

2014

Becoming visible : the audacity of asking the impossible : marriage, LGBTQ activism, and resiliency in the South

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Anna Rose Wilson
Becoming Visible – The Audacity of
Asking the Impossible: Marriage,
LGBTQ Activism, and Resiliency in
the South

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study's purpose was to explore the connection between resiliency and political activism in the LGBTQ community in the south. More specifically, this research asks how LGBTQ couples that have participated in the Campaign for Southern Equality's (CSE) WE DO campaign describe their experiences engaging in political activism. The WE DO campaign involves same sex and queer couples walking into a courthouse or county registrar of deed's office and applying for a marriage license and being denied as a way of highlighting the injustice of anti-gay laws in the South.

This project entailed semi-structured interviews with seven couples that participated (often multiple times) in WE DO actions. The research examines the intersection of political activism and the ways in which the act of resisting unjust laws impacts LGBTQ individuals' resiliency and coping in the face of homophobia, stigma, and marginalization. Specifically, my research asks the question: How do couples who participated in WE DO actions describe their experience, especially as related to the relationship between political activism, coping, and resiliency?

The six elements of resiliency that emerged as themes from participants' narratives are: (1) Long term perspective on social change; (2) Confronting internalized homophobia; (3) Family and community support; (4) Role of religion; (5) Impact on relationship; and (6) Becoming visible: The audacity of asking the impossible.

**BECOMING VISIBLE – THE AUDACITY OF ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE:
MARRIAGE, LGBTQ ACTIVISM, AND RESILIENCY IN THE SOUTH**

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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2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

First, thank you to my research advisor, Fred Newdom. From the beginning (before it was a thesis) you shared insightful and thought-provoking feedback in the most compassionate of ways, and provided steady guidance and perspective throughout the research process.

Thank you to Rev. Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, who had the vision for this project and works tirelessly for change with a quiet grace and courageous tenacity that is inspiring beyond measure.

M, a million thanks for reading all of these words. Over and over. For reminding me that I'm a writer. You listened and helped me make sense of the jumble. And most of all, for all the ways that we've grown.

To my community of friends and chosen family (at Smith and beyond), thank you for all the ways that you show up. Time and time again. The porch dinners, the kitchen table talks, the river runs, the belly laughing that doesn't stop, the spicy trax, the dog walks, and the innumerable ways that my life is enriched and emboldened because of each of you.

Finally, I extend my deep gratitude to the couples that participated in this project. They graciously welcomed me into their homes, trusted me to record their experiences, and generously shared their stories of courage, struggle, resilience, and resistance. I am humbled and honored.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
III METHODOLOGY.....	25
IV FINDINGS.....	32
V DISCUSSION.....	56
REFERENCES.....	68
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Informed Consent.....	73
Appendix B: Demographic Questions.....	76
Appendix C: Interview Guide.....	78
Appendix D: HSR Approval.....	79
Appendix E: HSR Amendment Approval.....	80

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the connection between resiliency and political activism in the LGBTQ community in the south. More specifically, this research asks how LGBTQ couples that have participated in the Campaign for Southern Equality's (CSE) WE DO campaign describe their experiences engaging in political activism.

CSE is a non-profit organization based in Asheville, North Carolina. One of CSE's main projects is the WE DO campaign, which involves LGBTQ couples across the south requesting, and being denied, marriage licenses as a way of demanding full equality and as strategy "to highlight the harms of current state laws" (<http://www.southernequality.org/>). Jasmine Beach-Ferrera (2013), the executive director of CSE, describes the approach and historical grounding of the WE DO actions:

When we show up at marriage license counters across the South, we are acting from a lineage of civil rights organizing that focuses on resisting unjust laws in the locus of their enforcement...By directly confronting a discriminatory law, we make visible a reality that LGBT people live with daily and that more people need to understand (p. 1).

The act of walking into a courthouse or county registrar of deed's office and applying for a marriage license may not seem extraordinary, but there is something exceptionally powerful in the undertaking of asking the impossible, and thus making visible the unjust and discriminatory

laws that ban same-sex marriage. My research interests lie in the intersection of how people resist the unjust laws and the ways in which the act of resisting impacts LGBTQ individuals' resiliency and coping in the face of homophobia and oppression. Specifically, my research asks the question: How do couples who participated in WE DO actions describe their experience, especially as related to the relationship between political activism, coping, and resiliency?

I come to this project as a queer woman born and raised in the southeast. In 2011, when CSE was launched in my hometown, Asheville, North Carolina, I was living in Arizona and planning a move home to North Carolina to attend graduate school. I vividly remember watching the videos of the first WE DO actions, recognizing my boss from my first job, a high school teacher, and family friends. The videos of the actions evoke a powerful emotional response as they make so tangible the injustice of the laws. After moving back to North Carolina, I contacted CSE and Jasmine and I began talking about possible collaborations. She expressed an interest in exploring how WE DO participants experienced both the risk involved in the actions and also the possibility that the actions themselves may serve as a protective element against discrimination and stigmatization.

As I worked with Jasmine to develop this project, my own interest became focused around the ways that involvement in activism impacts LGBTQ individuals living in the south. As a queer person who has lived in the south for most of my life, I am aware of the particular experience of being a queer white woman in the south, and interested in investigating the specific elements of a southern location that impact LGBTQ people and potentials methods of resistance. The narratives that emerged in the interviews speak to both the damage that is experienced as an LGBTQ person living in the south and the resiliency that can grow out of struggle and resistance.

A careful review of the existing literature revealed an absence of contemporary research on the experience of LGBTQ individuals living in the south in general, and even less looking explicitly at the impact of activism and political engagement on this population. To ground my research I focused my Literature Review on the field of study that has examined the impact of stigmatization and marginalization on LGBTQ individuals, the sexual minority stress framework (Diplacido, 1998; Herdt, 2006; Levitt, 2009; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Russell, 2003). I found that the existing research largely focuses on the ways that stigma and discrimination negatively impact LGBTQ individuals, while I hope that my research will be able to expand this inquiry to feature additional models of coping and resistance. To move towards a strength based model that explored empowerment and coping, I engaged with literature that included community based conceptualizations of resiliency that began to explore the role of activism and political engagement as a coping mechanism. (Case & Hunter 2012; DiFulvio, 2011; Oyersman & Swim, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2008; Stanley 2010; Shih, 2004; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011).

By approaching this topic from a strength based, action oriented stance (vs. a deficit model), I hope that the findings will provide valuable insight for clinical social workers working with LGBTQ individuals, as well as for social workers engaged in community organizing and policy work. This project recognizes and explores the complex ways that that policy (anti-same sex marriage laws in the south) affects individuals and communities and considers involvement in social change movements as a potential protective factor.

By locating my research in the south, where stigma and anti-gay legislation are particularly and often viciously entrenched, I hope to gather the narratives of LGBTQ people who are uniquely positioned to tell their own stories of resisting unjust laws and who, all too

often, are overlooked in the more nationally based gay liberation and same-sex marriage movements.

Following the Literature Review, the third chapter presents the project's methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven LGBTQ couples living in the south about their experiences participating in WE DO actions and the impact of their involvement in activism more generally.

The fourth chapter presents the findings, focusing on the six themes of resiliency that emerged from the interviews. The elements of resiliency that consistently came up in interviews are: (1) Long term perspective on social change; (2) Confronting internalized homophobia; (3) Family and community support; (4) Role of religion; (5) Impact on relationship; and finally (6) Becoming visible: The audacity of asking the impossible.

The fifth and final chapter of the thesis discusses the results of this study, makes recommendations for further research, and reflects on implications for clinical social work practice.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

I have located my research questions at the intersection of the fields of psychology, sociology, and social justice. My literature review will begin with a foundation of the historical and political context of the marriage equality movement in the U.S. The historical context will ground my research and situate the questions in a particular time and place. Next, I will review the literature on the sexual minority stress framework, which is a model for understanding how LGBTQ people are affected by discrimination on both systematic and interpersonal levels.

To move toward a strength based framework for understanding LGBTQ experiences of discrimination I will draw on literature that focuses on resilience, coping, and empowerment as strategies for enduring adversity. Finally, I will discuss the implications for my research that utilizes a strength based empowerment perspective and focuses on a geographic area (the southeast) where stigma, discrimination and risk are acutely felt.

Historical Context of Marriage Equality in the U.S.

There has been a significant shift in the way that homosexuality is viewed and criminalized in the U.S. since the 1960's. Just fifty years ago, all fifty U.S. states had laws in place criminalizing homosexual sex acts (Klarman, 2013). In contrast, today in 2013, opinion polls routinely show that the majority of Americans support marriage equality, especially when polling Americans between 18-29 years old, 70 percent of whom support marriage equality (Klarman, 2013). In order to better understand the current political and cultural climate

surrounding gay marriage or marriage equality, I will share a historical overview of the marriage equality movement in the US. An in-depth and nuanced history is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will provide a brief review in order to situate the work of the Campaign for Southern Equality (CSE) and current LGBTQ activism in the south.

The post-war period of the 1950's brought an increase in gay and lesbian organizing in the face of McCarthy era persecution and targeting of sexual minorities (Eaklor, 2008). In Los Angeles in 1951, one of the first major organizations to form was the Mattachine Foundation (1951-1953), which evolved into the Mattachine Society in 1953 (Fejes, 2008). The society's aim was to increase communication between homosexual and heterosexual society and promote gay rights and culture, which they did by writing and publishing a magazine, titled the *Mattachine Review* (Eaklor 2008; Fejes 2008). In 1955, a group of Mattachine members broke away from the organization to create their own more radical magazine, *ONE*, which focused more directly on gay rights and published accounts of police harassment of homosexuals from all over the country (Fejes, 2008).

The homophile ("loving the same") movement continued to build in the 1950's with the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian activist organization that began in 1955 in San Francisco (Eaklor 2008; Fejes 2008). The Daughters of Bilitis were organized around issues affecting lesbians in particular and published their own magazine, *The Ladder*, which added a feminist perspective to the movement. All of the homophile organizations of the time were characterized by a shifting awareness of gay and lesbian identity, challenging the conceptualization of homosexuality as psychological illness, and offering instead the viewpoint that gay men and lesbians were wholesome individuals engaged in healthy relationships (Feje, 2008). Within the homophile groups there existed tension between a more conservative approach of promoting gays and

lesbians as “good Americans” and ambassadors of homosexuality and the more radical approach of seeking legal change and gay liberation (Eaklor, 2008). This dynamic continues to play out in the LGBTQ movement and activism of the 21st century.

Emerging from the homophile movement and in the context of the civil rights and liberation movements of the 1960’s, the Stonewall riots in the summer of 1969 are widely thought of as the “birthplace” of the LGBTQ movement in the U.S. (Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011). While there had been many other actions and movement building prior to 1969, the Stonewall riots were a catalyst for national organizing around LGBTQ rights (Eaklor, 2008; Stanley, 2009). In the early 1970’s, there were several same-sex couples across the country who challenged state officials, filing lawsuits requesting marriage licenses (Klarman, 2013). At this time, when couples were first applying for marriage licenses, there wasn’t widespread legislation in place that explicitly excluded same sex couples from marrying. These legal suits did not gain much traction at the time. In the early days of the LGBTQ movement, marriage equality was not the focus; instead the priority was on anti-discrimination laws, electing openly gay public officials, and decriminalizing gay sex (Klarman, 2013).

Following the surge of LGBTQ activism and increased queer visibility in the early 1970’s, there was a significant backlash in the form of a “traditional family values” movement headed by Anita Bryant – a conservative Christian leader and activist (Chauncey 2013; Eaklor 2011; Fingerhut, 2011). In the mid-late 1970’s Bryant, and other “family values” advocates, successfully waged public campaigns that brought about the repeal of initiatives that protected the LGBTQ community from discrimination. In 1977, Bryant’s organization, Save Our Children, Inc. increased the volume and visibility of anti-gay rhetoric with their campaign to repeal an anti-

discrimination ordinance in Miami Dade County, Florida, bringing the debate around gay rights into the national spotlight (Fejes 2008; Fingerhut 2011).

In the 1980's the LGBTQ community began to focus on gaining legal recognition of relationships (Klarman, 2013). This shifting interest was spurred in part by the AIDS epidemic and the stark vulnerability that gay and lesbian partnerships faced during a hospitalization or following a death (Chauncey, 2013; Klarman, 2013). Another influence on the increasing prioritization of marriage equality was the gay and lesbian baby boom of the 1980's and the growing need for legal protection for gay and lesbian families (Chauncey, 2013; Klarman, 2013).

In the 1990's more states began to face challenges to laws defining marriage as solely between a man and a woman. Three gay couples in Hawaii challenged the constitutionality of these marriage laws, and in 1996 a trial judge ruled that same-sex couples had the right to marry (Chauncey, 2013). The decision went to voters who approved (69% to 21%) a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman (Eaklor, 2008; Klarman, 2013). In 1996, a similar case moved forward in Vermont, also initiated by three couples seeking marriage licenses (Eaklor, 2008). They lost and appealed to the state supreme court, who ruled in 1999 that it was unconstitutional to deny the rights and protections associated with marriage to same-sex couples, and Vermont's legislature went on to approve civil unions that carry the same legal rights associated with marriage (Eaklor, 2008).

Facing the possibility of gay marriage becoming legal at a state level, in the 1990's the Republican party worked to mobilize its religious conservative base and began to introduce multiple bills across the country that would deny legal recognition to same-sex marriages no matter where they were performed (Klarman, 2013). This led to Congress passing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in the fall of 1996, which stated that the federal government would

only recognize marriages between a man and a woman and that states were not required to honor same-sex marriages performed in another state. When DOMA was finally overturned 17 years later, in the summer of 2013, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote for the majority: “DOMA’s principal effect is to identify a subset of state-sanctioned marriages and make them unequal” (Chauncey, 2013, p. 3).

Following Vermont’s civil union victory, in 2001 activists in Massachusetts filed suit, demanding equal recognition of same sex marriage. Two years later the state supreme court ruled in support of marriage equality, arguing that civil unions constituted “second-class citizenship,” and becoming the first state to recognize same-sex marriage (Klarman, 2013). The Massachusetts ruling amplified attention on marriage equality on a national level and propelled the marriage equality movement across the nation. In San Francisco, Mayor Newsom began to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples, despite the California law banning same-sex marriages (Klarman, 2013). Despite these gains there was significant backlash from conservative Republicans. As Fingerhut (2011) notes:

Prior to 2004, voters in three states (Alaska, 1998; Nebraska, 2000; and Nevada, 2002) approved constitutional amendments restricting the definition of civil marriage to one man and one woman. In contrast, between 2004 and 2008, voters in 26 states passed such amendments, reflecting a new strategy by opponents of marriage rights for same-sex couples (p. 228).

Simultaneously, throughout the early – mid 2000’s, anti-discrimination legislation was put into effect that outlawed employment discrimination on the basis on sexual orientation. By 2008, such legislation was in place in twenty states (Eaklor, 2011).

Over the past decade as more states have passed marriage equality laws across the U.S., a significant increase in public support for marriage equality has followed. However, despite the national trend towards acceptance and legal recognition of marriage equality (especially following the overturning of DOMA), every southern state fails to provide legal protection from housing and employment discrimination, much less legally recognize same-sex partnerships (Beach-Ferrara, 2013). In the context of religious conservatism, the marriage equality movement strives to normalize and publicize LGBTQ couples, by highlighting traditional and “tolerable” gay and lesbian couples and families (Klarman, 2013).

While same-sex marriage remains illegal in the majority of U.S. states as of the writing of this document (April, 2014), the tide is shifting socially and politically as seen with seventeen states (the eighteenth pending with UT) and the District of Columbia recognizing full marriage equality (CA, CT, DE, HI, IA, IL, ME, MD, MA, MN, NH, NJ, NM, NY, RI, VT, and WA). Additionally, six states recognize full civil unions or domestic partnerships (CO, HI, IL, NJ, NV, OR) (www.freedomtomarry.org). While federally and nationally, the tide is shifting for marriage equality, the south remains by far more politically, religiously, and socially conservative than other regions of the U.S. Opposition to same-sex marriage tends to be grounded in moral and religious arguments about “family values.” The south historically votes Republican and is home to a higher concentration of religious conservatism. Baunach’s (2012) research on the shifting attitudes towards same-sex marriage found that opposition to same-sex marriage tends to be located within certain subgroups: “older Americans, southerners, African Americans, evangelical Protestants, and Republicans” (p. 365).

While the Supreme Court’s overturning of DOMA offers married same-sex couples living in states that recognize same-sex marriage access to the federal protections and rights

provided to all other married couples, it does very little to impact the legal rights of same-sex couples living in the majority of states that don't recognize same-sex marriage. In every southern state you can be fired because of your sexual orientation and/or your gender (www.hrc.org). Additionally, in the majority of southern states LGBT families cannot complete second-parent adoptions (Beach-Ferrara, 2012). Recent Pew data illustrates the regional divides regarding same-sex marriage with the majority favoring same-sex marriage in New England, the mid-Atlantic, and along the Pacific Coast. "In the Midwest and the south Atlantic states, opinion is closely divided, but in the central South, a majority opposes same-sex marriage" (Connelly, 2012). A Pew Research Report notes: "Attitudes toward gay marriage in the South are comparable to where the country as a whole was a decade ago" ("Behind Gay Marriage Momentum," 2012).

Conservative religious views of same-sex marriage play a significant role in the anti-gay and anti-marriage equality movements. The same Pew Research Report notes "two in three people who attend religious services on a weekly basis oppose same-sex marriage" while "two in three people who attend religious services *less than monthly* favor it" ("Behind Gay Marriage Momentum," 2012). Because of the conservative religious framework of the anti-gay movement in the south, it is especially interesting to consider the role of faith communities and religious leaders in the marriage equality movement in the south. CSE's executive director, Rev. Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, is a United Church of Christ minister. The WE DO actions typically begin and end in local churches, with robed clergy accompanying the couples requesting marriage licenses as a sign of religious support for their relationships and marriage. By studying the state of marriage equality and the reality of LGBTQ life in the south, this thesis will offer a glimpse at

the extent to which there is still significant work to be done, despite the progress on a national level, and the ways that LGBTQ folks in the south are enduring social stigma and discrimination.

In a recent report by Southerners on New Ground (SONG) Cortes (2014) describes beautifully the ways that the queer experience in the rural south is both similar to and distinctly different from the queer experience in urban areas because of the “social economy of small spaces”:

Small town and country life is defined by networks and cultures of familiarity and kinship offered to those seen as an “authentic” part of whatever insider culture has been created in a particular place. In the South this has been defined by white and Christian supremacy deeply invested in promoting whiteness, standards of morality, and norms of gender and sexuality as measures of an authentic and acceptable culture. This insider culture which breeds conditions of violence, isolation, silence, criminalization and poverty has created mass exile of small town and rural Southern Black gender non-conforming bodies into urban areas both in and out of the South (p. 8).

LGBTQ people in the south commonly hear the refrain “Why stay? Why not simply move to another state, or an urban area? CSE’s executive director, Jasmine, often speaks and writes about this belief that LGBTQ people should just move out of the south if they are seeking more open and embracing communities (Beach-Ferrara, 2013):

We can't wait for our rights for as long as it would take Southern states to grant them; the human consequences are too profound. And we can't just move. You should not have to leave your home state to be treated as an equal citizen in America (p. 1).

It is also important to note that focus on marriage equality within the LGBTQ movement in itself is controversial. Since early in the movement there have been divisions between activists who considered marriage a patriarchal and heteronormative institution and rejected it as a goal of the movement and activists who have organized around the idea that LGBTQ people should have equal access to the benefits and privileges of legal marriage (Chauncey 2013; Klarman 2013; Schacter 2009). An example of the critique of the focus on marriage within in the LGBTQ movement is Cohen's (2000) theoretical analysis of civil rights strategies as an approach to social change because it advocates for assimilation and maintaining the status quo, by providing rights to privileged members of oppressed groups. Cohen's (2000) theoretical conceptualization of queerness offers the possibility of an intersectional movement for change, which does not rely on single-issue identity politics, which marriage equality typically exemplifies.

Sexual Minority Stress Framework and Alternative Models

In order to better understand the realities of life as an LGBTQ person in the south, it is helpful to consider the ways that stigma induced chronic stress affects the LGBTQ community both as a whole and individually. The minority stress model emerged from social stress theory (Meyer, 2003) and describes the intensified level of stress that minorities experience due to their stigmatized social status (Rostosky et al, 2010). The minority stress model was initially developed as a tool to understand the ways in which racial minorities are affected by social stressors due to their "stigmatized status as part of a racial/ethnic minority group" (Levitt, 2009, p. 68). Applying the minority stress model to communities and individuals of color created a framework for understanding race-based stress (e.g. institutional, systematic, and interpersonal racism) as trauma (Carter, 2007).

Meyer's (2003) conceptualization of the minority stress model expanded the framework from the ways that it had been applied to racial minorities and applied it explicitly to the LGBTQ experience of social stigma. Both Meyer (2003) and Levitt (2009) note the important differences in the ways that racial and ethnic identities and sexual orientation are stigmatized. One way that Meyer (2003) argues that LGBTQ people in particular experience stress is in the ways that they may have to work to conceal their sexual orientation, though Russell (2003) and I would argue that people of color (queer or not) experience more systematic denial of privilege than most white LGBTQ people experience. Another difference that Russell (2003) and Levitt (2009) highlight is the ways that LGBTQ people may be less likely to find support within their families of origin when they come out, as opposed to racial and ethnic minorities who are likely to share their stigmatized identity markers with their families of origin and frequently find emotional and social support in their families of origin.

Herdt (2006) proposes that marriage denial in itself causes a minority stress reaction by excluding LGBTQ identified individuals from the ingrained cultural goals and meanings associated with marriage "including the social value placed on being married and having children to attain love, intimacy, and authentic selfhood" (p. 39). Marriage denial affects LGBTQ communities beyond the individual couples who aren't able to marry. Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, and Huellmeier's (2010) research with 300 LGB individuals from across the country examined participant reactions to marriage amendment campaigns and concluded that minority stress and psychological distress increased with exposure to hostility and discrimination associated with anti-gay legislation. Russell (2003) also notes that hostile campaigns around anti-gay legislation can cause strain and create (or exacerbate) divisions within LGBTQ communities.

In 1992, Colorado voters approved a ballot measure, Amendment 2, which denied legal protection to LGBTQ people who experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation (Russell & Richards, 2003). In their survey of 316 LGBTQ people in Colorado, Russell and Richards (2003) found that when LGBTQ people were exposed to the anti-gay rhetoric perpetuated by the campaign, they experienced “feelings of shame and negative feelings about themselves, which are defining features of internalized homophobia/homonegativity” (Rostosky, Riggle, Miller, & Horne, 2009, p. 57).

The common understanding of the effects of anti-gay discrimination frequently concludes that the experience of interpersonal, social, institutional discrimination leads not only to increased levels of stress, but also an increased risk for mental illness (Nadal et al. 2011). The association of sexual orientation and gender identity with mental illness is a complex history, with “homosexuality” existing as a mental disorder in the DSM until 1973. While sexual orientation is no longer considered a mental disorder and pathologized in the same way, the reality that it was considered pathology in the mental health field for so long continues to complicate the conversations about sexual orientation and mental illness (Herek & Garnets, 2007). This is seen in the way that researchers consider the impact of homophobia and stigmatization on LGBTQ individuals and the ways sexuality minority status and sexual minority stress increase individuals likelihood of having mental health concerns (Diplacido, 1998; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003).

Russell and Bohan (2007) describe heteronormative oppression as trauma and utilize a liberation psychology framework to call into question the division between the personal and social.

Oppression generates social and personal alienation, a sense of ill-fit, dis-ease, and hopelessness. The remediation of these personal ills, thus, requires joining with others in social change, resistance to oppression, and the empowerment that derives from actively claiming one's social identity (p. 69).

By recognizing the ways that homonegativity in the social and political realms can affect LGBTQ individuals and leave them feeling in some way flawed, Russell and Bohan (2007) expose the mechanisms of internalized homophobia as “manifestations of immersion in a homonegative and alienating environment that is fundamentally political rather than individual” (p. 67).

This sociopolitical framing avoids the pathologizing label of *internalized homophobia* that can have the effect of blaming LGBTQ individuals for harboring self-hatred versus understanding internalized homophobia as a reasonable result of living in a homonegative culture. Bennett and Rizutto (2012) approach internalized homophobia from a psychodynamic perspective, noting the ways that internalized anti-gay messages “exacerbate shame and work against wholeness, integration, and feelings of worth, acceptability, and possibility” (p. 219).

While the sexual minority stress model can be helpful in understanding some of the ways that the stresses of social stigma impact LGBTQ communities and individuals, I don't believe that it provides a cohesive nor a complete framing of the dynamics at play. Stanley (2010) discusses the limitations of the minority stress framework, noting that “It reduces the experiences of non-heterosexuals to singular, universal affliction, a cross to bear: a stereotype . . . The name of the theory alone suggests that the psychosocial effects of identity-based stigma outweigh the positive adaptations to identity-based stigma” (p. 54). Emphasizing only the negative aspects of identity-based stress creates a pathology driven narrative around LGBTQ identities and doesn't

sufficiently acknowledge the population's capacity "to adjust, thrive, and lead exceptionally ordinary lives" (Savin-Williams, 2008, p. 137).

DiFulvio (2011) also suggests that approaching the issue of from a deficit-based perspective, such as the labeling of sexual minority youth as "at risk" "does little to understand how people transcend adversity" (p. 1611). Instead, DiFulvio suggests using a "youth development approach" that emphasizes resiliency and protective factors. DiFulvio (2011) writes about the role of activism in research participants' process of social connection, making the claim that public engagement in LGBTQ activism was a method for youth empowerment. DiFulvio (2011) understands resiliency as a process where people are able to adapt successfully despite facing "threatening circumstances" (p. 1611).

Resilience, coping, and empowerment as strategies for dealing with adversity

In my research I hope to move beyond the pathology and deficit based model of understanding stress and LGBTQ identity and instead employ strength based empowerment models. In order to move towards an empowerment model of understanding how LGBTQ communities experience adversity, it is helpful to first outline how different social scientists understand resiliency and the components involved in healthy adaptation. Resiliency is a contested subject and often understood in a public and mental health context relating directly to quantifiable outcomes such as depression and suicide.

In her research looking at how Colorado's Amendment 2 impacted the LGBTQ community, Russell (2011) found that that participants described five key elements contributing to resiliency in the face of the stress associated with an anti-gay campaign: (1) long term perspective on change and civil rights; (2) the process of confronting and challenging negative

internalized messages; (3) active coping strategies; (4) an awareness of heterosexual allies; and (5) connections to LGBTQ community.

In her literature review of resilience factors in gay and lesbian family networks, Oswald (2002) extracts four different processes of redefinition that validate lesbian and gay family networks: “politicizing, naming, integrating gayness, and envisioning family” (p. 379). Oswald (2002) describes politicizing as “a kind of resilience because it enables network members to make sense out of what is happening in their private lives by linking it to a larger societal context.” (p. 380). The idea of politicization as a form of resilience is one of the key hypotheses of my research project and an area that merits further study, both in the context of the LGBTQ community, as well as in other marginalized communities.

In a case study of an older lesbian’s disclosure process, Jenkins, Walker, Cohen, & Curry, (2010) define resiliency as “a complex set of processes including belief in something greater than oneself, caring and affirming relationships, and strong support networks” (p. 404). The authors conclude that resiliency can also be defined as an individual’s capacity to succeed even while experiencing crises and disruption.

Connolly’s (2005) work takes a more narrow view of resiliency, considering it in the context of long-term (10-24 years) lesbian relationships. In a qualitative research project with long-term lesbian couples, Connolly (2005) approached the concept of resilience from more relational viewpoint, finding that the couple’s relationships themselves served as a protective buffer. Themes of relational resilience that emerged in the interviews included: mutuality, relational balance, and interdependence (Connolly, 2005). An aspect of Connolly’s (2005) research that I found especially intriguing was that she initially concluded that the couples were reluctant to discuss their experiences of oppression and societal stressors. However, when she

approached the topic of oppression through the framework of resilience, participants provided more in-depth and vulnerable responses regarding their experiences of oppression.

The conceptualization of resiliency as a collective or community based process (versus a purely individual dynamic) is a common theme that has emerged in my examination of the literature on resiliency (Case & Hunter 2012; Haas 2005; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Russell 2003; Singh et al, 2011; Stanley 2012). Kirmayer et al. (2011) explored the concept of collective resiliency in their research on rethinking resiliency from a traditional indigenous perspective:

Although resilience tends to be framed as an individual characteristic, it may also have systemic, collective, or communal dimensions. At the level of family and community, resilience may reside in the durability of interpersonal relationships in the extended family and wider social networks of support (p. 85).

Herek and Garnets (2007) also discuss community engagement as a protective factor for LGBTQ people noting that: “Nonheterosexuals who actively participate in a sexual minority community report less psychological distress than those who do not” (p. 362).

This collective conceptualization of resiliency fits well with CSE and the WE DO Campaign where LGBTQ couples request, and are denied, marriage licenses in communities across the South as a way of bringing attention to the inequality of anti-gay marriage laws. As of May 2014, over 115 LGBTQ couples have requested marriage licenses across seven southern states. (<http://www.southernequality.org/we-do-campaign/>). I expect Kirmayer’s (2011) idea of a shared and collective definition of resiliency to be especially helpful in considering WE DO participants’ experience both as couples and members of a larger activist community.

Singh, Hays, & Watson (2011) conducted a phenomenological research project looking at the ways that 21 transgendered individuals experienced resiliency in their day to day lives. The

five themes that emerged from their work have a lot of overlap with the perspectives on resiliency that we have already examined, especially the theme of connection to community (Kirmayer et al. 2011; Russell 2003; Stanley 2012). The five central resiliency themes the authors recognized from their research are: (1) self-generated definition of self; (2) embracing self-worth; (3) awareness of oppression; (4) connection with supportive community; and (5) cultivating hope for the future. Within these key themes they also identified the two sub themes of social activism and being a positive role model for others (Singh, 2011).

Case & Hunter (2012) provide a conceptual framework for understanding resiliency from a collective and dynamic process of adaptation. Haas (2005) joins with this collective approach, noting that collective identity is a useful way of explaining how oppressed groups “develop and maintain a sense of empowerment over time” (p. 15). Case & Hunter (2012) conceptualize an entirely new way of understanding marginalized individuals’ responses to oppression and its associated stress. They propose a Counterspaces framework which is defined as a way to improve overall well-being by challenging the typical deficit model of understanding marginalized identities (Case & Hunter, 2012). Counterspaces include three key processes: “(1) narrative identity work, (2) acts of resistance, and (3) direct relational transaction” (Case & Hunter, p. 257). I find the clear articulation of Counterspaces’ processes to be an especially useful way of considering resiliency, activism, and political agency. Moving into the next section of this literature review, I will focus specifically on the ways that scholars have looked at political engagement and activism as systems of empowerment.

Political Engagement and Activism as a method of empowerment

An empowerment model of coping and resiliency fits with the goals of CSE and the practice of confronting oppression with the aim of changing unjust laws. Shih (2004) builds off

the work of Oyersman & Swim (2001) defining the empowerment model of developing resilience as a way to view “stigmatized individuals not as passive targets of prejudice who focus only on avoiding negative outcomes but rather as active participants in society who seek to understand their social world and create positive outcomes” (p. 180). Applying this framework to LGBTQ individuals in the south, one can consider the ways that intentionally applying for, and being denied, a marriage license can be an act of resistance and a direct attempt to challenge and change their social world.

Jones & Voss’s (2008) research examined the way that involvement in LGBTQ organizing increased a community’s sense of agency. Jones & Voss (2008) conducted a case history of lesbian parents involved in community organizing against anti-gay legislation in Texas. The authors explore the ways that involvement in organizing and activism can increase community empowerment and resiliency. In their case study project, Jones & Voss (2008) found that even when organizing efforts do not succeed at their original goal, there are significant and meaningful ways that the process of organizing creates positive change in the community.

Levitt et al.’s (2009) research with 13 LGBTQ participants in Tennessee followed an anti-gay state constitution amendment campaign. In semi-structured interviews with the participants, engagement in activism emerged as a theme and significant resiliency factor. Participants reported, “activism allowed for authentic personal engagement, the sharing of their experiences with others, as well as the shaping of their identities as advocates for their community” (Levitt, et al., 2009, p. 76). Participants also noted that activism and this process of engagement increased their comfort level with being out in their communities and positively impacted their self-esteem, self-awareness, and sense of pride (Levitt et al., 2009).

While activism and political engagement were shown to have multiple positive and empowering effects, Levitt et al. (2009) also make note of some of the more negative effects of activism including the ways that it highlights the extent of discrimination and the pervasiveness of homophobia in your community. Being engaged in political activism can also increase public attention and potential risk as an out LGBTQ person, leading to withdrawal from political engagement and subsequent isolation and guilt (p. 78). Levitt et al. describe the duality of threat and support that can result from engaging in LGBTQ activism:

Fighting initiatives and movements could threaten their emotional well-being, sense of safety, financial well-being, support systems, time, and resources. At the same time, self-protection through withdrawing from resistance had costs as well. These included fears of increasing discrimination, guilt, loss of a sense of dignity, and a sense of self-betrayal (p. 77).

The balance of political engagement and self-protection is something that I anticipate hearing in my interviews with WE DO Campaign participants, especially as it pertains to the public nature of requesting a marriage license in small southern towns, and the potential repercussions in terms of employment and family support.

Russell's (2007) application of liberation psychology to the experience of LGBTQ individuals living amidst anti-gay rhetoric and discriminatory policies connects the personal experience of homophobia and heterosexism with political action:

New actions, in turn, make possible new levels of consciousness, and so on, in a dialectic that intertwines the personal and sociopolitical. In the case of homophobia and heterosexism, once antigay policies can be framed, not as understandable or justifiable, components of social systems, but as elements of a

widespread campaign of oppressive politics (broader than just anti-gay politics, we might add), it becomes possible to reframe one's relationship to the political (p. 70).

Russell (2007) goes on to discuss the ways that the connection between individual growth and community organizing creates the groundwork for psychological resiliency when LGBTQ individuals are facing homophobia in the context of political attacks. The particular experience of anti-gay campaigns and political attacks is one that many of the participants of my study may be all too familiar with given the recent passage of Amendment One in North Carolina, banning same-sex marriage on a state constitution level and undoing second parent laws that provided same-sex parents legal rights and recognition.

In multiple research projects examining LGBTQ community members' perceptions of the long-term impact of Colorado's Amendment 2, Russell et al. (2000, 2007 & 2011) found that within the context of hostile anti-gay political campaigns there were both negative and positive effects. As previously discussed, negative impacts included an increase in symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress syndrome, depression, and anxiety (Russell 2007). However, respondents also commented that disappointing and discriminatory elections results also had significant positive effects including "an increased sense of community with other LGB people, a stronger analysis of political change, and a personal commitment to work towards change" (Russell et al., 2011, p. 15). In their preliminary research, directly following the passage of Amendment 2, Russell and Richards (2003) found that participants highlighted the relevance of working to promote change as a significant factor of resiliency. In a study conducted ten years later, participants continued to emphasize the empowering effect of working towards institutional change (Russell et al. 2011). The potential empowering effects of activism is a central question

of my study that I explored with LGBTQ couples who have participated in WE DO actions throughout the south east.

Implications for my research

My research builds on Russell et al. (2000, 2003, 2011) and Levitt et al.'s (2009) research based on the minority stress framework and the ways that hostile anti-gay political environments can negatively affect LGBTQ individuals and communities. I hope that my research will fill a gap in the existing literature by exploring more fully the ways that involvement with LGBTQ activism (specifically the WE DO actions) impacts individuals and if there are ways that political engagement and collective identity affect coping and resiliency (Herek & Garnet, 2007). The existing research focuses primarily on how stigma and discrimination negatively impact LGBTQ individuals. A goal of my project was to expand this inquiry to highlight modes of coping and resistance.

By situating my research in the south, where stigma and anti-gay legislation are especially deep-rooted, I hope to feature the stories and experiences of LGBTQ people who are uniquely positioned to resist unjust laws and discrimination. The place where resistance and resilience intersect is at the heart of my investigation and interest. The literature outlined has provided a foundation for my research and the following chapter will outline my sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this exploratory research project is to better understand how couples who participated in the Campaign for Southern Equality's (CSE) WE DO actions experience resiliency and political agency. To do so, I designed a qualitative exploratory study that examines the following research question: How do couples who participated in WE DO actions describe their experience, especially as related to the relationship between political activism, coping, and resiliency? I chose to use a qualitative methodological approach to address this research question and I chose to use semi-structured interviews as my primary research tool.

Based on a careful review of the literature on my topic, a qualitative research design emerged as the method that is most appropriate for my research question. This project's exploratory nature requires time to explore participants' narratives and engage in shared meaning-making within the interview process (Connolly, 2005). Both Connolly (2005) and DiFulvio (2011) utilized less directive research methods and followed the lead of the research participants as they told their stories. Connolly's (2005) research focuses on how "relational resilience" functions as way of protecting the couples against stressors. DiFulvio's (2011) study explored the ways that social disconnection, and conversely social connections, affects health outcomes, ranging from substance abuse, anxiety, depression, and suicide for sexual minority youth.

A key concept in my research will be exploring participants' resiliency. There are multiple ways of considering resiliency, from individual, public and mental health models, to more community based definitions. For the purposes of my project, I hoped to develop a collaborative inductive definition of resiliency based on participants' narratives. Singh et al. (2011) speak to the importance of this methodological framework in their study exploring the resiliency strategies of transgender individuals: "Phenomenology was the most appropriate qualitative method for this purpose because this research tradition is concerned with seeking to understand the essence and meaning of individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon" (p. 21). Incorporating this model of participants as co-researchers is an important part of my project and methodological design.

Another important feature of resiliency that I have incorporated into my framework is collective resiliency. Kirmayer et al. (2011) explore the concept of collective resiliency in their research on rethinking resiliency from an indigenous perspective:

Although resilience tends to be framed as an individual characteristic, it may also have systemic, collective, or communal dimensions. At the level of family and community, resilience may reside in the durability of interpersonal relationships in the extended family and wider social networks of support (p. 85).

I am drawn to this idea of a shared and dynamic idea of resiliency and think it will be helpful in thinking about WE DO participants' experience both as individuals and as a larger community movement.

My working definition of resiliency is based on Kirmayer et al.'s (2011) discussion of resiliency within biological systems, which states: "resiliency is a process of adjustment, adaption, and transformation in response to challenges and demands. In adapting, the organism

also usually changes its own environment” (p. 85). Using this idea of biological resiliency, it will be important to consider the ways that participants experience transformation, not only in their own sense of resiliency, but in their environment as well.

Sample and Recruitment

My sample was a self-selected convenience sample pulled from all of the couples who have participated in WE DO actions in the states of Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. I collaborated with Jasmine, Executive Director of CSE, to recruit couples who matched my criteria for sampling. In partnership with the CSE, Jasmine and I emailed all potential participants a brief description of the study and asked that any interested couples contact me directly. Initially I heard from 21 people indicating that they were interested in being interviewed. I emailed everyone who expressed interest a brief email confirming their interest, verifying that they could be interviewed as a couple, and requesting their geographic location so that I could choose a diverse geographic sampling. 13 couples responded confirming their availability, interest, and eligibility. Of those 13 couples, one lives in Mississippi, two live in South Carolina, and ten live in North Carolina, with the majority of those in North Carolina living in the Asheville area where CSE’s office is located. I initially selected the three couples from Mississippi and South Carolina and mailed them consent and demographic forms to be completed and returned before scheduling phone (or Skype) interviews. One of the couples from South Carolina didn’t return the consent forms and after a series of email exchanges decided that they didn’t have time to participate. Once the completed forms were returned I scheduled interviews via email.

Five North Carolina couples were selected based on a range of gender and geographic diversity (rural, urban, suburban, and region) and scheduling availability. I scheduled in-person

interviews with these five couples via email and phone calls. Four of the North Carolina interviews took place in the participants' homes and one interview was conducted in a study room at the public library. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. The recordings were downloaded into a password protected iTunes folder. And then transcribed in their entirety.

Researcher Reflexivity

As the researcher, I approached this project as a white, queer, cis-gendered, able bodied, early thirties, raised middle-class, woman who is completing my masters of social work. While there are identity markers that I might share with some of the participants, it's also crucial to note that my experience in a lesbian relationship doesn't mean that I understand the experience of lesbian participants in my research, or that my experience as a North Carolinian is the same as a participant who is from the deep south, though we may both identify as queer southerners.

As a part of the interview process, I identified myself as a queer southerner who is from North Carolina. I shared how I came to know of CSE and WE DO and my experience participating as a support person during a WE DO action in 2012. Naming these social identity markers was a critical element of researcher reflexivity, which Singh and Shelton (2011) note as central part of qualitative research with LGBTQ populations: “[P]roviding basic researcher reflexivity, naming the researcher's own social location, is a way of establishing credibility and trustworthiness for the research” (p. 220). By naming the possibility of shared experiences as LGBTQ people in the south, I hoped to minimize the oppression that can be reified in research with oppressed populations by de-centering my own “expert” role as researcher. Including a brief personal narrative at the beginning of the interviews also functioned as a rapport and trust building strategy.

Informed Consent Procedures

In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, everyone who was interviewed was required to read and agree to the terms of the Informed Consent (Appendix A). Prior to recruitment and data collection a detailed Human Subject Review application was submitted and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Institutional Review Board (See Appendix D for HSR approval letter). Because couples who participated in the WE DO actions have been out publically (in newspapers, YouTube videos, local news reports, the CSE website, etc.), participants have voluntarily identified themselves publically and I am unable to guarantee anonymity given their history of public activism. However, the confidentiality of their responses will be maintained and responses won't be linked to specific identities in my project.

For the in person interviews, consent forms were reviewed and signed prior to the interview. Each participant was provided his or her own copy of the Informed Consent with my contact information. For the out of state interviews, two copies of the Informed Consent Agreement were mailed to each participant, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Participants were informed via email that the consents had been mailed and that their agreement must be returned prior to scheduling the interview.

Multiple precautions were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Once the interviews were transcribed, each participant was assigned a pseudonym upon transcription. All electronic data and transcripts are kept in password-protected files on a password-protected computer. All other data and recordings will be kept secure for three years as required by Federal regulations and, after that time, they will be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as needed. When no longer needed, all data will be destroyed.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

This study explored participants' experiences related to participating in WE DO actions and LGBTQ identity in the south and there existed low to moderate risk that the interview could bring up uncomfortable feelings or memories, though this was unlikely given the nature of the interview questions. The potential benefits of participating included the experience of sharing one's story and point of view on important issues and the possibility of gaining insight around one's experience. Participants may also benefit by knowing that they are contributing to research that might help policymakers, community leaders, and residents better understand the effects of anti-gay legislation and ways that community organizing impacts participants.

Data Collection

The data for this project was collected between December 17, 2013 and March 12, 2014. Both in-person (5) and phone and Skype (2) interviews were conducted using semi-structured open-ended questions (see Appendix C). The interview process was designed to take 40-60 minutes, including time for participants to review and sign the Informed Consent Agreement and complete the demographic survey (see Appendix B).

Data Analysis

The demographic data was analyzed with attention to themes and differences around participants' experiences based on geographic location, age, race and gender identity. Because my sample is relatively small, there is not an extensive analysis of the demographics because it is not representative and does not offer generalizability.

A transcriptionist transcribed the interviews and the qualitative data was analyzed using narrative analysis, whereby I considered the concepts that emerged from the narratives as whole stories, rather than answers to specific questions. I reviewed the transcripts multiple times,

highlighting themes, concepts and theoretical refrains. Using a color-coded highlighting method to visually map key topics that emerged from the data. As themes and concepts emerged from the narratives, I developed theory grounded in the participants' own words and experiences. In the following chapter I will discuss the findings that came out of the data analysis around elements of resiliency that the participants identified in their interviews.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the connection between resiliency and political activism in the LGBTQ community in the south. More specifically, this research asks how LGBTQ couples that have participated in the WE DO campaign describe their experiences engaging in political activism. This chapter contains the findings from the interviews that were conducted with seven LGBTQ couples in Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Interviews were conducted over the phone, Skype, and in-person based on geographic proximity, transcribed in their entirety, and then coded using thematic analysis. The interviews were semi-structured and often directed by the participants' narrative of their experience. Because interviews were conducted with couples, an interesting process of mutual meaning making occurred as the dyads engaged in reflection and storytelling.

My interview questions and prompts were designed to capture participants' experiences with political activism, within the WE DO campaign and independent of the WE DO actions. The interviews began with questions about how participants became involved in the WE DO campaign and asked them to describe the experience of participating and how their involvement affected them. The interview questions also aimed at understanding the dynamic between the risks and benefits of political activism, especially highly public engagement such as the WE DO actions. Additionally, the interviews explored the ways that participants coped with their experiences of marginalization based on their stigmatized sexual orientations and gender

identities as a way of discovering methods of resiliency. Finally, the interviews concluded with questions about participants' experiences living as an LGBTQ person in the south, and how regional culture impacts them as LGBTQ people.

Following a section on the demographics of participants, the findings chapter will be organized around the elements of resiliency that emerged from the data analysis: (1) Long term perspective on social change; (2) Confronting internalized homophobia; (3) Family and community support; (4) Role of religion; (5) Impact on relationship; and (6) Becoming visible: The audacity of asking the impossible. Because of the scope and depth of the data, it is impossible to identify and include all of the themes that emerged in the interviews. I have chosen to focus on the themes that were most pronounced as participants described their experiences participating in the WE DO campaign.

Demographics of Participants

A total of 14 individuals (7 couples) completed the interview process. All of the participants identify as white. The lack of participants of color is a significant limitation to this study, though potentially indicative of the whiteness of the marriage equality movement as a whole. Nine participants identify as female, four identify as male, and one identifies as gender queer. Three of the couples had been together more than 30 years. Four of the couples were married in states other than where they currently live (New York, Maryland, Washington DC). One of the couples is engaged and two of the couples describe themselves as partnered.

The participants range in age from their 20's to late 70's, with 42% (N=6) over 60 years old, and 71% (N=10) over 40 years old. Three of the seven couples have grandchildren and nine of the individual participants have children. Five (36%) of the participants have master's degrees; three (21%) have bachelor's degrees; two (14%) have attended some college; and four

(29%) have associates degrees. The participants have a diverse range of household incomes with one couple earning less than \$25,000 a year; 3 couples earning between \$25,000 - \$50,000 a year; one couple earning between \$50,000 - \$75,000 a year; one couple earning between \$75,000 - \$100,000 a year; and one couple earning more than \$100,000 a year.

Under religious affiliation five participants identified as Christian, four identified as none, two identified as agnostic, one identified as nature, one identified as pagan, and one identified as spiritual. The diversity of religious and spiritual identification is especially interesting when considered alongside participants' discussion about the role of religion in their experiences as LGBTQ people in the south.

All participants were assigned pseudonyms, which are used throughout this paper in order to protect confidentiality.

Long Term Perspective on Social Change

The first theme that I will discuss is the long-term perspective on social change. The participants frequently situated their involvement in the WE DO actions within the historical context of the civil rights movement in the south as well as reflecting on how their actions are impacting current movements for social change around gay rights. Six of the couples commented explicitly on how engaging in the WE DO actions made them feel connected to a sense of history that reflects a long term perspective on social change movements. Rachel spoke about the ways that she came to the work of WE DO from the perspective of the civil rights era in the Deep South and the ways that marriage equality is tied up in racial justice and equality movements as a whole:

Susan and I both grew up in the south. I grew up in the *deep* south, south Alabama in the 50s and 60s and I think what we were bringing to it is real

different from what most of the other people who have been involved are bringing to it. As far as their history, their memories, and their passions and their experience, because it was not pretty in the 50s and 60s in the deep south. Not at all, it was horrible. And it was ugly for white people too. So I think that Susan and I both brought a different perspective and that's just simply to say, that for me it's all wrapped up together. For me, whether it's an African American person having the right to vote or gay and lesbian people being able to be legally married, to me it's all about pushing for equality and expecting equality. So for me, as much as it was single focused around being able to have the federal, and hopefully someday state rights, that other people in this country have, it was a much bigger picture too. So being able to do that act felt empowering on lots of levels. So it was, it was, it felt really good for me.

Both Rachel and Susan had been active in social justice work throughout their lives and discussed their involvement in marriage equality work against the backdrop of their work around economic justice.

Many of the couples also commented on the ways that making a difference for future generations of LGBTQ youth was a motivating factor for, and benefit of, participating in the actions. David articulates this sentiment in his interview:

I think what has also been surprising is the way you feel connected to history. Not only from CSE to civil rights comparisons, but throughout time there have been groups of people who did activism that was very grassroots, so it has just been kind of, I mean, you just feel connected. Not to say we will be in the history

books, because that is not our goal in life, but just as far as feeling like you've done something to try and help the younger generation.

David and his partner James live in a small conservative town, noting that prior to their participation with the WE DO campaign, they hadn't been involved in political activism of any sort, but that working with CSE and WE DO has greatly increased their readiness to engage in activism.

All of the participants aged sixty and older described a sense of wonder at the pace of change they had already witnessed in terms of federal and state level policies, and recognition of same sex marriages, despite the fact that in the states where they currently live it is illegal for them to be married. Judy and her wife, Monica, have been together for 32 years and Judy describes how participating in WE DO was particularly important to them given their age and her hope for policy change in their lifetime:

The only thing I would add is how significant it is at this stage of our life. Being older, and I am not trying to be morbid, but we don't know how many more years we are going to be around and what health challenges we will face to be active, so to be able to do this now and really believe at this point that NC will be forced to recognize our marriage before we die, assuming we live to very ripe old ages...I am thinking within 5 years - it will be kicking and screaming - but I think it is going to happen. There was a point where we didn't think we would see it in our lifetime.

Her wife, Monica, went on to add:

Even to know that it is undoubtedly going to happen in a few years. I mean years ago, that was not even imaginable. Where things are moving now - the states are

saying, “OK, we are going to have same sex marriage.” It is amazing. We will just look at each other sometimes and say, “Is this really happening? This fast?”

We did not expect to see it in our lifetime.

This quote exemplifies what many of the participants spoke to - the importance of having your activism situated within a time and place and the sense of it having an impact on the future. For the people who I interviewed, their location in the south give their involvement in WE DO a particular weight and meaning, specific to the realities of being LGBTQ in the south. Likewise, for the participants who have experienced extreme discrimination and marginalization in the past, their perspective on social change, and their sense of their ability to affect social change in the long run fuels their engagement with WE DO and activism in general.

Rachel spoke of the way participating in the WE DO actions allowed her and Susan to connect with their grandchildren around values of justice and social change:

It gave us an opportunity, especially with the grandkids, to talk about what you believe in, what your truth is, and that if it’s contrary to the way things are, how important it is to stand up and to speak your truth, over and over and over again.

Rachel and Susan had applied for a marriage four times when I interviewed them and been arrested after refusing to leave the registrar of deeds’ office without being granted a marriage license.

Confronting Internalized Homophobia

This theme emerged from participants’ coming out stories. While none of my interview questions explicitly asked about people’s experiences coming out, in all of the interviews coming out narratives appeared to be connected to people’s sense of strength, empowerment, and resiliency. For some couples, the action itself was a kind of coming out. One couple held hands

in public for the first time after they requested their marriage license in a small town in a conservative area of North Carolina. Another participant, now a retired therapist in her seventies, noted that she had never been out to her clients or co-workers before her picture was on the front page of the newspaper after participating in a WE DO action.

For three of the couples I interviewed, all of whom were in their sixties and seventies, the WE DO action acted as a catalyst for couples to confront their own internalized homophobia. This process was often described to me through coming out stories, despite the fact that none of my interview questions asked specifically about coming out. This suggests that the process of “coming out” is intimately connected to people’s sense of themselves as activists and members of the LGBTQ community. In addition to the importance of the WE DO actions in these participants’ coming out narratives, they also identified therapy as a crucial part of their process of confronting internalized homophobia.

Holly describes this: “We both found a therapist that was helpful to deal with our own homophobia and being ok with ourselves. Not feeling like we were living in sin.” Later in the interview, Holly’s partner, Ramona, shares that she still struggles with internalized homophobia:

R: Sometimes I still struggle with my own homophobia; I have so much loving support around me. But that’s still there – because it was engrained in me –

H: Really? Are you serious?

R: Yes! I am.

H: Huh – I don’t think I experience that anymore...hmmm

R: It was just engrained in me to be heterosexual. That was the way to be. H:

Well, here I’ve just learned something about her that I didn’t know because I know we both certainly dealt with it in therapy for lots of years, but I didn’t know

that, I don't think about it all any more. It just feels so absolutely natural...

R: Well, I know it when I work at the hospital – I feel it. I'm not fitting in there.

While Ramona is commenting on the ways that she presently experiences internalized homophobia, there is the implicit understanding in Holly's response, that challenging negative beliefs about self can result in a more accepted sense of self. Judy, a retired social worker, commented on the parallel process of advocating for self-acceptance in her professional life and the work that it entails internally:

Judy: I've done presentations on homophobia at regional conferences and I wasn't living myself what I was preaching. I was talking about the internalized piece of it – every time you hide yourself, every time you cower, all you are doing is reinforcing these negative feelings about who you are. So, if you don't open up and stand up for who you are, you really can't be a complete person.

Susan also described in detail her journey of self-acceptance around her sexual-orientation when asked about how she coped with experiences of discrimination and marginalization:

Well, my relationship with Rachel has always been healing in that regard. You know, that and community and lots of therapy! But you know, I think it takes working through your stuff long enough, living long enough. Trying hard enough - when you get to that place and you find out that if you are waiting for approval and acceptance and love and worthiness and all that to come from the outside, you're going to be waiting for the rest of your life. So you really have to get to that place where it comes from within, where nobody can take that away, or tarnish it, or tear it... That when you love yourself – I love myself – I love where I

am in my life and who I am and what I've done and I am ok. And it took a long time to love myself. That's what it's all about. And I'm very real; it has to be very real. It took me awhile. And I didn't have a real positive family background or experience. So it's been a work in progress for my whole adult life, to love myself and to get those kinds of things from myself and not rely on a partner, 'cause I don't think that works. And then part of it is also believing, not just that you are lovable and you love yourself, but on some level it's also believing other people, not people who are judging you, but people who are loving you, that they really love you! You know, I couldn't get that for the longest. 'You love me? *Me?*' It's a little bit of both; certainly loving yourself is probably the foundation piece for real healing.

Susan's striking narrative about this process illustrates the ways that confronting internalized homophobia is practice that occurs internally, but also in the context of relationships (i.e. with a partner, in community, in therapy).

Family and Community Support

Russell (2011) identified heterosexual allies and the LGBT community as two separate areas of support that were essential in her resiliency framework. I am conceptualizing those sources of support together based on how participants described their own experiences. All but one of the couples noted that they had the support of their immediate families and all were out to their families prior to participating in WE DO. Participants described the support of their family and larger communities as being both one of the reasons they were able to participate in the actions, and also a significant benefit of the actions. The act itself served as a way to bring

families together and often resulted in a more public and intentional statement of support than couples had experienced before.

One of the couples relayed their experience going into the courthouse to request their marriage license and how the heterosexual couple ahead of them in line began to quote bible verses, condemning the couple and calling them an abomination. While both members of the couple described this as incredibly painful, one of them also commented that the positive messages and support that she received from family and friends after they witnessed this moment was healing. She said: “For them to see what true discrimination looks like to someone that they know - and they see it! And that has been a really healing moment for me personally.”

All of the couples commented on being recognized by strangers after they participated and that all of the messages that they received from strangers were positive and supportive. David and James described an incident when they were leaving a restaurant shortly after participating in the WE DO action:

After it happened we had a lot of people who would come up to us at random places and say: “We saw you and we are so proud of what you did.” There was a guy at Wendy’s and he was kind of just staring at us one night. We were leaving the restaurant and he came out by the trashcans and was kind of rambling...I was like “Hey, how are you?” He said, “I saw you in the paper and I just want to let you know I’m gay and I am very proud of what y’all did. And thank you for what you did.”

None of the participants reported receiving in-person negative backlash from participating in the actions, though many noted that they initially felt nervous about what neighbors and coworkers

might say. One couple received an anonymous hate letter. Another couple reported being affected by negative comments regarding gay marriage on their Facebook news feed.

Another element of this theme is the way that CSE functioned as a base of community support, prior, during, and after the actions. All of the participants commented on how connected they felt through the “Family Dinners,” organizing meetings, and on-going Facebook groups. Many participants commented on the warmth and safety that they experienced during their first meetings with Jasmine and the rest of the organizing team. Rachel and Susan commented on how CSE provided a community of support and some of the ways that this has shifted as CSE increased its geographic organizing area:

R: Yeah – and I think that’s one of the gifts of CSE, that it offers that. At least in the beginning it did – when it was really Asheville focused. There was a real sense of community and within that community there was so much support.

S: And we met together a lot, doing family dinners, all of that.

R: It was wonderful, but then after CSE became more globally southern, that focused was naturally no longer here. And I really miss that. I’ve just missed it.

Another couple, Matt and Zach, commented on the level of support that they have felt from CSE following participating in the WE DO action:

Matt: They’re [CSE] constantly in touch with us. They called six months after we did the action in Hattiesburg and they called just to check on us and see how we were doing –

Zach: And they had a reunion that they invited us to – we couldn’t go to it – but they invited us. And they also keep up with current events on their website – and all the changes that are happening so far.

Matt: I'm proud to even know them. Just because - what they did, coming here, for us to walk into the courthouse, I'd say that was a pretty ballsy move!

Zach: It's true, because on my own – I wouldn't be able to do that. I would be scared to do that.

Participants also reported contacting other couples that had done WE DO actions as sources of support and for mentorship during the process.

Role of Religion

The theme of religion emerged in all of the interviews to varying degrees. While none of my interview questions explicitly asked about religion, the topic of marriage equality and the Christian based anti-gay rhetoric are often intertwined. In the interviews, participants spoke of religion as both a site of discrimination and also a site of resiliency and support. This is especially true in the south where Christianity often anchors communities and the history of civil rights movements. The CSE and WE DO the actions themselves are often grounded physically in churches, with members of the clergy marching with participants, visibly recognizable in their vestments and clerical clothing.

Jasmine, the executive director of CSE, is a minister in the United Church of Christ and always accompanies the couples requesting marriage licenses as they approach the counter. She is typically dressed in a suit, with a stole and the distinct white collar worn by clergy. In his interview Zach spoke about the impact of the WE DO action having religious components and Jasmine's identity as a minister specifically:

It was solemn, it was supposed to be a quiet march, and so we all marched without saying a word. To me the neatest thing was us circling up and having a group prayer right there. Because it's probably one of the first times that I've ever

done anything in the LGBT community where it was Christian based. It was really unique, because even though I know that that exists, it was my first introduction to that side of our community. The actual Christian side of it. And meeting a lesbian minister was a highlight of my life!

James and David spoke about a meeting that their minister held for all the couples who were participating in the action, where they reviewed the parts of the bible that might be used against them, and the minister also provided them with passages that they could use to counter anti-gay arguments that they faced.

James: She would bring up exact passages and she would say: “Ok, if they say this, then you will know what it really means and you can come back with this.” It was amazing. Like you had something to come back with and it was coming from a religious leader. We called it “the inoculation.”

David: Because that is what it felt like, you know? We were protecting ourselves.

Jessie spoke about what it was like grow up in an evangelical church community and the ways that that space was simultaneously protective and harmful:

It was super important to me because I found comfort in that community that I had met in the church, even though they were all preaching about me being an abomination, so it took tremendous amount of strength to walk away from that and then to realize that you're not alone. And you don't have to do it alone, just because you decided to walk away from that; there is a tremendous amount of power in that. And I believe that the strength we have is when we stand together.

All but one of the couples identified religious support (both from within CSE and independent of CSE) as a positive element of their participation in the actions. This is especially interesting to note considering that only five (35%) of the participants identified as Christian.

One couple noted a general sense of frustration with the connection between religion and the LGBTQ movement in their area:

I mean that's just a personal thing for us, neither of us are very - we're not religious and you know it's like, okay well what about the atheists in the room, you know? Those people should be respected too and not put into an uncomfortable situation. It's like we've been the scapegoat and the community that the religious community has left alone, or bashed and hated and then we're gonna embrace them?

This quote illustrates some of the complexity in the relationship between LGBTQ movements and the religious community. It's also interesting to consider the ways that people who self select to participate in the WE DO actions and CSE may be more likely to be open to support from and participation with the religious community.

Monica and Judy, who aren't members of a church, described the way that a friends' church "adopted" them after they participated in a WE DO action.

Monica: The minister was one of the supporters at the WE DO event talked to his congregation about us and they all wrote affirmations for us and Jennifer came over with this pile of 50 cards that the parishioners had all written things on and we wrote something back thanking them. . . Periodically whenever something would happen – when we got married – Jennifer would go back and tell the congregation and they all applauded. So any ways, every time something happens

Jennifer will report [back to the church], so they have kind of been following us. So even though we've never met them or been there, it feels like a real support system.

For the twelve participants with positive associations with religious support, having the backing of the religious community seemed to provide a kind of protective balm against the anti-gay rhetoric that is often religious in nature. Jasmine wrote to me about the intentionality of bringing religious support into the actions as a way to heal past experiences of discrimination in the form of religious rhetoric:

So many queer folks in the South carry spiritual wounds that come from having been condemned as sinners within the traditions they were raised in. Sometimes those wounds are old, sometimes very fresh. Many times, people share that they have not been exposed to traditions or clergy who affirm LGBTQ people and, over the course of the action, we have learned that people essentially have a "worship" experience in the form of a public ritual that we enact (Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, personal communication, May 23, 2014).

Impact on Relationship

In six of the seven interviews the couples commented explicitly on the impact that doing the WE DO action had on their relationship. Couples who had been together for multiple decades described feeling surprised that the act of requesting (and being denied) a marriage license could impact them in this way. Ramona spoke to this effect:

There's one other point that we experienced after it was all over – we've been together 40 years, but we did feel a closeness that occurred. There was something in our relationship, something about coming out and saying to the world, this is

who we are. That made a difference in how we were feeling. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but we both recognized that there was a different feeling.

Judy and Monica, another couple who has been together for over 30 years commented on the impact on their relationship:

Monica: It has improved and made us feel better. I also think I feel better about myself – more free to be who I really am. It certainly has made a change, hasn't it?

Judy: Oh, yeah definitely.

Zach and Matt celebrated their first anniversary shortly after participating in their first WE DO action and in their interview, Zach described the way that completing the action was a way of affirming their relationship:

Honestly, it's brought us closer. I would say, from my perspective, I've never had a guy actually stand up with me enough to do that. I mean, it's hard enough just being in a relationship and being able to hold hands in public. But for him to have gotten up and to walk in there and apply for a marriage license with me and then come outside and do an interview on the news...

This speaks to the way that the actions themselves are a way of coming out in the ways that they provide a highly public platform for a couple to have their relationship witnessed and celebrated. It's also noteworthy to consider the ways that relationships themselves are often thought of as protective factors in a resiliency framework.

Becoming Visible: The Audacity of Asking the Impossible

What does it mean to ask for rights that you don't have? To engage in an unsanctioned public act? How does the visibility of such an action affect you and your community? How does

the boldness of that action re-work your internal working models and sense of self? These are some of the questions that emerged as participants described the powerful experience of requesting a marriage license and the rejection that followed, time and time again. The act of requesting a marriage license, with the knowledge that your application will be denied, is a way of shedding light and attention on the unjust laws. All of the participants spoke about the (often surprising) distress that they experienced in the moment when their request was denied, and yet they all voiced an unflappable willingness to do it again. The theme of *Becoming Visible: The Audacity of Asking the Impossible* speaks to the duality that participants described when talking about their experiences of rejection and the feeling of empowerment that also existed as a result of that same experience of rejection. In the following section I will first present the narratives that describe the rejection and then the empowerment.

Rejection. The thread of *you never forget what it feels like...* wove through all of the interviews. Participants described in detail the physical feeling they experience when their application for a marriage license was rejected. There is a video on the CSE website (http://youtu.be/_jQxNB5FsPc) that shows footage of numerous couples being turned away from the registrar of the deeds' counters in states across the southeast. This video captures sense of what that moment feels like, but the participants' accounts paint a vivid picture of the internal experience of that moment. When asked to describe what it was like to request a marriage license, Lucy explains some of the emotions that came up when she and Jessie participated for a second time:

You don't really know what to expect even though you think "we've been through this, we know what they're going to say." But the fact that when they say "No." and that feeling in that moment of "Wow, I am so really not a regular citizen of

this state or this country.” You feel this sting of, “So you tell me I’m different and it just sucks.” I don’t think you can ever be truly prepared for that feeling.

In his interviews, Zach commented on the way that hearing “no” brought to the surface past experiences of discrimination:

Knowing that they were going to say no and then actually hearing it were two completely different things. It ripped me apart. It made me feel like a kid again. When I would deal with all of that, the people, you know, you know how it is growing up gay? It was kind of like that all over again, but at the same time I would say - it was empowering.

Susan also spoke at length about the way that the tangible dismissal at the counter triggered feelings around past rejection because of her sexual orientation and gender presentation:

Because then you’re so much more aware that it’s not about the piece of paper that’s between us, this is about *me*. You’re rejecting *me*. You’re writing “rejected.” You know, it just brings to the surface every experience of that you’ve ever had. Or it did for me. You know, I’m so obviously a lesbian and I always have been. I am who I am and I look how I look and I’ve never been able to successfully pull off looking any different. And so I’ve faced a lot of rejection, and that staring, and the talking, and the comments and, you know... So when you do something like that, even though you don’t walk in thinking about all those things, as soon as you have that experience of being told “no,” or being rejected, it’s like – oh, that’s what it feels like – that’s what it’s felt like my whole life.

James explains why he chose to participate a second time, despite the painful aspects of the action:

Cause you don't really want to deal with that kind of emotion. Like why would you go and put yourself through that knowing that you are going to get rejected? Because people need to know what it feels like and they need to see what it feels like.

Judy, who has been with her partner Monica for 30 years, describes feeling surprised by her emotional response to the action:

Well I had no idea I was going to break down and cry. I thought, well, I will just do this. And the support felt incredible with that group you go in with and then when I got up to the actual person and said "Here we are, we would like to apply for a marriage license" and they were very nice but the answer was "No." I hadn't intended to do this, but I said: "You know we have been together for 30 years and live together and this is really disappointing..." and the tears came and I didn't expect to feel that emotion and that is when the photographers caught me.

The visibility of having the moment of rejection witnessed and publicized via newspapers and television, adds another layer of exposure, but also seemed to magnify the sense of empowerment that participants experienced from the actions.

Empowerment. *"I mean, I think a lot of it when it first started, there was almost this sense of - How dare you? This is the south! You don't do that. And Jasmine was fucking going to do it!"* This quote from Rachel's interview describes of the audacity of CSE and WE DO and Jasmine's vision in starting these movements. In the interviews, as participants described what it felt like to demand the impossible, many of them spoke about the actions themselves being transformative. In her interview, Rachel went on to speak about empowerment that results from asking the impossible:

I'm asking for something that I don't deserve or I'm asking for something that I have every right to ask for. And that's magic. It's like, "Wow!" And there is the "No", but you also still walk out with the feeling of: "I asked for my rights." And I'm going to keep asking for them. And that's the jewel of it.

An important aspect of the empowering nature of the actions is how they occur in the context of community support and public recognition, which are elements of my conceptual model of resiliency as a collective process. Paula spoke about her experience participating, and the way that the community presence and support affected her:

I think that action that particular day was really powerful because there were so many supporters there and it wasn't just people involved in CSE. It was the community and the community embraced us that day and that felt like even the people we were asking for the marriage license in the office - they were crying and they were upset and wanted to do it, but legally they couldn't and to see their reaction and the humanity on that side of things was eye opening.

Paula was one of many participants who talked about the interaction with the county employee who was tasked with rejecting the marriage application. All participants expressed feeling compassion and empathy for the employees, even when they knew that the employees didn't support marriage equality.

Holly: I mean it just seemed like, even though they were turning us down, it seemed like a friendly experience. She's shaking our hands –

Ramona: Well, we did, we really put our hands out there to shake hers. I felt a lot of compassion for her in a way. I don't know if compassion is the right word... We've learned since that she's a very conservative Republican. But I

think, I was feeling for her in a way...That was a really hard place for her to be.
And you could tell.

Holly: I think she was more uncomfortable than we were.

Jasmine writes about the power of taking the stance of approaching the counter, and the employee who is tasked with rejecting the marriage application from a place of empathy and love:

This is particularly critical at the counter, for in the moment that a law that degrades one's humanity is enforced, we respond from a place of empathy - that is, recognizing the humanity of the person on the other side of the counter who has been tasked with enforcing this law. It is hard to overstate the power of what can happen at the counter during this encounter because of the ethical posture of couples towards those on the other side of the counter (Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, personal communication, May 23, 2014).

In the WE DO actions, after the couple requests their marriage license and the registrar of deeds denies their application, the couple and their support team walk out where they are greeted by a crowd of supporters. David describes the way that this experience of support helps to mitigate some of the pain of the rejection:

Coming back to the church afterwards, or even coming out of the register of deeds offices, I mean everybody cheered. Here I was bawling, coming down the steps and everybody is like "You did such a good job! We are so proud of you!" I would say it is up there with one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

Later in their interview David and his husband James go on to describe the love that they experienced in being a part of the action: "You feel really good about what you getting ready to

do. Very safe, very loved – the way they bring it all together you feel very secure, safe, and love is the big thing.” Ramona and Holly also talked about the feeling of love that was present during the action:

Holly: It is just an uplifting, proud moment. You feel really good about what you getting ready to do. Very safe, very loved – the way they bring it all together you feel very secure, safe, and love is the big thing. And it is so strange, because it is such a simple action. I mean we could go tomorrow and walk down and do it and you know you are going to be turned away.

Ramona: I feel there is a certain kind of it freedom that I feel with it. I haven’t had any kinds of feelings of fear or fright, it’s just like “This is who I am and I’ve said it now.” So there’s been a freeing, a freeing up. . . And I’ve said already about how our relationship feels more, maybe it’s just more honest and it’s made a difference somehow.

In their interview Monica and Judy also talked about the way that participating in the action brought a kind of honesty to their relationship by it being a kind of publically witnessed coming out:

Monica: It was amazing because for years we were on different levels about how active and out we wanted to be, and I really had to respect where she was because I couldn’t plow on ahead if it was going to identify her. So this put us on an equal footing and you just felt incredibly...

Judy: Empowered

Monica: And relieved and free and empowered

Judy: So incredibly empowered

Monica: And like, “We don’t care!”

Judy: “Hey, here we are!”

Monica: So that was wonderful for both of us.

Time and time again, all of the participants reported that despite the painful and challenging aspects of engaging in the kind of action that the WE DO campaign requires, they would do it again (and again) if asked. The sense of connection to a larger community that resulted from the actions, combined with the power of having your relationship and struggle witnessed (and celebrated) in such a public way, seems to provide a sense of empowerment that protects against the traumatization of willingly evoking discrimination and marginalization.

Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the research with the hope of sharing the voices and narratives of the respondents as they engaged in meaning making in the interview process. I have attempted to approach analysis and presentation of the findings from a non-biased stance that allows for the theory and themes to be grounded in the respondents’ own words. With that said, I am aware that the rich narratives that were shared contain further themes and elements that could be highlighted if the scope of the project was more expansive or through the lens of a different researcher. I was honored to hear the stories of the respondents and hope that my conceptualization of their findings feels true to their experiences.

The themes of resiliency that developed in the interviews are supported by previous scholarship on resiliency in the LGBTQ community and there are also new elements of resiliency that emerged that are unique to the specific context of the WE DO actions and the south, namely the role of religion as both a historical site of discrimination and a potential site of restoration and healing. These findings will be explored in more depth in the following chapter

as I situate the findings of this research against the backdrop of literature on resiliency and activism.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the connection between resiliency and political activism in the LGBTQ community in the south. Specifically, this project asked LGBTQ couples that have participated in the WE DO campaign to describe their experiences engaging in political activism. The histories and perspectives in this study were collected during in-person, Skype, and phone interviews with participants from across the South. The findings, in the form of participants' narratives, provide valuable information about the lived experiences of LGBTQ people living in the south, a region that historically has been overlooked on the national stage of the LGBTQ movement, and marriage equality efforts in particular. The south is a region where religious conservatism is more often than not accepted as the social norm. The deep resistance to marriage equality, which is steeped Christianity, has made it a challenging site for gay marriage and LGBTQ liberation movements. Following the recent increase in legislative and judicial support for marriage equality, national LGBTQ organizations have begun to pay attention to the South as the location of the next push for marriage equality.

The discussion will review key findings and explore the ways that findings both support and build upon previous research. This chapter discusses the findings in the following sections: (1) key findings, (2) limitations and recommendations for future research, and (3) implications for social work practice.

Key Findings

A significant focus of my interviews was trying to understand what elements of resiliency participants identified in their own experiences, especially as they related to their engagement in political activism. By and large, participants identified themes of resiliency that fit within previously reviewed frameworks (Case & Hunter, 2012; Jenkins et al, 2010; Oswald, 2002; Russell, 2011; Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). Though there were also important elements of resiliency that emerged from WE DO participants' narratives that are specific to the experience of engaging in a liberation theology based LGBTQ resistance in the south. In the discussion of the key findings, I will explore these themes that depict the simultaneously unique and universal narratives of participants and how they described their strategies for coping, building resiliency, and practicing resistance.

Long-term perspective and resistance narratives. Much of what I found was supported by previous conceptualizations of resiliency in the LGBTQ community. The theme of the “Long Term Perspective” aligns with Russell’s (2003, 2011) research on LGBT responses to an anti-gay campaign in Colorado that identified long-term perspective on change and civil rights as an important element of resiliency and continued engagement in political activism. This theme is also supported by Singh, Hays, & Watson’s (2011) research with transgendered individuals that found that *cultivating hope for the future*, was a crucial factor in the resiliency of their participants. Additionally, this theme is supported by Case & Hunter’s (2012) conceptualization of *Counterspaces* as a framework for understanding the role of dynamic settings in how marginalized individuals adapt and respond to oppression.

When respondents talked about participating in the WE DO actions, they often situated their political activism against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and with an awareness of the long-term trajectory of change in LGBTQ liberation and marriage equality efforts. Participants acknowledged that the WE DO actions hadn't yet changed laws, but nonetheless saw the actions (and their participation) as a part of a longer arc of change. For example, Rachel spoke to this intangible dynamic in her interview: "I think about the speed with which things are changing around this issue in the country. I think CSE has impacted that. I don't think it's directly impacted it, I just think that energetically it's impacted it." Having a sense that their activism is rooted in something bigger than the individual action provided a context for meaning making and cultivating a hope for long-term change, even when the day-to-day reality hadn't yet shifted for the participants. Case & Hunter (2012) write about this hope of a different future, which they call a resistance narrative:

In embodying the hopes of counterspace members for an alternate future, this narrative serves a restorative function of fostering a sense of hope and optimism that ultimately connects the world as it is to the world as it can be (p. 264).

By rooting their activism in their hope for change, respondents used their sense of optimism to maintain their engagement on the individual level and also by sustaining the collective space where hope for a different world was alive and real.

Confronting internalized homophobia and narrative identity work. In Russell and Richards' (2003) conceptualization of resiliency, they identify *the process of confronting and challenging negative internalized messages/homophobia* as a key component of how LGBTQ participants confront the negative impact of marginalization and stigmatization based on their sexual orientation identities. Russell & Richards (2003) conclude, "if LGB respondents can

directly confront the homonegativity, as it touches their lives, they can transform that homonegativity into the grounds for enhanced self-understanding and the courage to be more out” (p. 324). In all of my interviews, participants shared, to varying degrees, their coming out stories which consistently included narratives around how they have (and continue to) confront their own internalized homophobia.

Respondents’ also noted how participating in the WE DO actions was in and of itself a coming out process. This was true even when individuals had been out for decades before the action given the publicity involved in the actions. The majority (N=5) of the couples reported having their photo on the front page of their local newspaper and many also had their story appear in national news sources, such as the Huffington Post. There is something powerful about the public gaze that couples experienced as they challenged unjust laws. The publicity provided an opportunity for participants to tell their stories in a way that highlighted parts of their identities that had previously been minimized or hidden. Case & Hunter (2012) describe this process as narrative identity work:

Identity work refers to the process by which individuals or collectives give meaning to themselves and others through narratives. This process brings about healing and restoration to marginalized individuals through contesting pejorative societal representations relative to these individuals and their reference group (p. 263).

In addition to the ways that WE DO actions offer the opportunity for couples to engage in identity work, the interview process also created space for participants to engage in meaning making through the process of telling me their stories, as well as having that narrative witnessed by their partner. This process was tangible during Ramona and Holly’s interview when Ramona

shared that she still struggles with internalized homophobia, which came as a surprise to Holly, her partner of more than 40 years. Ramona went on to describe how participating in the WE DO action had allowed her to create a new narrative about her self and gave her a greater sense of freedom to be her full self without fearing retribution because of her sexual orientation.

In her interview, Susan, memorably described her experience confronting negative internalized messages about her sexuality:

So you really have to get to that place where it comes from within, where nobody can take that away, or tarnish it, or tear it... That when you love yourself – I love myself – I love where I am in my life and who I am and what I’ve done and I am ok.

In sum, many of the interviews I conducted support the literature’s discussion of resiliency and the crucial components of *embracing self-worth* and *self-generated definition of self* (Singh, 2011).

Resiliency as a collective process. In my review of the scholarship around resiliency and empowerment, the conceptualization of resiliency as a collective, community-based process emerged as a way to connect the individual’s experience of oppression and trauma with the shared practice of activism (Case & Hunter, 2012; Kirmayer et al, 2011; Levitt et al, 2009; Russell & Bohan, 2007). The collective relationship based view of resiliency was present throughout the interviews and supports the literature’s framework of resiliency as a collective, rather than solitary, process. Case & Hunter (2012) develop and utilize the theory of *counterspaces* as way of understanding this collective process, where they build off of bell hooks’ (1990) description of this process as embodied by a “community of resistance” (p. 42). Case & Hunter (2012) expand on hooks’ framework, noting that such communities are

“comprised of individuals who share a common narrative, experience and/or understanding of oppression and who, as a result of this, are uniquely positioned to help promote the marginalized individual’s sense of self-worth and humanity” (p. 261). The structure of CSE and the WE DO actions creates and maintains a kind of counterspace within which participants are supported and able to challenge the oppressive and discriminatory laws.

What is so successful about WE DO as a political act is that it requires the coming together of a community in a public forum (no couple acts alone). Throughout the interviews I heard again and again the ways that participants experienced the collective political act of WE DO actions leading to feelings of resiliency. Asking for a marriage license when it is “illegal” intentionally invites the act of discrimination. This act, in itself, was transformative for many of the participants and they described a sense of empowerment related to claiming rights. However it’s important to note (as many of the participants did in their interviews) that this would be impossible in isolation, and is only empowering with a community of supporters who are also witnessing the immorality of granting some people rights and denying them to others.

The sense of connection to a larger community was a consistent theme in the interviews, and seemed to be especially important to participants who lived in more rural and conservative areas where it is difficult to find LGBTQ community and safe spaces to be out. For one such participant, engaging in the WE DO action prompted him to organize an effort to build a LGBTQ community center in his town. While CSE operates on a limited budget with a small staff of three full-time employees, they have been able to maintain that sense of connection via Facebook groups, family dinners, and local grassroots organizing that continues after the CSE staff have gone home to Asheville.

The community based witnessing and celebrating of the WE DO actions also emerged as a strong theme throughout the interviews. The experience of having family, friends, clergy, and community members stand with them and cheer and sing after the actions, provided the couples that participated in WE DO a tangible sense of relief and a balm to soothe the sharp sting of rejection that they experienced when their marriage applications were denied. In their interviews, couples often spoke of the sense of love and safety that they experienced from the community presence and celebration. Russell & Bohan (2007) write about this process, noting that the process of healing trauma as a result of oppression “requires joining with others in social change, resistance to oppression, and the empowerment that derives from actively claiming one’s social identity” (p. 69). Because the act of resisting unjust laws is a collective act, both shared in and witnessed by other community members, the power of the engagement is amplified in a way that isolated actions would not be.

Regional and cultural location of research. The geographic and cultural location of the south differentiates this study compared to previous research with LGBTQ communities around issues of resiliency and activism. Historically, the south has been a site of both religious and political conservatism, where until recently the issue of same-sex marriage was a seemingly impossible battle to win. The audacity of asking for a marriage license as a same-sex or queer couple in the south was unquestionable to all of the people who I interviewed. Because of the unique nature of the WE DO actions and the specific geographic context of the south, there is a lack of previous research that speaks to the particular experiences of WE DO participants as southern LGBTQ people participating in direct action as a form of activism. One of the goals of my research was to address this gap in the literature, by including the voices of LGBTQ people in the south.

The narratives of the 14 participants demonstrate the complex and diverse range of experiences had by LGBTQ folks in the south. Some participants noted that they have always been out and always been able to find safe and like-minded communities. Others reported that engaging in a WE DO action was the first time that they had been out to more than a small circle of close family and friends. Participants anecdotally reported varying degrees of discrimination depending on their ability to pass as straight and whether or not they lived in a more liberal or conservative area. For example, the couples that live in Asheville and Durham, North Carolina generally reported feeling more comfortable being out to neighbors and colleagues. While participants living in Mississippi and South Carolina reported more explicit experiences of discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identities.

The majority of the participants (N=9) were born and raised in the south, while the other five had moved to the south as adults. One couple, who had moved to the south to retire, reported feeling apprehensive about moving to an a region known for its conservative politics and more fundamentalist Christian beliefs, but also noted that they had found a supportive and welcoming community in their local church that they were very active in. Religion and the role of the church both as a site of discrimination and oppression and also as a potential source of repair and support emerged as a meaningful dynamic in the interviews.

Religion as a source of protection and restoration. While none of my interview questions asked explicitly about religion, it's not surprising that it was subject that came up in all of the interviews. In the context of the south, the loudest and most hateful voices of anti-gay rhetoric are usually religious in nature. Only five (35%) of participants identified as Christian, however the majority (N=12, 86%) of the participants spoke positively about the role of faith and religion in the context of the WE DO actions. The religious presence and grounding in CSE is

not by accident. Jasmine notes the ways that she developed CSE and the idea of the WE DO actions with a deep understanding of liberation theology and the power of having clergy stand with the couples as support and protection:

While couples are waiting to approach the counter, they have a clergy member with them as a calming, pastoral presence. We are there to offer support as needed and also a visual symbol that the church has this couple's back - in the moment that a law that is based in religious animus is enforced, we are countering that by demonstrating that there are religious traditions who stand with this couple. (J. Beach-Ferrara, personal communication, May 23, 2014).

By acknowledging religion as both a site of persecution and protection, CSE and the WE DO actions offer the possibility of repairing past wounds perpetuated by religious fundamentalism on LGBTQ individuals.

The role of religion as a potential source of support and protection for LGBTQ activists is an area that has not been studied sufficiently to compare my results with previous research. The absence of extensive scholarship on this topic, with this specific population, suggests a need for further research on the impact of religious support and involvement for LGBTQ identified activists in the south.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A key limitation of this study was the relatively small (N=14) and racially homogenous sample size. While the demographics of the sample may be fairly typical of the WE DO participants as a whole (primarily white and lesbian identified), they are not representative of the LGBTQ community as a whole and thus not generalizable. Another important limitation to consider is the likelihood that participants self-selected because they had a positive experience

with CSE and the WE DO actions, thus restricting the narratives to those that are largely affirming of the methods and strategies involved in the actions themselves.

An additional limitation of the study is the lack of uniformity of interview methods. Because of time and travel limitations, two of the seven interviews were conducted over the phone and video chat, which presents a unique set of challenges and may prevent the same level of rapport and trust building that can occur during in-person interviews. Because of the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, each interview varied to some degree in length and the depth of responses. While this methodological approach has limitations, it also offered each participant the opportunity to share personal and meaningful information that provided a significant breadth of data.

Based on these limitations, I would recommend future research that allows for a larger and more diverse sample size. And also perhaps solicit people who have reported having less positive experiences with the WE DO actions. One possible approach would be a qualitative survey provided to all of the individuals who have participated in WE DO actions (as of the writing of this thesis approximately 115 couples have participated in WE DO actions across the southeast). From survey responses, a smaller sample could be selected to complete interviews designed to solicit diverse narratives that might be more widely representative of the LGBTQ community in the south. Additionally, future research could expand its scope to include the experiences of the allies and individuals who have participated in WE DO actions in the role of support team members.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of this research pose a challenge to the role of activism and change movements within the therapeutic process as well as offering insight into the healing aspects of

social change work for social workers working in community and macro settings. Therapy is traditionally thought of as an individual and primarily internal interpersonal process. However participants' narratives of the healing and empowerment that they experienced by participating in WE DO actions requires an expansion of conventional roles of psychotherapy and clinical social work to include both political and collective models of recovery and ways of healing the trauma of stigmatization and marginalization. Russell & Bohan (2006) speak to the necessary nature of this shift:

In practical terms, this means bringing the political into psychotherapy, encouraging the client to see her/himself not as a free-standing individual who contains the germ implanted by external homophobia but as a participant in socio-linguistic exchanges that suffuse the collective experiences of us all. The client's self, in this understanding, is a phenomenon of social exchange, not of interiority; homonegativity (or homonegating process) is a creation of social exchange, not a matter of internal pathology (p. 354).

Maintaining an understanding of the client as an active participant in their environment is a key principle of social work practice, and the findings from this research support that belief and takes it a step further by suggesting that political engagement in itself can provide psychosocial healing. Time and again in the interviews, participants spoke of the power of having both their actions and identities witnessed and celebrated, even while engaging in an action that provoked discrimination.

This research demonstrates some of the ways in which political engagement can lead to feelings of affirmation (via community and family support networks), public recognition, empowerment, all of which make up a conceptual model of resiliency that is illuminating for

clinical social workers and organizers alike. The narratives included in this project speak to the risk that can be a part of activism, and also the ways in which engagement in social change movements can offer healing and potential for emotional repair. In the WE DO actions, couples ask the impossible, surrounded by community that witnesses the duality of rejection and empowerment that exists in the resistance.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

Title of Study: A Southern Marriage: LGBTQ Political Agency and Resiliency

Investigator(s): Rose Wilson

(List Name, Department)

Rose Wilson, Smith College School for Social Work

.....

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study of people’s experience participating in The Campaign for Southern Equality’s WE DO actions.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you have participated in at least one of the WE DO actions and you live in Mississippi, North Carolina, or South Carolina.
- We 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 learn about WE DO participants’ experience participating in the actions and how their participation may have affected their involvement in political activism and their communities as a whole.
- 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 do the following: Complete a 40-60 minute interview, as a couple, about your experience with the Campaign for Southern Equality and the WE DO actions (may be phone, Skype, or in person depending on geographic location and preference). Interview topics will include: your experience with activism and organizing, including but not limited to the WE DO actions; your experience as an LGBT person in living the South; and ways that you experience support in the context of difficult situations. Additionally, you can elect to be contacted during the data analysis for member checking, which would involve providing feedback on emerging themes from the interviews. Member checking would take place over the phone and take approximately 20-30 minutes. Member checking could be completed as a couple or an individual. I anticipate your time commitment (including scheduling) to be approximately 2 hours.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- The study has the following risk: The interview could bring up uncomfortable feelings or experiences, though this is unlikely given the nature of the interview questions.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The benefits of participation are the experience of sharing your story and point of view on important issues and the possibility of gaining insight around your experience.
- The benefits of participation for me are that I will be able to complete the thesis requirement for my Masters of Social Work program.
- The benefits to social work/society are: I hope the results of this project will help policymakers, community leaders, and residents better understand the effects of anti-gay legislation and ways that community organizing impacts participants.

Confidentiality

- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a secured (e.g.: encrypted) file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Any video or audio recordings that are made will only be accessed by the primary researcher and any professional (and confidential) transcriptionist that is used. To keep your information safe, the video/audio file of your interview will be password safe file until a written transcript has been created. As soon as the transcript has been created the audio file will be destroyed. The written transcript of your interview will be stored on a password-protected computer that only the researchers can access.
- We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.
- 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/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

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* (up to the date noted below) 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 up to the point noted below during the study. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by March 1, 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, Rose Wilson at arwilson@smith.edu. 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 or video (depending on the setting) 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 B

Demographic Questions

1. Race (Please select one)

- Asian
 - African American
 - White
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Native American
 - Pacific Islander
 - Other (Please Specify)
-

2. Age (Please select one)

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70-79
- 80+

3. Education (Please select one)

- High School/GED
- Some College
- Associate Degree
- Bachelors Degree
- Masters Degree
- PhD

4. Gender (Please select one)

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Other _____

5. Religion (Please select one)

- None
- Buddhist
- Catholic
- Christian
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Other (Please Specify)

6. Parental Status (Please select all that apply to you in the role as care provider)

- No Children
- Children
- Grandchildren
- Elderly Parent(s)

7. Current Marital/Partner Status (Please select one)

- Single
- Partnered
- Married

If married in another state/country than where you currently live, where were you married?

8. Job Title _____

9. Which of the following best describes your household's total annual income, before taxes, in 2012?

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000 - \$50,000
- 50,000 - \$75,000
- \$75,000 - \$100,000
- \$100,000 or more

Appendix C

Interview Guide

- Before becoming involved with the CSE and WE DO, were you involved in activism?
- If so, what was your experience like with activism/organizing before WE DO?
- Tell me about how you got involved in CSE/WE DO.
Possible prompt: How have you been involved in CSE/WE DO?
- Tell me about how participating in WE DO has impacted you.
Possible prompt: Your personal identity, within your community, politically, etc.
- Do you remember what did it feel like right after the WE DO action(s)?
- How did it feel after you went home?
- How did it feel a month after the action?
- How did it feel a year after the action?
- Have you experienced any risk associated with the WE DO actions?
- If so, tell me more about how you experienced that risk.
- What resources or supports did you have or need in place for that experience?
- What could have made that experience/recovery different/better?
- Do you see yourself being politically engaged in the future? If so, in what ways?
- What are some of the benefits of being politically engaged for you personally?
- What are some of the drawbacks of being politically engaged for you personally?
- What is your experience as a queer person/LGBT person in the south?
Possible prompt: Do you feel like you have power to change that?
Has participating in CSE/WE DO changed that? In what ways?
- Are there things in your life that keep you going in the face of hardship or adversity?
Possible prompts: Community resources, spirituality, family, support systems, etc.
- Is there anything else you feel was important about your participation in WE DO?
Possible prompt: Is there anything else you feel I should know about your experience with WE DO?

Appendix D

HSR Approval



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

October 30, 2013

Rose Wilson

Dear Rose,

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: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor

Appendix E

HSR Amendment Approval



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

November 14, 2013

Rose Wilson

Dear Rose,

I have reviewed your amendment and it looks fine. This amendment to your study is therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,

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

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.

Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor