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Lauren Millerd
How Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual
Youth Develop Positive Identities
During Adolescence and Young
Adulthood

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was designed to examine the ways in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents form positive identities, specifically in strength-based ways looking at factors of resilience. Twelve individuals, aged 22-28, were interviewed to give retrospective information about their adolescent development. By utilizing a semi-structured interview model for this study, the researcher was able to analyze the subjective findings utilizing thematic analysis. Significant findings include the influential nature of one's first disclosure of sexual orientation in the development of one's identity, and the positive impact that role models have for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth during adolescence.

**HOW GAY, LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL YOUTH DEVELOP POSITIVE IDENTITIES
DURING ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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Northampton, MA 01063

2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Ronald Vincent Stephens (09/17/1929-05/02/2010). My grandfather made perhaps the largest impact on my life of any person I have encountered in my life – he was my grandfather in name, but also one of my closest friends and confidants. From him, I learned countless ways to be kind to myself in my own self-growth, pursue my passions fully, care for others, and fully immerse myself in the love of family. He taught me an immeasurable amount about how to live life fully. Despite all that has struck me in life, I know that he would be there to support me, and still watches over me through everything he has taught me in life.

To my family, who has always been beside me in believing in me and knowing that I can accomplish my dreams. This is especially dedicated to those family members who have been reliability there with my through difficult times.

To Louie and Sam, my amazing dogs who have always energetically and enthusiastically supported me, and have wanted me to succeed in the journey to and at Smith College SSW.

To the larger community of SSW Smithees, who allowed me to experience self-growth in not only an academic setting, but also a raising of consciousness throughout my life.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to answer the following question, “How have young adults developed a positive gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity during adolescence?” This was a qualitative study, which involved interviewing participants aged 22-28 to provide retrospective information regarding personal adolescent development related to gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. The operational definition of a *positive gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity* is the factors associated with resilience, leading toward a subjective positive experience of one’s identity in adulthood. For the purposes of this study, the definition of *bisexual* encompasses anyone who identifies as neither heterosexual nor homosexual, but at some level acknowledges attraction to male, female, and/or other genders. The researcher understands there may be controversy over the definition of ‘bisexual’ and therefore will ascribe to this definition, in hopes that it is as inclusive as possible. Throughout this study, *adolescence* is defined as the age range from age 12 to age 18; *young adulthood* is defined as the age of over 18 to 25 years old. *GLB* will be henceforth used as an acronym to mean gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

The rationale for conducting this study is that much of the existing research focuses on negative outcomes of GLB adolescents and young adults, instead of looking at this population from a strength-based approach. Few research studies focus on what assists in navigating adolescence to promote positive outcomes for these youth. One such example is the study completed by Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez (2010) on the Family Acceptance

Project, which looked at positive outcomes related to parental acceptance of a GLB identity. Family related outcomes are becoming increasingly important as youth are ‘coming out’, or disclosing their GLB identities, at earlier ages than ever before (Riley, 2010).

In contrast, there are several examples of explicit homophobia faced by GLB teens, as cited by Thurlow’s (2001) exploration of the use of homophobic pejoratives in a high school setting, and Plummer’s (2001) commentary on the internalization of homophobic remarks growing up as a male in the United States. Many GLB adolescents face explicit fear of rejection by peers as the result of disclosing a GLB identity, which may be intensified by a homophobic school climate, disapproval of GLB behavior by prominent adults in the adolescent’s life, and homophobia among peers (Ford, 2003).

This research is highly useful to the work of social workers in the field, as roughly 10% of the population identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Ford, 2003). Given this statistic, many social workers in clinical practice will encounter GLB individuals that have struggled with their identity, as even today homophobia is an ongoing factor in many young people’s lives (Riley, 2010). Many adolescents that identify as GLB internalize homophobia to an extent that it begins to interfere with their mental health (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). This age of development is additionally complicated by safety concerns in the coming out process, for those who feel they are able to disclose their identity to others, or are ‘outed’ by others in their lives.

Most existing research focuses on the negative outcomes of GLB adolescents, in terms of mental health, school achievement, drug and alcohol use, riskier sexual behaviors, and other factors (D’Augelli, 2002). These negative outcomes are poorer than their heterosexual counterparts, and many persist to have difficulties with mental health, homelessness,

drug/alcohol abuse, and/or risky sexual behaviors over the course of their lives (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005).

From section 5.02 Evaluation and Research of the NASW Code of Ethics(2008), “(c) Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work and fully use evaluation and research evidence in their professional practice.” Given this ethical principle, social workers must engage in discussions of emerging knowledge, such as the identity development of GLB adolescents, to be able to fully integrate their understanding into social work practice, in a format of evidence-based practice.

This study developed a deeper understanding of the identity processes that operate for a GLB adolescent, as well as look at the contextual nature of young adulthood on identity development. In exploring the influences on the participant’s individual identity development, the researcher found additional data to support integrating a strength-based approach of resiliency in promoting positive outcomes for GLB youth.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will review previous research related to the study question, “How have young adults developed a positive gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity during adolescence?” The chapter begins by defining key terms and definitions outlined in the study. Next, it explain the difficulties in the existing paradigm of sexuality as it exists in Western culture. Given the previous research in this area, the next section will address popular models of identity development in gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) young adults. Reviews of current literature on GLB identity development of young adults, much of which is focused on negative outcomes, will be outlined, indicating relevant outcomes to this research. Lastly, a discussion of the ‘coming out’ process and subsequent experiences of adolescents will be discussed, as well as the impact of parental acceptance and/or rejection.

Within this literature review, several key terms will be used that will be referenced throughout this paper. For purposes of clarity, definitions for those words are provided here.

Sexual Minority Youth: Youth that identify as anything other than heterosexual, most commonly adolescents, inclusive of many varying identities including bisexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, and others.

Psychosocial Stages: Different stages of life, in which the primary developmental task involves understanding an aspect of one’s identity in a deeper way.

‘Coming Out’: Disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to another person, when one’s sexual orientation is other than heterosexual.

Queer Youth Space: “Community and school-based support programs serving sexual minority youth” (Asakura, 2010, p. 362). Specifically, Asakura focuses on providing a safe, open atmosphere in which sexual minority youth can openly express and create their identities free of shame, in an open, supportive environment.

Mental Health Struggles for Sexual Minority Youth

Multiple studies have shown that there are poor mental health outcomes for GLB adolescents (D’Augelli, 2002; Russell, 2005; Needham & Austin, 2010). One study examined the impact of a Gay-Straight Alliances in high school for LGBT adolescents, found that in cases of high victimization based on sexual orientation, there is little that promotes resilience or positive outcome (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011).

One study looked at existing research data of 1413 LGB students using the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey, administered to approximately one third of Oregon’s 8th through 11th grade teenagers (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012). The results showed that LGB teenagers were almost twice as likely to have experienced physical abuse and three times as likely to have experienced sexual abuse (Hatzenbuehler, Pachankis, & Wolff, 2012). The LGB teens in this study also had a higher number of sexual partners on average when compared to their heterosexual peers. This article also looked at the impact of religious climate on sexual minority youth, and showed that LGB teens with more involvement in religious activities had less experimentation with alcohol and smoked less often than their LGB peers. However, the LGB community studied had an overall higher percentage of alcohol use and cigarette smoking when compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

Saltzburg (2010) outlines the particular shame faced by sexual minority youth as adolescents that are 'closeted' (keeping their sexual orientation secret), stating,

We find gay and lesbian adolescents looking for human connection and self-affirmation through sexual acts; this often places them in secretive, unsafe, and compromised situations (e.g. indiscriminate, anonymous, or unsafe sex; sex while consuming alcohol or taking drugs; sex with older adults; prostitution)(p. 223).

The study provides particular case examples outlining the particular struggles of closeted youth and the lengths they will go to keep their sexual minority status secret (Saltzburg, 2010). At the same time, seeking self-affirmation places the youth in some compromising situations. These adolescents, in exhibiting adolescent identity exploration, are oftentimes met with intolerance, rather than understanding that they are exploring their identity in the same way of other adolescents (Saltzburg, 2010).

The Question of 'Changing' Sexuality

For some members of the dominant culture in the United States whom identifies as heterosexual, it appears that sexuality is thought of as an 'either/or' choice. Members of the dominant culture may also assume that people are either are 'gay' or 'straight', meaning one or the other, with no middle ground for 'shades of gray.' The dichotomy implied herein is not the common reality for GLB people, as many within the gay community feel differently, whether they believe their sexuality to be a result of environment, biology, or both. Moore & Rosenthal (2006) describe how many GLB adolescents internalize homophobia and may not come out until much later in life, while others feel comfortable enough in their teen years to disclose their identity. There appears to be a commonly held myth in society that individuals who identify as bisexual or non-labeling are 'confused', rather than 'knowing what they are'. Studies show that

many adolescents have not yet figured out what label they feel comfortable identifying as, but may identify themselves as part of the queer community (Asakura, 2010; Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Moore & Rosenthal (2006) further illustrate that a strong indicator of positive identity development is whether or not the person believes their identity to be acceptable or deviant – for those that believe their identity is deviant and ‘bad’, they are much more likely to hold associated shame and guilt with their identity (Ford, 2003).

Navigation of Psychosocial Stages

Erik Erikson’s theory of child development involves a stage-oriented process, in which a task must be completed for the child to move to the next stage. For adolescents, the main developmental process is *identity vs. role confusion*, in which an adolescent must determine who they are in terms of personal identity and/or balance confusion about who they are and want to become (Lesser & Pope, 2007). Navigating the tensions of *identity vs. role confusion*, and, during adolescence as a GLB identified person, is compounded by the conflicting hegemonic culture’s expectations of this child. An adolescent may experience and receive messages from media and modern society that his/her sexual orientation of GLB is not a ‘normal’ part of development, and as a result, the adolescent’s sexual orientation historically is associated with shame. Riley (2010) notes the societal trends towards societal acceptance of young persons, characterized by the decriminalization of lesbian and gay sexual acts, positive outcomes in the Gay Rights Movement. She also points out the increase in disclosures of sexual orientation at younger ages to parents, family members, and peers (Riley, 2010).

‘Coming Out’ as a Process

Adolescents experience ‘coming out’, or disclosing his/her gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, differently depending on their own particular context in culture, family, social class,

economic class, race, and a variety of other factors (Ford, 2003). ‘Coming out’ does not end after one disclosure, but continues in the integration of social, community, and family domains (Cass, 1979; Ford, 2003). Individuals may experience this time as a crisis, as interpersonal relationships at all levels have the potential to be markedly impacted by the disclosure of one’s sexual orientation (Ford, 2003). In particular, Spencer & Patrick (2009) illustrate the differential process of development for a GLB adolescent and young adult, as it is characterized by diverse living arrangements, residential instability, and non-linear educational experiences.

In explaining identity development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, Cass’s Stage Model, first published in 1979, was the first widely accepted model of homosexual identity development. Based on Cass’s own clinical experience, the model depicted six stages that GLB young adults navigate. This model is widely used as a way to understand the specific struggles experienced in identity development by those in the GLB community (Cass, 1979; 1984). Although this model is quite dated, it is still referred to as one of the key theoretical models in understanding GLB identity development.

Beginning with *Identity Confusion*, an individual recognizes the incongruence between homosexual thoughts and the society at large. Second, *Identity Comparison*, highlights the comparison between the adoption of a gay/lesbian/bisexual identity and the implications it would have on societal and familial relationships. The third stage, *Identity Tolerance*, is when a GLB individual begins to reach out and make connections with the GLB community, as a result of feeling isolated in their experience. Fourth, *Identity Acceptance*, highlights the emerging positive thoughts of one’s self in relation to his/her GLB identity. Positive, accepting feedback from supportive individuals allows a person to accept their identity and recognize strategies to use when others do not accept one’s GLB identity. Fifth, the stage of *Identity Pride* highlights

the anger GLB individuals feel toward society for not being accepted. At the same time, pride in the GLB community is expressed during this time, and has the potential to result in “us and them” mentality, depending on how the stage is navigated. Lastly, *Identity Synthesis* is when a GLB individual fully integrates the GLB identity into the other portions of his/her personality. The gay identity no longer remains as the focus of the individual’s identity.

Peterson and Gerrity (2006) utilized Cass’s model of identity development to study the levels of internalized homophobia in lesbian identity development in undergraduate women, and the relationship between internalized homophobia and self-esteem. There was a significant, moderate, negative relationship between internalized homophobia and self-esteem. They found that internalized homophobia rates were higher for those who in the first three stages of Cass’s Identity Development Model. This study generalizability is limited by the participant pool being mostly Caucasian, undergraduate women, as well as the sample size (n=35) being relatively small considering they conducted a survey-based research method.

Within recent years, Riley (2010) describes recent changes to the coming out process for adolescents, due to changes in hate crime law and societal perceptions. With more positive role models in the media that identify as GLB, as well as changing societal perceptions, adolescents may not feel the need to label themselves, or may not be as fearful of homophobic stigmatization (Riley, 2010; Ford, 2003). However, there is still a larger concern of safety and heightened level of fear for GLB adolescents than for heterosexually identified adolescents (Spencer & Patrick, 2009).

Issues of Safety in the Coming Out Process

Many children begin to have an awareness of sexuality around the age of ten (D’Augelli, 2002), depending on developmental processes. Over the years, identity becomes development

through an exploration or denial of sexuality, depending on the context in which the child lives. For those that have chosen to disclose their sexuality at younger ages, they have faced a variety of safety concerns (Cramer, Kehn, Pennington, Wechsler, Clark, & Nagle, 2013). Historically, it has been painstaking for some youth to disclose their identity – some were even targeted and killed due to their sexual orientation (Cramer et al., 2013), such as Matthew Shepard. It took from the time of Matthew Shepard’s death in 1998 until 2009 for the first comprehensive hate crime act to be passed - *The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crime Prevention Act*. Riley (2010) argues that the application of this act has resulted in more of the general public finding hate crimes to be ‘morally reprehensible’ than had been historically the case.

Much research has been done on the victimization of gay youth, including physical and verbal harassment. Thurlow (2001) showed that hate-ridden words, such as “queer” or “fag”, when used in a derogatory context, are taken less seriously by high-school administrators than other hate words. Additionally, Plummer (2001) explored the use of language in boys regarding sexuality, and discovered a resulting increase in the hostility of the developmental environment when words like ‘fag’ were used often during childhood. These studies point towards gender identity deviance as being problematic as well, demonstrating the commonly held thought that deviance from male norms can ‘result’ or ‘cause’ someone to become gay.

Another area of safety concern is whether or not a child experiences rejection within their home if they choose to disclose sexual orientation, and the resulting variance in impact. Extreme examples of parental rejection have resulted in a high homelessness rate of LGB identified youth, which has been difficult to quantify by researchers (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). One study conducted self-reports with 548 LGB adolescents aged 15-19 on parental awareness of their sexual orientation (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). More girls than

boys reported psychological abuse from their mothers as a result of disclosing sexual orientation; less boys reported ‘very positive’ or ‘positive’ reactions from fathers than their female counterparts. The study showed that 12% of females and 18% of males experienced an extremely negative reaction from parents as a result of disclosing sexual orientation, which resulted in some form of punishment, including taking away of privileges, preventing of children from hanging out with friends, and increased monitoring of phone and internet use (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005).

Family Role in Identity Development

D’Augelli (2002) studied outcomes of 542 individuals aged 14-21, identified as GLB, utilizing survey sampling. D’Augelli (2002) found that children with parents that were rejecting or intolerant of their child’s sexual orientation had a significantly higher presence of problematic mental health symptoms. At least a third of respondents stated they had lost a friend due to their sexual orientation. Two-thirds of respondents reported being verbally abused for their sexual orientation. These symptoms became intensified if the youth had a fear of rejection from community, parental, or peer rejection. Although attempts were made to make this study population representative of the diversity present in the United States, the study was primarily performed with White-identified youths.

Alternatively, Ryan et al. (2010) evaluated the impact of family acceptance during adolescence on LGBT young adults. The study comprised of 241 Latino and non-Latino White young adults, aged 21-25. About half of the sample identified as Latino while the other half identified as non-Latino; about 20% of the Latino population was born outside of the United States. Researchers met with the participants and their families for interviews ranging from 2-4 hours, during which time they measured the presence of positive family acceptance reactions.

Ryan et al. (2010) found that those who had accepting parents were found to have better physical and mental health outcomes. Those that stay closeted during adolescence are more likely to suffer the effects of numerous mental health and physical problems (Ryan et al., 2010).

However, parental rejection has been a reason why some adolescents choose to remain closeted, for fear of being evicted, being cut off from family members, or simply disappointing their family members. The results showed that family acceptance did not vary in relation to sexual orientation or gender identity. The study further showed that risk factors did not correlate with protective factors, meaning an individual's risk is not mitigated by the existence of protective factors. It is also important to note that more of the young adults in better mental and physical health were white. This study's utilization of intensive interviewing may not be generalizable, but is useful in providing foundational material for further research.

Needham and Austin (2010), using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, examined 11,153 LGB adolescents and their corresponding in-home interviews. They then studied what effect family support can have on mitigating the worse physical and mental health outcomes of LGB young adults, in relation to their heterosexual counterparts (Needham and Austin, 2010). Self-perceptions of family acceptance showed that LGB young adults had less parental support than heterosexual young adults. As a result, the study found that lesbian and female bisexual young adults have higher rates of heavy drinking, depression, suicidal thoughts, marijuana use, and hard drug use (Needham and Austin, 2010). However, no statistically significant difference was found between the men in the study (bisexual, gay, and heterosexual men), and the researchers were unsure as to why this was a result. As a cross-sectional study, Needham and Austin (2010) only explored this phenomenon at a specific point in time. In looking only at families as a primary support system, Needham and

Austin (2010) overlooked the mitigating effect a positive queer community presence can have on these young adults.

Positive Queer Youth Space

Asakura's (2010) research studied the protective nature of a queer-youth space for queer-identified youths. The availability of such a space helps in facilitating the development of a positive identity, by allowing for the existence of positive role models, community building, and even the practical dissemination of queer sexual education (Asakura, 2010). He explains how the use of a queer-youth space can assist in meeting selfobject needs of *twinsip* and *mirroring* throughout adolescence, particularly in Gay-Straight Alliances and similar spaces. In particular, self-object theorist Kohut used the word *twinsip* to explain one's need to feel alike to other human beings, and the word *mirroring* to explain how others work toward making an individual feel validated, nurtured, and accepted in terms of their everyday experience of emotion (Asakura, 2010). These self-object needs of *twinsip* and *mirroring* are crucial to the healthy, positive development of any identity, and even more crucial for queer identified youths (Asakura, 2010).

Gay-Straight Alliances serve as a place where gay-identified and straight-identified individuals alike can work towards fostering a sense of community. Russell (2005) highlights Gay-Straight Alliances as a place where queer youth can foster resilience and an area free from gender and sexuality based harassment. As an at-risk group, queer youth spaces are important in order to increase resiliency. In effect, these queer youth spaces can provide a safe environment for meeting these selfobject needs of *twinsip* and *mirroring*. However, these studies fail to represent the differences in types of queer youth space, as there can be a large difference in a school offering a Gay-Straight Alliance group and actualization of the space being a safe, open space.

Queer youth spaces are important given the reality that many adolescents spend much of their time in a school setting, and that this is the primary place where adolescents socialize and begin developing their individual identity (Toomey et al., 2011). From the data gained as part of the larger Family Acceptance Project, Toomey et al. (2011) looked at the six questions answered by 245 LGBT participants that had identified as LGBT as well during their adolescence. The sole presence of a GSA, regardless of participation, was associated with lower dropout risk in high school, and higher chance of college level educational attainment. However, they did not find a correlation with GSA participation and a lowered risk of suicide attempts, which they had expected to find.

Conclusion

There are many protective factors existing in tandem with risk factors for GLB youth, and it is difficult to parse out how each of them impacts other factors. In looking at protective factors, it appears that family acceptance, positive queer youth space, and acceptance among peer group are particularly strong factors in promoting resilience and positive outcomes. However, at the same time, GLB youth experience higher rates of mental health difficulty and risky sexual behaviors, and higher levels of physical and sexual abuse, and victimization among their peers. Additionally, GLB adolescents face higher rates of difficulty when parents are not accepting of their GLB identity exploration, or when GLB adolescents perceive that a parent will not be accepting of their identity. Adolescent lives must be looked at in the context of their current developmental stages, and become exponentially more complicated when looking at an adolescent with a GLB identity.

This literature demonstrates the need for additional exploration on exactly how positive influences can promote resilience and positive outcomes in GLB youth. This can assist social

workers in tailoring interventions to each particular individual depending on their presentation and current status in the development of sexual orientation.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of positive identity development for GLB individuals aged 18-28, from a strength-based lens. This qualitative study focused on identifying several factors from a retrospective lens that contribute to positive identity formation for GLB individuals during their adolescence. The study identified people, institutions, and processes that positively impacted the formation of a GLB identity, which could influence the way social workers shape interventions to assist GLB adolescents. Previously, much research has focused on negative outcomes of adolescents rather than factors like resiliency and strength-based factors that should be incorporated into the treatment of GLB adolescents.

Design

This descriptive, qualitative study interviewed twelve participants about their personal experiences throughout adolescence. Data collection was based on asking participants 13 open-ended questions developed by the researcher that asked individuals about their beginning awareness of GLB identity, how individuals gathered information about GLB individuals in the world, how they experienced positive or negative reactions from others in ‘coming out’, and personal comfort of their GLB identity at the current time. The results and analysis of this data provided differential ways in which GLB adolescents navigated identity development from the sample group, as well as in comparison with previous literature. The research question that was explored was: How do young adults develop a positive gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity during adolescence? The research question was formulated after the researcher had reviewed the existing literature.

The individual interview allowed participants to answer questions in a way that felt comfortable to them, allowing for authenticity and ability to answer questions with as much detail as the participant felt was necessary. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for additional follow-up questions, as the researcher felt was pertinent to the study. The questions devised enabled the researcher to expand beyond the idea of resiliency in GLB youth to the identification of positive aspects of a GLB adolescent's life. This provided a general understanding of community, familial, and social institutions that impact the life of an adolescent.

The literature reviewed in chapter two consisted largely of qualitative studies, and several quantitative studies. The qualitative studies tended to provide more information to answer broad questions about the differential process of identity formation. The researcher believes that qualitative data allowed for a larger depth of knowledge and understanding that could not have been possible in a quantitative study.

Subject Section

Participants in this study were individuals aged 22-28 who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This study focused on interviewing adults since they are more able to retrospectively report on their identity development and life experiences. The individuals were located in either Massachusetts or Connecticut at time of the interview. Individuals were not required to have identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual during their adolescence, and some deviation from adolescent sexual orientation was noted. Participants were native to the United States and spoke English as his/her primary language. The sample size was twelve participants.

Recruitment for this study was done by sending recruitment emails (Appendix B) to my acquaintances utilizing a social network via Facebook, as well as individual personal contacts

from graduate school. A snowball sampling method was utilized in recruiting these participants. After the creation of a general recruitment email with selection criterion (Appendix B), attached was a more in-depth electronic recruitment email (Appendix C). The researcher requested peers and personal contacts forward this to potential participants. The electronic recruitment email explained the purpose and scope of the study, the criteria for participant inclusion, the voluntary nature of participation, and asked for participation in the study. The email provided the researcher's contact information and asked that potential participants contact the researcher to arrange the interview for participation. Interviews were completed on a rolling basis, signing the informed consent (Appendix D) forms at the site of the interview. On the informed consent, participants were given the option to sign for the sole purpose of consent to recording of the interview, to which all participants consented.

Data Collection

Participants were given a copy of the informed consent (Appendix D), after the researcher reviewed the process of interview and briefly outlined what the interview would entail. The participant was asked to sign a copy for the researcher's records. Participants were asked to consent to audio recording of the interview via an Olympus 400-S recording device, and all participants agreed individually to this request. After signing the informed consent, participants were then asked to complete the brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix E), indicate sexual orientation, and identify preferred pronouns to the researcher. The demographic questionnaire is utilized to identify socioeconomic status, environment in which the participant grew up, race, ethnicity, current occupation, level of education, and age.

The interviews lasted between twenty-three and forty-five minutes in length. The interview was semi-structured in nature, relying on the interview guide (Appendix F) of thirteen

questions. Utilizing the identity framework by Cass (1979), these questions were formulated in three main content areas. First, the researcher asked questions to ascertain current stage of identity development according to Cass's (1979) identity development framework. Secondly, questions were asked to determine the degree to which each participant explored their identity as an adolescent. Third, questions sought to gather information regarding the influence family, role models, peer groups, and friends. Fourth, questions were asked to inquire as to a person's experience in disclosure of identity, and subsequent disclosures of identity throughout one's life.

The researcher asked follow-up questions as deemed appropriate, to assist the participants in answering the questions more thoroughly. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had any additional information to share on this topic. After the interview ended, the participants were reminded of the withdrawal deadline date of April 15, 2014.

Recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher and held in a password-protected file to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts of this study were utilized for the sole purpose of this study. When the information is no longer required, or after a period of three years, the recordings and transcripts will be destroyed. All signed consent forms and demographic data sheets will be maintained by the researcher for a similar time period of three years, and will be destroyed at that time, or if the participant withdraws from the study. To safeguard the confidentiality of the interviewee, the researcher asked the interviewee to refrain from stating their own name during the interview. If a participant did disclose a name, the researcher omitted this from the transcription, instead inserting 'name' in that spot.

The Smith College School for Social Work appointed a research advisor to the researcher, who had access to the thesis data only after identifying information had been removed. The researcher utilized her school email for the purposes of this study and all emails

were deleted after the purpose of setting up the interview. All data will be reported in an aggregate format to illustrate thematic patterns discovered in the data; in this way, individual-specific data will be unable to be traced back to the participant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was utilized by looking at trends throughout the data collection, in individual transcripts as well as across the transcripts. For example, comparisons in developmental processes were made in tandem with the practices outlined in similar qualitative studies. The data analysis attempted to look at unique individual experiences as well as experiences shared among participants. Although the study primarily focused on the data collection of positive identity formation, negative experiences were also identified in the process of data transcription, and thus became an integral component of this study. Findings of this study will be compared to the literature reviewed for the purpose of further discussion and practice implications. Data generalizability is expected to be limited due to the heterogeneity of the sample and small sample size. In addition, this study's qualitative design is more indicative of thematic findings than quantitative data.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of positive identity development for GLB individuals aged 18-28, from a strength-based lens. This study also aimed to identify the positive influences throughout a GLB adolescent's life that assist in promoting positive outcomes. However, upon completion of the study, including additional data from the developmental years of 18-22 was found to be useful, primarily due to participant experiences in college. This chapter contains findings based on interviews with twelve individuals aged 22-28, all of whom identified as non-heterosexual. Participant quotes will be used in this chapter via pseudonyms assigned during the coding process. All names and places mentioned in the interviews have been altered to protect privacy. Demographic questionnaires were completed prior to the start of the interview.

During the first part of the interview, the interviewer focused on the participant's earliest awareness of his/her sexual orientation, as well as his/her first experiences of disclosure and/or 'coming out'. Specific information regarding about themes of acceptance and/or rejection within a participant's family (commonly defined by the interviewer as 'people you grew up with in your house') was gathered, as well as how these perceptions changed over time, if that was the case. Information regarding sources of external support was collected, with specific attention paid to high school environment, college environment, and peer groups. Participants were asked about their level of comfort and pride with their current sexual orientation. Lastly, participants were asked what advice they would give to their teenage selves if they were able to do so at this point in time. The findings of this chapter will be discussed in the same order as presented above.

Demographic Data

A total of twelve individuals completed the demographic questionnaires and corresponding interviews for the purposes of this study. All twelve individuals identified as white or Caucasian, spoke English as their primary language, and either resided in Connecticut (n=2) or Massachusetts (n=10). Participants were not asked to identify religion or spiritual practices in the interviews. However, throughout the course of the interviews, three participants identified as Jewish, two participants identified as Christian, and two participants identified as Catholic. The remaining participants did not mention religion in the course of the interview.

All participants (n=12) were born and raised in the United States. Participants were asked to identify whether the area they were raised in was suburban (n=7), rural (n=3) and urban (n=2). One participant identified herself as Hungarian in addition to Caucasian, and spoke fluent Hungarian in addition to English. One participant reported an ability to speak Hebrew. All individuals were either currently enrolled in or had completed a masters-level education, within different subject areas (social work, marketing, and speech pathology). The individuals in this study ranged in age from 22 to 28 years old at the time of the interview, with the median age of 24.9 years old. Two of the participants (16.67%) identified as male, while ten participants (83.33%) identified as female.

The individuals utilized five identifications for their sexual orientation, including: lesbian, gay, bisexual, non-heterosexual, and queer. Two participants (16.67%) utilized multiple identifications for their sexual orientation. Three participants identified as lesbian, two identified as lesbian and queer, two identified as bisexual, one identified as gay, and four participants identified as queer. In this context, queer is used to describe described individuals who see themselves as non-heterosexual, but have not ascribed to any particular sexual orientation status.

Sexual Orientation Awareness, Understanding of Sexual Orientation, and Disclosures

Awareness of Sexual Orientation

Individuals were asked the question, “When did you first become aware that you had a sexual orientation?” Five respondents (41.67%) stated they first became aware of their sexual orientation in high school and six respondents (50.00%) stated they first became aware of their sexual orientation in middle school. One respondent (8.33%) stated she did not become aware of her sexual orientation until college. Many participants described an experience of being expected to be heterosexual.

Claire described her middle school-aged perception, “Boys and girls were kind of starting to date and stuff, and so I just kind of saw heterosexuals, but not really knowing that there was any other kind of option, right, and so that’s when I kind of became aware of this idea of liking each other and dating but like, in a very hetero-normative kind of way.”

Patricia described first knowing of her feelings for women, “So my first thoughts, like when I first realized that what I felt toward women, in addition to men, was more than just like, admiration or friendship, my thought was, ‘Damn, like I can’t even do anything about that.’”

Awareness of sexual orientation became complicated for some participants in the setting of sexual education class, as described by Kyle, “It was awkward and kind of difficult for me because it was very hetero-normative, in the classroom, and it didn’t really speak to what I was going through, and I didn’t really feel like I could ask. I didn’t know who I could ask or talk to about it.”

Maggie was not able to label her sexual orientation until later in her life. “The first time I was aware of like, having romantic feelings toward another woman, I was probably fourteen or so. The first time I think I intellectually understood what that meant? Probably not til age

twenty-five. So I think in part I didn't understand enough of what those feelings were, what that meant, yeah, until I was older. And, there was a lot of denial.”

Understanding of Sexual Orientation

Participants were asked, “As a teenager, where did you get information about your sexual orientation? How did this lead to accepting your identity?” Seven participants specifically mentioned the internet as a resource for obtaining information about sexual orientation. One participant spoke about her parents as a resource for information on sexual orientation. Seven participants specifically stated a lack of information from their sexual education curriculums throughout their education. Three people stated having a much better understanding of their sexual education once they were in college, for a variety of factors including the environment and having GLB-identified peers.

Four participants talked about societal construction of gender norms and the meaning of what being gay or lesbian looks like in America. Lori said “I think that gay men are like, idealized, fascinating, and fun, and you know, everyone wants a gay best friend. You know, like a fashion buddy and stuff. And I feel like, lesbians are either portrayed as like really masculine, like dyke-y people, or weird people. Like I feel you don't see too many just like, somewhere in the middle of the butch-femme scale.”

First Disclosures of Sexual Orientation

Participants were asked, “What were some of the reactions of people you told about your sexual orientation?” At the time of the interview, all participants were ‘out’, in terms of sexual orientation, to their friends. All participants except for two were out to their families. Nine participants described positive interactions when they disclosed his/her sexual orientation for the first time, while three described negative interactions. Based on participant responses, it seems

like all were affected greatly by the reaction of their first time disclosing their sexual orientation.

Mark described his first disclosure to a peer, “I told my best friend I think when I was eleven or twelve. I was like ‘I think I have these feelings, whatever’ and he completely freaked out about it. And so I was like, “Nevermind, I was just kidding. It was a joke, but just forget I ever said anything.’ So yeah, he was the first person I told, and when he reacted poorly toward it, I took it all back and pretended it like it never happened. I didn’t come out again for another.... Four years ... yes, four years at that point.”

Kay described her coming out process. “I did it on National Coming Out day, and I did it on my facebook page, andI was worried, you know, that identity was something people would use against me rather than something I could find power and strength in....and I got a lot of really positive responses.”

Claire described her first disclosure, “I would say it was my friend Kelly who I actually met at that Pink concert.... I was sixteen. And we started talking and one day, I remember we were on instant messenger, and I was like, ‘I think I like girls.’ And she was like, ‘Me too.’ And that was the most amazing thing ever, because I didn’t really expect that. And then, that like really helped me come out to other people, other close friends at school, like pretty soon after that.”

Lori’s friends were not surprised by her disclosure. “When I was twenty. Actually, when I was twenty-one. And it went fine. Most of my friends were like, ‘finally,’ like they kind of all figured.”

Bisexuality

Seven participants (58.33%) indicated they were open to dating both men and women, although some identified as bisexual and others identified as queer. These seven participants all

expressed difficulty with using the word 'bisexual', whether they used it to identify or not., as they felt it does not accurately depict the varying shades of sexual orientation. All seven of these participants identified varying degrees of experience with biphobia, as playing a negative role in identity development. Several reported confusion among friends or family when they would come as bisexual. For instance, Kay reported her mothers response, "You know, I don't understand, I thought you were interested in men... this doesn't make any sense." Kyle reported, "There are people that will say to me, 'you know, just be gay already.' Or, 'there's no such thing as a bisexual man.'"

Jenny reported reactions from others that she has gotten over the years, "It kind of circles back to, 'But you're with a guy right now' or, 'you're confused' are primarily the two biggest responses. Because I've never been in a relationship with a woman, and the fact that you know, I've been with Tom for almost two years that it's like, 'oh that doesn't make any sense' to some of them. But no reaction as ever been hostile or anything to that effect."

Environment in Relation to Sexual Orientation

The interviewer asked several questions in relation to the support systems available to adolescents and young adults for exploring their GLB identity. In particular, the interviewer asked these three questions:

- 1) Did your high school have a Gay Straight Alliance? (Followed by, were you a part of this?)
- 2) Were there ways in which your school helped or hindered your identity development?
- 3) Were there other supports that helped you with the development of your identity? In what ways?

High School Environment in Regards to Sexual Orientation

Nine participants reported the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance during their high school years. Eight of nine participants reported that they participated in the Gay-Straight Alliance, but some did not do it until later in their high school years. Participation in the GSA differed among these individuals. The remaining three participants stated there was neither a Gay-Straight Alliance nor anything like it in their school.

Mark discussed the difficult formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance during his senior year. “They started one when I was a senior I think. But it was so poorly organized that I think beyond the, you know, president, vice president, those people, I think they only ever had two or three people show up.”

Jenny reflected on the environment of her high school. “It was all pretty closeted all around. I was part of the Gay Straight Alliance of the high school and everyone in it, aside from like two people, were straight or identified as straight at that point in time. But ‘Be straight’ was kind of the message from school.”

Bobbi talked about why she chose not to participate in her school’s Gay-Straight Alliance. “I’d look at the people that were actually in the group. There was actually one or two people that actually identified as being in the community and everyone else was allies. I didn’t even feel like they were allies, because I felt a lot of those people were just in the group to know who was gay and like, spread the rumors or whatnot.”

Sexual Education

Although the researcher did not ask specific questions regarding sexual education in schools, eight (n=8, 75.00%) of participants specifically mentioned the presence of sexual education in their school curriculum as a middle schooler and in high school. Each participant had experience with sexual education during at least two separate points in their education. Of

these participants, all eight stated there was a lack of information in regards to same-sex relationships, in varying degrees. Multiple participants stated that the lack of adequate sexual education hindered their sexual orientation development and understanding. These eight participants mentioned utilizing the internet and peers to get information in regards to sexual orientation.

Mark said, “I got [information] from the internet, and tv shows and like, Queer as folk was really big, still really big, still love that show. You know, when LOGO came out, when that first started, everything that was on there,it was through googling things and trying to discover myself through that. Because there was no talking to me about it. Sex ed wasn’t covering anything, and my parents weren’t discussing it.”

Patricia said, “Either there wasn’t any information or the information was negative. Sex ed. I feel like we barely even got that. It was awful, I mean awful. We barely had sex ed, I barely remember anything being taught to us about like safe sex, what sexuality even meant, and definitely nothing was mentioned about like, other kinds of sexuality aside from heterosexuality.” Bobbi said, “I definitely learned from friends and in like, sex ed and stuff. I didn’t learn about sexuality as in like, gay and lesbian and all those sorts of things.”

College Environment

Seven participants mentioned the positive support of an LGBT peers in their peer group or a GLBTQ cultural center while at college. Bobbi mentioned finding the GLBTQ resource center on campus. “I eventually got myself to the Rainbow Center at [college], like my sophomore year, and I learned a bit more and that was positive.

Some mentioned that this assisted in countering internalized homophobia that was present. Four participants intentionally and specifically took a class related to understanding

sexuality and gender identities during their undergraduate education. Two participants mentioned the presence of a GLBTQ group or cultural center on campus, but chose not to participate.

Bobbi reflected on her experience with the GLBTQ community, “It took going to college and seeing the positive of gay, you know, people in the community or whatever, to feel comfortable with the label. Because I had only really seen, thought, that lesbians looked a certain way, acted a certain way, and that it was bad. So I didn’t want to give myself that label because then I would not, you know, really like myself.”

Judaism

Two participants mentioned the positive effect of Judaism in their identity. Ashley describes the active role her rabbi took in assisting her with coming out to her mother. “She had a meeting in her office between me and my mom, because I was just so frustrated at my mom for not understanding any of this and not listening to me... so she helped bridge that gap. It was later I found out she was gay, so it was kind of funny.”

Catholicism

Two participants discussed negative experiences and understanding of their own sexuality related to their upbringing in the Catholic church. Jamie said, “I had some internalized homophobia, even after I came out.... Like, ‘this is disgusting’. There were a lot of awkward moments of like, hanging out with a girl and then being, ‘this is wrong, I can’t do this’. We went to church, and I wasn’t a zealot. But I did believe that they were teaching about the gay part.”

Role Models and Influences

To gather information about role models in the lives of GLB adolescents and young adults, the researcher asked the following questions:

- 1) When you were a teenager, did you have other people of the same sexual orientation in your life? How were these people important in understanding your sexuality?
- 2) Who helped you become who you are today, with respect to your identity?

Peers

Four people described negative discussions about sexuality while growing up. The two male participants described seeing other men make fun of gay men during their childhood.

Lori discussed the openness of her 'very liberal high school', with multiple LGBT groups. She indicated that this assisted in her understanding her sexuality at a later age, as information was available from her peer group and other sources.

Jenny talked about the positive impact of her best friend in understanding her sexuality, "My best friend on the entire planet, for sure, has influenced a lot of my openness with who I am. She obviously hasn't necessarily influenced my sexuality, but she's kind of helped me be more explicit about it. Which has been awesome."

Patricia talked about how people with non-heterosexual sexual orientations became important to her. "I really noticed like any individual who I had any kind of relationship with who identified as gay or as queer or whatever, and just had pride in that, especially if they had confronted a lot of challenges along the way, in like come out. I always noticed and appreciated that about them, and that always really inspired me to feel that same confidence that wasn't present in my younger years because there wasn't an individual like that in my life.

Family

Four participants specifically cited examples during childhood where a parent had ridiculed a sexual identity. Four participants described grandparents ridiculing a sexual identity during childhood. Bobbi's father, in particular, had ridiculed sexual orientation on numerous

occasions, where she recalls him making comments about her lesbian neighbors down the street, “‘Oh look, the dykes are walking the dog’. He would like say racist things and homophobic things and size-ist things, and ableist things, but I though he was kind of joking. I never really realized that he had internalized those kinds of, types of, feelings, until I came out.”

Two participants discussed the unexpected acceptance of their identity by a grandparent upon disclosure of their sexual orientation. Four participants mentioned having an aunt, uncle, or cousin that identified as gay or lesbian that they kept in contact with, and openly discussed their sexual orientation with.

Participants described their parent’s initial reactions to disclosure of sexual orientation. Of the eleven participants who are out to their parents, ten had negative initial reactions to disclosure of their sexual orientation. Over time, seven participants felt that their parents have come to accept their identity, though varying in degrees. Four participants have specifically not come out to their grandparents as a result of discussion with their parents in regard to sexual orientation.

Mark discussed the difficulties his mother had in discussing Mark’s sexual orientation, “‘If she couldn’t even say the word boyfriend, then I mean, it’s not like I’m gonna go talk to her about my relationship issues. But, she came around and once I got into my first serious relationship, she opened up communication a lot more, and so we were able to discuss things a lot more openly. And now – she’s pretty okay with it.”

Jamie expressed her wish for parental guidance. “‘I wish I had a friend’s parent, I wish I had some part that had been gay that I could talk to.”

Bobbi described intense arguments surrounding her sexual orientation with her parents. “‘The times where I’d say, you know, like, ‘I’m gonna go see her’ and then my mom would

throw out all the Christmas presents I bought for her, and threatened things, like not paying for my college anymore.”

Patricia described the positive admiration for her married, gay-identified cousin. “I have like a cousin who I talk to, not as frequently now, he’s in Pennsylvania. So he’s married to this wonderful, wonderful guy, and they went through all sorts of shit in my family when they got married.”

High School Teachers

Four participants specifically mentioned the positive presence of a gay or lesbian identified teacher while in high school, and indicated that it was helpful to have visibility of these identities.

Ashley described the atmosphere in her high school toward gay teachers. “We knew they were ‘different’ teachers, but they obviously, they didn’t lose their jobs. But everybody knew. I didn’t know what it meant. I knew they were like ‘different’ in some way, but they never SAID gay, or explained that they were dating. It never became a matter of sex or sexuality.”

Self Reflection

Participants were asked the following three questions in order to gauge level of personal comfort with their current identity:

- 1) How comfortable are you with your sexual orientation?
- 2) How proud are you of your sexual orientation?
- 3) If you could go back in time and give advice to the teenage version of yourself, with respect to your identity, what would you say?

Comfort with Sexual Orientation

All participants responded to the question, “How comfortable are you with your sexual orientation?” Participant responses included: ‘very comfortable’, ‘absolutely comfortable’ or ‘super comfortable’ (n=5), ‘moderately comfortable’ (n=1), ‘comfortable’ (n=2) ‘comfortable when it is appropriate to be’ (n=1), ‘90%’ comfortable (n=1) and ‘it is what it is’ (n=1).

One participant, who self describes as queer, felt that even that label was limiting and prevented her from truly expressing her identity. Another participant specifically described using several different identifiers over her lifetime (lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and queer), believes that sexual orientation is fluid, and can change throughout the course of someone’s life.

Pride of Sexual Orientation

In reflecting on pride of sexual orientation, participants were asked, “How proud are you of your sexual orientation?” Nine participants indicated that they are proud of their sexual orientation; of these respondents, two stated they are ‘very proud’, and seven stated they felt ‘proud’. Three participants indicated they are happy with who they are, but do not feel it is necessary to discuss their identity unless directly asked about it by someone they care about.

Maggie stated, “If I’m not proud, then I want to be. I want to try.” One participant stated he is not proud of his sexual orientation, as he does not want to be perceived as self-righteous and be “throwing it in everyone’s faces”.

Self-Reflective Advice

All twelve participants responded to the question, “If you could go back in time and give your teenage self advice in regards to your sexual orientation, what would you say?”

Four participants said, “be true to yourself” or “be honest with yourself”. Three participants stated the need to allow themselves space to explore what their sexual orientation

really was. Two participants stated they wish they had been kinder to themselves as teens. One participant said they wish they could give themselves a hug and tell them things were going to be okay. Two people said it would be important to understand that things are not so black and white in regards to defining sexual orientation.

Four participants said they wish they could tell themselves to join a GSA or join a GSA sooner than they did. Four participants said they wish they had actively sought out community or someone to talk to who has been through the same obstacles. Two people said they would recommend seeing a mental health professional.

Lori said, “I think that the only person you really have to deal with at the end of the day is yourself. And you want to live an authentic life, so...”

Summary

This chapter has presented findings from 12 interview questions asked to twelve, twenty-two to twenty-eight year olds whom identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Many individuals shared experiences of both positive and negative interactions with others in regards to sexual orientation. It appeared more participants became comfortable with their identity throughout the course of college rather than in high school. Sexual education appeared to be an area in which schools provided little to no education for gender variant individuals. Many individuals cared a great deal about the reactions of the first person they disclosed their sexual orientation to. Individuals also cared a great deal about the reactions of their parents, including those who have not yet disclosed their identity with their parents. Individuals generally agreed that they wish they had sought out more support earlier in their development than they did, and that they wished to have more people to discuss their development of sexual orientation with than they did.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the how influences on adolescent GLB-identified individuals help to promote positive outcomes in identity development. Some of the themes found throughout the study are somewhat evidenced by the existing literature. Throughout the interview process, participants disclosed various positive and negative experiences throughout their adolescent and young adult development.

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in the following order:

- 1) key findings, including the relationship of findings to the literature
- 2) implications for social work practice, discussing how social workers can incorporate the findings from this study and why this is important to the field of social work
- 3) recommendations for future research in the area of GLB identity development for adolescents and young adults.

Key Findings: Comparison with Literature

The participants represented an intersection of multiple backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, families, and environments. However, the commonalities amongst the participants allow for a deeper understanding of ways in which societal influences can assist individuals in developing a positive identity, in relation to the individual's sexual orientation.

Awareness of Sexual Orientation

Participants' awareness of sexual orientation varied with age, but correlated with the study by D'Augelli (2002) in that participants generally become aware of sexual orientation between the ages of 10 and 14. This is indicative of the reliability of this study for this factor.

Participants all sought out information in somewhat of an anxious manner, from various sources in order to gain more information and understanding about what to call their sexual orientation and how to discuss this, and this is where participants varied. Riley (2010) explained how this anxiety is directly related to the ‘crisis’ of coming out that is added to a non-heterosexually identified individual’s adolescent development.

Initial Responses to Disclosure of Sexual Orientation

The findings indicate a strong correlation with the initial, very first response of disclosure for individuals and subsequent beliefs in regard to how others perceived their sexuality, in correlation with findings of a study of mental health for sexual minority youth, done by D’Augelli (2002). All of the participants that experienced initial negative reactions remained cautious about subsequent disclosures, regardless of how positive they were. Similarly, disclosures to parents had a significant impact on participants, and also seemed to influence readiness for future disclosures. Unfortunately, there is little additional research to support this finding.

‘Awareness’ of sexual orientation can be defined in a variety of ways, and will be defined as follows for the purposes of this study: a participant’s first recognition of attraction, which tended to lack a definition of orientation. For a variety of reasons several participants chose to come out later in life, as was consistent with research conducted by Moore & Rosenthal (2006). Participants explained the reasons for this, including religious influences, parental disapproval, lack of language to define themselves, and lack of a safe environment. The initial response of acceptance or disapproval from the individual they first disclosed to remained consistently important.

Education and Resources in Schools

Participants largely reported a lack of sexual education that addresses anything other than heterosexuality. Schools did not provide this education for participants, and failed these students in helping to provide them with language necessary to identify themselves as they developed into their sexual orientations. There is a lack of literature in this area, and the researcher was unable to find any studies about sexual education for non-heterosexual adolescents or young adults.

Participants who had a GSA in their school benefited from the positive presence of this organization, as it represented a decrease in societal stigma, and seemed to show a smaller representation of what larger society would be like as an adult. Individuals who participated in the GSA as an adolescent continued to utilize GLB support networks, whether in the form of an unofficial peer group or official organization, throughout their young adulthood. This correlates with the positive effects of providing queer youth space as evidenced by Asakura's (2010) study. The presence of a GSA also functioned as a way to foster resilience for adolescents identified as GLB (Russell, 2005).

Participants who identified other GLB adults in school spoke about how it had been helpful to have the visibility of other GLB individuals, and this assisted in decreasing associated stigma of coming out. However, for those that knew GLB identified peers, mixed experiences of GLB identified individuals being bullied or being accepted influenced the way they felt about whether or not it was 'safe' to disclose sexual orientation within the confines of school. As Moore & Rosenthal (2006) discussed the negative effects of a non-supportive peer group, it can easily be inferred that positive effects would stem from a supportive peer group.

Role Models

All participants identified role models in the development of their identity. When these role models shared beliefs that conflicted with a participant's sexual orientation, the individual had more difficulty internally reconciling whether or not it is 'okay' to be gay. This also was correlated with whether someone found sexual orientation to be an integral part of their identity as an adult or whether it was just one small part of themselves.

Several people mentioned the positive effects of individuals they did not speak to, but knew that the person identified as gay, lesbian, or non-heterosexual. It appeared that this was the case whether this individual was a peer, distant family member, member of a religious community, or an adult in the school setting. It appears that the increased visibility of GLB individuals, in concordance with Riley's (2010) findings, assists in promoting the positive development of a GLB identity.

Shades of Gray

In regards to bisexuality, there are several common assumptions in our current culture as evidenced by participants this study. The first assumption demonstrates a belief that 'bisexuality' implies a 50-50 split of liking men and women, the second of women labeling themselves as 'bisexual' to be greedy or want attention from men, and the third of men labeling themselves as 'bisexual' when they are 'truly' gay. Some participants used the word 'queer', meaning non-heterosexual, but otherwise vaguely defined. The use of the word 'queer' by participants shows many things, including that they do not ascribe to 'bisexual' as a status that is accurately descriptive. This is difficult due to the differential understanding of terms of sexual orientation; many of the participants could, at times, still be labeled by others as 'bisexual'. This was one of the major flaws of this study design, in asking participants to identify their own

sexual orientation – sexual orientation is fundamentally purposed for other people. Originally, the researcher had intended to use the term ‘bisexual’ as a categorical word for people who date both men and women. However, in labeling the participants this way, it ignores the palpable experience of individuals as much different from what the label ‘bisexual’ represents. In effect, there are many ‘shades of gray’ along the spectrum on which people identify themselves.

This seems to correlate with the research done by Riley (2010), in that more and more individuals seem to be more comfortable identifying as being on the sexual orientation spectrum, and instead, utilizing other terms indicative of their preferences as ‘other than straight’. This allows for fluctuation throughout the lifespan as well. However, this seems to present more of a complication for gay men, as there appears to be internalized biphobia – the idea that a man cannot be bisexual, that if he likes men he must be entirely gay. A bisexual-identified male participant in this study evidenced this and described a negative dating experience due to disclosure of his bisexual identity.

This begs the question, “Who are identifications of sexual orientation for?” The answer is for society, not for the individual who identifies. As a society, we trend toward a need to categorize and know an individual's sexual preference, but generally do not consider the impact of this on the individual we categorize. This study shows how categorization can complicate and deter individuals from positive identity development. However, categorization may be helpful to some, providing relief of ‘naming’ one’s identity (Riley, 2010).

Parental Acceptance and/or Rejection

This study shows parental acceptance as vitally important in supporting an individual throughout identity development and negating the effects of negative reactions from others. In particular, participants whose parents were more accepting had better mental health outcomes

(based on self report). This stayed the case even in the face of negative interactions in which participants felt threatened. This suggests that Cramer et al (2013)'s study, showing the safety concerns felt when disclosing sexual orientation at a younger age, could encourage a child to be more supported and protected with the acceptance from a parental figure.

Needham and Austin (2010)'s study findings that parents of heterosexually identified children are generally more accepting of their children than non-heterosexually identified youth. This correlates with the study finding that the majority of participants had negative experiences in the disclosure of their sexual orientation to their parents.

Ryan et al (2013)'s study, representative of many home study interviews with parents, showed how resilient individuals can be with the support of one parent's acceptance, which was evidenced by the better mental health outcomes of the participants in this study of those with parental acceptance of their sexual orientation. Importantly, in this study, if the participants had a parent that reacted negatively and a parent that reacted positively, the individuals still appeared to have positive outcomes.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social Workers as Holders of Information

Social workers may be one of the first people a GLB youth discloses their sexual orientation to. The social worker's reaction and response has the propensity to have a significant impact on an individual's future disclosures and perceptions of one's own identity as a GLB person. Further, a social worker should be mindful of the identity processes, and attempt to allow a client to use the language they feel most comfortable with for the purposes of self-identification.

Parental Acceptance and/or Rejection

Several participants outlined not just rejection by their parents in regard to their sexual orientation, but persistent and pervasive rejection of themselves due to this identity. In contrast, those who experienced a positive, accepting stance from parents in regard to sexual orientation appeared to have a much easier time adjusting to and accepting their personal identity, which correlates with the research (Ryan et al., 2010). Therefore, this implies a necessity for integrating education into a larger part of our society to help parents to understand the long lasting impact of their reactions in terms of sexual orientation. For social workers, it is part of our responsibility to assist in educating the parents of sexual minority youth that we work with in our profession. Additionally, when social workers are working with GLB clients, it remains important to explore experiences with their parents and how their identity formation has been impacted by these experiences. Interventions, such as queer youth support groups, could be formed to help normalize difficult family experiences in relation to their GLB identities.

Reparative Therapy

None of the participants who were told they needed therapy or help, by either a parent, friend, or peer, sought out 'help' for 'curing' their sexual orientation. In social work practice, social workers should advocate for the dismissal of 'reparative' therapies, or therapies that state they can 'cure' someone of a sexual orientation. The message that this sends to an individual is only associated with shame, guilt, and fear to discuss sexual orientation. Living 'in the closet' is not a positive experience, and is associated with higher levels of difficulty and mental health issues in life (D'Augelli, 2002). Further implications should include not allowing an individual to practice with a social work license, not allowing this practice to be covered by insurance, and integrating this message about reparative therapy into social work education.

Biphobia / Phobia of ‘Shades of Gray’

Given the variation in sexual orientation identification of the participants in this study, a particular area of interest to future research should be the experience and impact of biphobia on individuals within our culture. This research will help to identify possible interventions and ways to support these individuals who identify as non-heterosexual and non-homosexual. Additionally, social workers should consider the impact of labeling as an act, on the macro and micro levels, on influencing the identity formation of GLB youth.

School Social Workers

As school social workers play a vital role in the daily functioning of schools and students, it becomes a priority to label oneself as a resource for GLB youth, while at the same time maintaining a student’s confidentiality within the school system. When broaching the subject of one’s GLB identity, a social worker in a school setting should be aware of the ways in which the student may be being treated by the other systems, such as the peer culture, special education, and interactions with families. Increasingly, the topic of difficulty in identity development may become one that a school social worker has to approach, as many at-risk youth do not have adequate services and/or support systems.

Sex Education

As eight participants specifically cited a lack of non-heterosexual sexual education, it seems prudent that social work be concerned with the future sexual education of our youth. Griffin (1992) wrote an article in *The Chicago Tribune*, detailing the lack of information available to GLB youth in sexual education settings. While we have made vast strides over the past few decades in this arena, this continues to be an ongoing issue that has been addressed by few thus far in the social work profession. Mustranski, Greene, Ryan, & Whitton (2014) have

proposed a Queer Sex Ed (QSE) model that can be delivered to GLBT teens through an online format, which has shown moderate positive results. Social work as a profession needs to promote interventions like this to enhance the positive outcomes for GLB youth.

Implications for Theory

In theoretical formation, while Cass's (1979) identity development model is useful, it implies that 'successful' identity development involves navigation through all stages of identity development he describes. Instead, it is possible that an individual can have a positive identity development and be in any stage of the development. He implies that individuals experience negative reactions from the outside world, and have internalized homophobia as a result of this. However, this research demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case, and individual factors need to be incorporated into explanations of these developmental stages.

A further adjustment to theory would be to incorporate the positive effects of resilience, and what can assist in promoting resilience of GLB identified individuals. Cass's (1979) theory lacks in this area, only noting the beneficial effect of GLB-centered organizations in two of the stages of development. There is a significant variation in this area, which is not accounted for by his theory.

Theoretical approaches to identity development seem to lack what is called 'gay adolescence' by some individuals in this study, wherein an individual explores his identity in later years, particularly in the setting of college as a young adult. This particular developmental stage seems to not address the positive effects of an accepting collegiate environment, which could be incorporated into this theory.

Recommendations for Future Research

One of the most difficult parts of conducting this research was the lack of existing knowledge in this subject area. In particular, many theories surrounding GLB identity formation are outdated and not reflective of today's youth. Only recently have adolescents been looked to as a possible participant group to explore GLB identity development, as we have become more aware of earlier disclosures of sexual orientation as a society. For those reasons, it is also difficult to recommend areas that would be most useful, as there may be useful interventions that have not been created yet.

Theoretically, it would be important to revise and evaluate the effectiveness of Cass's research (1979; 1984), currently being utilized as one of the most common models for gay and lesbian identity development. In order to do this, a meta-analysis of several studies may be most useful. This should be re-evaluated with respect to the current culture surrounding sexual minorities in society and the result impact on identity development.

It is important that research on queer youth space (Asakura, 2010) continues, as it is important to identify the positive results of integrating support systems into the lives of adolescents and young adults. While there are general support structures for youth such as the Boys & Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, these organizations can be problematic when looking at the policy and political agendas associated with some organizations. To that end, establishing policy that requires separate time for queer youth space to exist may allow the space needed for these youth to flourish.

As parental acceptance appears to be a significant factor in the positive or negative identity development of GLB adolescents (Ryan et al., 2010), research should continue to explore this area. Possible considerations for further research could be parent education

programs or the usefulness of groups like PFLAG for parents of sexual minority youth. Given the experiences of the participants in this study, it seems important to continue to consider the factors of resilience for every participant, as many had experiences with academic success, supportive partners, supportive family members, and positive experiences in college environments.

This study did not inquire as to impact of sexual experiences on the development of identity, which could be a potentially interesting and helpful source of research on this topic. Additionally, it could add a new element to the existing research of risky sexual encounters of sexual minority youth, by looking at the ways in which sexual relationships help to shape one's own identity in a positive way.

In future research, it is recommended that a larger study sample is utilized, as well as a more representative sample, as this sample was an all-white identified group who had either all attained masters degrees or were in the process of obtaining a masters degree. Additionally, there appear to be marked differences in the experience of women versus the experience of men, and this could be a potential area to study genders individually or with larger sample sizes of each gender group.

Conclusion

Individuals who identify as GLB experience a range of differential reactions and responses, both externally and internally, when processing their identity development throughout adolescence and adulthood. Across the results, participants showed a variety of resiliency factors, including positive peer influences, positive school environment, supportive GLB environments, role models, and perhaps most importantly, the factor of parental acceptance. These variations in resiliency factors help to understand that the ways we can help to bolster

adolescents during this developmental period can be done in a variety of ways, and that there is not necessarily a 'right way' to do this. In working towards a more accepting future, where GLB adolescents can thrive and begin to live their lives more openly and integrated into society, it is of utmost priority to pay attention to these factors to help ensure positive identity formation, and in turn, stronger individuals within our society.

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**Appendix A
HSR Approval Letter**



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

December 18, 2013

Lauren Millerd

Dear Lauren,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Shella Denney, Research Advisor

Appendix B

General Recruitment Email

Hello,

For my thesis at Smith College's School for Social Work, I am working on a project that explores positive experiences influencing the creation of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity in young adults during their adolescent years.

I am currently looking for study participants, and would greatly appreciate your help.

If you are a person between the ages of 18-28, identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and live within an hour of the Boston metro area, you meet the qualifications for this study.

In addition, you can help by sending the second portion of my email to those you know who may meet the criteria.

Included below are more details about the study. If you feel comfortable sending it to others, I recommend copying and pasting the information below into a new email.

I very much appreciate your help. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thank you!

Lauren Millerd

MSW Candidate

lmillerd@smith.edu

Appendix C Specific Recruitment Email

Dear [Mr. / Ms. LAST NAME],

My name is Lauren Millerd and I am currently an MSW student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am writing to tell you about the study on *Positive Identity Formation of Young Adult Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Individuals During Their Teen Years*, and request your participation in this study. I received your name from [INSERT DESCRIPTION OF HOW PERSON WAS IDENTIFIED AND WHAT INFO YOU HAVE ABOUT HIM/HER]

The purpose of this research study is *to talk to gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults between the ages of 18-28 to determine what helped them feel positive about their identity during adolescence*. This study is being conducted as a part of my master's thesis requirement.

I am recruiting participants who are 18 to 28 years old, identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual and live within an hour driving distance of Boston, MA. Participation involves an individual interview of 45-60 minutes in length, and is not compensated by any monetary or other means. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me by phone or email. I will send a reminder email in two weeks to follow-up.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at LMillerd@smith.edu or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Lauren Millerd
MSW Candidate
LMillerd@smith.edu

**Appendix D
Informed Consent**

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College - Northampton, MA**

.....
Title of Study: *Positive Identity Formation of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Young Adults
During Teen Years*

Investigator(s): Lauren Millerd, Smith College School for Social Work

.....
Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study of *young adults to identify what helped to develop a positive gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity during adolescence*. You were selected as a possible participant because *you identify as a person with a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, who is between the ages of 18 and 28*.

I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to gain a greater understanding of positive experiences in the development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. I am reaching out to young adults in particular to understand what experiences were most salient for them during their adolescence. Currently, much research on identity of gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents focuses on negative outcomes. Instead, I will be looking at what helps to promote positive outcomes. The research question of this study is: How do young adults develop a positive gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity during adolescence?

This study is being conducted as a thesis requirement for my master's in social work degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to: meet with the researcher for a one on one interview discussing the importance of your personal identity development, for a period of 45 to 60 minutes; identify important events, persons, places, and spaces that were important to your personal identity development. The interview will, with your consent, be audio-recorded for the purpose of later transcription for data analysis.

You may choose to decline being audio-recorded. If so, the interviewer will take notes and attempt to re-create the interview from memory for study purposes.

You will meet with the interviewer at the mutually agreed upon location, free of distraction. This will ensure privacy/confidentiality of the process.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

In this study, you may be triggered in remembering particularly difficult events that have contributed to your identity development as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person.

Beyond this, there are no reasonable or foreseeable expected risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study

The benefits of participation are having an opportunity to talk about important life events during their teen years, being able to be honest about the history of your personal identity, and an open space to share influential moments in life that may not typically be shared.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. I will keep research records in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. I will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. These interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and accessible only to me, for the sole purpose of this study. The data will be kept for at least three years according to Federal regulations. They may be kept longer if still needed for research. After the three years, or whenever the data are no longer being used, all data will be destroyed.

Payments

You will not receive compensation for participation in this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If you choose to withdraw, the researcher will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify the researcher of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 15, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, *Lauren Millerd* at LMillerd@smith.edu or by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher.

.....
Name of Participant (print): _____
Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____
.....

1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____
Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____
Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

Appendix E
Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questions:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Where do you live?

Where did you grow up?

Was that area (circle one): Urban Suburban Rural

Country of Birth:

Years lived in the US, if applicable:

Gender Identity:

Sexual Orientation:

Education Level:

Languages spoken / Primary language:

Occupation:

Appendix F

Interview Questions

- When did you first become aware of your sexual orientation?
- At what age did you begin to ‘come out’ to others?
- What were some of the reactions of people you told about your sexual orientation?
- As a teenager, did you have other people of the same sexual orientation in your life?
- How were these people important in understanding your own sexuality?
- As a teenager, where did you get information about your sexual orientation? How did this lead to accepting your identity?
- What were the most important aspects of your teenage years related to your identity development?
- Were there ways in which your school helped or hindered your identity development?
- Were there other supports that helped you with the development of your identity? In what ways?
- What helped you become who you are today, with respect to your identity?
- Are you comfortable with your sexual orientation?
- How proud are you of your sexual orientation?
- What advice would you have for teenagers struggling with their identity?
- Is there anything else you would like to say or share about this topic?