington School of Social Work	2015-2017
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Taught and mentored MSW students in a two-quarter foundational research course

**Master Teacher, UW Center for Teaching and Learning,  
Contemplative Pedagogues in Anti-Oppressive Curriculum**

University of Washington 2015-2016

**Instructor, Health Sciences Schools**

University of Washington School of Medicine  
Interprofessional Education Program (IPE) 2014-2015

**Co-Instructor, MSW Program**

University of Washington School of Social Work 2013  
Teaching practicum for Intellectual and Historical Foundations of Social Work

**Teaching Assistant, BSW Program**

University of Washington School of Social Work 2012-2014  
Undergraduate Introduction to Social Work Practice

**Adjunct Instructor, Alcohol / Drug Counseling Program**

Bellevue College, Bellevue, WA 2011-2015  
Behavioral Addictions

**Adjunct Instructor, Psychology Department**

Highline Community College, Des Moines, WA 2010-2012  
“Understanding AIDS” (online and campus-based)

**PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS**

Masters, N.T., Morrison, D.M., **Querna**, K., Casey, E.A., & Beadnell, B. Having “the talk”: Correlates of young men’s intention to discuss birth control with female partners. *Perspectives in Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 49(1), 37-43.

Shaw, J., McLean, K.C., Taylor, B., Swartout, K., & **Querna**, K. (2016). Beyond resilience: Why we need to look at systems too. *Psychology of Violence*, 6(1), 34-41.

Casey, E., **Querna**, K., Masters, N., & Blair, B., Wells, E., Morrison, D., Hoppe, M. (2015). Patterns of intimate partner violence and sexual risk behavior among young heterosexually active men, *Journal of Sex Research*, 53(2), 239-250.

**Querna**, K. (2008). *Designer vaginas*. *Columbia School of Social Work Journal*, 6, 57-67.

**PUBLICATIONS UNDER REVIEW**

**Querna**, K. A systematic review of risk factors associated with psychological aggression perpetration in heterosexual emerging adult men. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*. (invited to resubmit).

Yuan, N.P, Miller-Graff, L., Shultz, K., Wamser-Nanney, R., Howell, K., Goforth, K., & **Querna**, K. Addressing violence in community based participatory research. *Preventing Chronic Disease*..

### **PEER-REVIEWED PRESENTATIONS**

**Querna**, K. (2017). *Compassion in Action: Adapting Compassion Meditation Practices for Use in Social Justice/Anti-Oppression Education*. Poster presented at the Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Conference, Scotts Valley, CA.

**Querna**, K. (2017). *Promoting social justice and resilience through contemplative practices in the classroom*. Presentation and poster presented at the Resilience Conference, Nashville, TN.

Yuan, N.P, Goforth, K., Howell, K., Miller-Graff, L., **Querna**, K., Schulz, K. & Wamser-Nanney, R. (2017). *The conundrum of promoting community-based participatory research on violence, trauma, and resilience, while facing barriers to achieving success*. Moderated panel session presented at the Resilience Conference, Nashville, TN.

**Querna**, K. (2017). *Non-physical aggression in emerging adult men*. Paper presented at American Men's Studies Conference. Ann Arbor, MI.

**Querna**, K. & Weller, I. (2017, April). *Contemplative and somatic approaches to critical masculinities in the classroom*. Workshop presented at American Men's Studies Conference. Ann Arbor, MI.

**Querna**, K., Ranchigoda, T., & Meyers, M. (2016). *Using competency assessments to evaluate contemplative practices in social justice education*. Council on Social Work Education Conference, Atlanta, GA.

Meyers, M., **Querna**, K. & Ranchigoda, T. (2016). *Contemplating justice: Contemplative practices in Social justice-oriented social work education*. Council on Social Work Education Conference. Atlanta, GA.

Meyers, M., **Querna**, L, & Ranchigoda, T. (2016). *Teaching Justice: The use and evaluation of mindfulness and compassion practices in social work education*. Poster presented at International Contemplative Studies Conference, San Diego, CA.

**Querna**, K. (2016). *Contemplative pedagogies in higher education: Bringing our whole selves to our work with students and colleagues*. International Contemplative Studies Conference, San Diego, CA.

- Querna, K.** (2016). *Controlling behaviors in emerging adult cis-gender heterosexual men*. Qualitative Health Research Conference, University of Alberta, Kelowna, BC.
- Querna, K.** (2015). *Contemplative pedagogy in social work curriculum*. Panel presented at The Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Conference, Washington, DC.
- Querna, K.** (2015). *Whole person mentorship*. Poster presented at The Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Conference, Washington, DC.
- Querna, K.** (2015). *Modeling mentorship*. Presented at the Virtues, Narratives, and Resilience Conference, Sewanee, TN.
- Querna, K.** (2014). *Intimate partner violence and sexual risk among young heterosexual men*. Paper presented at the Psychosocial Workshop Annual Conference, Boston, MA.
- Querna, K.** (2013). *Intimate partner violence and sexual risk in a diverse sample of heterosexual men*. Poster presented at the International Academy of Sex Research Annual Conference, Chicago, IL.
- Ssewamala, F., Nabunya, P., Alicea, S., & **Querna** (2008). *Exploring mentorship as a supplement component to interventions targeting orphans and vulnerable children*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR), Washington DC.

## **PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP**

### **Community Instruction and Facilitation**

#### **Sexual Health/Intimate Partner Violence Consultant**

Country Doctor Clinic, Seattle, WA

10/2016-Present

#### **Adaptive Yoga Instructor, Specialized Programs**

Seattle Parks and Recreation, Seattle, WA

2016-Present

#### **Mental Health Consultant**

Trader Joes Grocery Store, Seattle, WA

2016-2017

### **Public Lectures**

- Querna, K.** (2018). *Sex and Consent on Campus*. Panel presentation at CrossCut Fest, Seattle University, Seattle, WA.

Ornelas, I., Mauer, S., Ryan, D., Lengua, L., Duran, B., **Querna, K.**, Blancas, M. (2017). *Amigas Latinas Motivando el Alma (ALMA): Using mindfulness to reduce mental health disparities among Latina immigrant women.* Mindful Families, Schools, and Communities: Contemplative Practices to Promote Child and Family Well-Being. Seattle, WA.

**Querna, K.** (2017). *Assessment and intervention of non-physical aggression.* Family Court of King County, Seattle, WA.

**Querna, K.** (2016). *Tossing out the binary: Transforming gender norms to improve health.* Scholars Studio, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

**Querna, K.** (2015). *Doing Science: Exploring the research process through gender and sexuality studies.* Pacific Science Center, Seattle, WA.

**Querna, K.** (2015). *Relationship violence.* Presentation/workshop for students at the University of Washington through the Sexual Assault and Relationship Violence Activists (SARVA), Seattle, WA.

### **ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE (POST MSSW)**

**Assistant Field Supervisor, PITCH Study** (funded by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

#### **Mental Health Therapist**

YWCA Seattle/King County, Seattle, WA

2010

#### **Bilingual STEP Treatment Education Coordinator**

Lifelong AIDS Alliance, Seattle, WA

2008-2010

### **UNIVERSITY, DISCIPLINARY, AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

#### **University Service**

Member, UW President's Task Force, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response 2014-Present

Member, Faculty Council on Student Affairs 2016-2017

Member, University of Washington Committee on Student Safety 2014-2017

Member, Washington State Student Association Ending Sexual Violence Task Force 2014-2015

Member, Student Speaker Series Committee UW School of Social Work 2014-2015

Member, Student Advisory Council UW School of Social Work 2014-2015

Member, WA State HIV Prevention Planning Committee 2011-2012

Member, AIDS Clinical Trials Unit Community Advisory Board 2008-2010

Member, Faculty Committee for Field Education Policy 2007-2008

**Community Service**

Member, Susan G. Komen LGBTQ Health Initiative Advisory Board	2015-Present
Volunteer, Outdoors for All	2015-Present
Volunteer, The Northwest Network for LGBTQ Survivors of Domestic Violence	2015-Present
Volunteer, Lifelong (formerly Lifelong AIDS Alliance)	2011-Present

**Disciplinary Service**

Reviewer for <i>Perspectives on Social Work</i>	2013-Present
Reviewer for WA State HIV/AIDS Materials Review Panel	2011-Present

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

International Institute of Qualitative Methodology	2016-Present
The Scholars Strategy Network	2016-Present
The Coalition to End Gender-Based Violence	2015-Present
American Men's Studies Association	2015-Present
Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education	2014-Present
International Association of Sex Researchers	2012-Present
National Association of Social Workers	2010-Present

**ADDITIONAL TRAINING**

Neuroscience and Yoga in the Treatment of Trauma	2016
Thinking Qualitatively Workshops, International Institute for Qualitative Methodology	2016
The Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Summer Session on Contemplative Higher Education	2015
The Samarya Center, Yoga Teacher Training Certified Yoga Teacher-200 hours	2015

**LANGUAGES**

Spanish – speak/read/write with proficiency