

A Qualitative Investigation

of Gay Male

Adolescence

by

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A Research Paper

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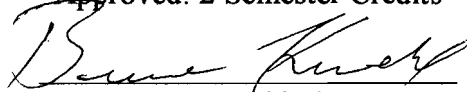
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Bruce Kuehl", written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of being a gay male adolescent in the Midwestern United States. A phenomenological research study consisting of interviews with four adult gay men (ranging in ages from 19 to 42) about their adolescence revealed several important themes about this time in their lives. Each interview participant discussed many topics fitting within three general categories: identity, sexuality, and diversity. Each man described feelings of confusion or emotional upset while forming his identity, as well as moments of confidence and understanding. Discussion on sexuality and sexual experiences are also included as part of identity development. Participants also described the experience of chronic stress, constant secrecy, and fear of adversity due to their identities while sometimes finding support in unexpected places. These results are compared to existing literature.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Sameness and difference exist in all things, particularly in lived experiences of groups and individuals. The field of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) has both the unique opportunity to witness these experiences and the obligation to honor them. This study aims to bring depth of understanding to one particular experience: being a gay male adolescent in the Midwestern United States. A phenomenological study of four individual experiences will offer information on the complexity of being a gay male adolescent.

Purpose of the Study

Adding to the body of research on gay male adolescence is the main goal of the study. By bearing witness to the stories of four men and providing space for their voices to be heard, four fewer voices will be silenced by the dominant culture.

Assumptions of the Study

The primary assumption of this study is that there is sameness and difference in every experience. Meaning, any group of individuals who have experienced similar things will still have great diversity and variety amongst them. Therefore, four participants' experiences will present several common themes but is not a conclusive description of gay male adolescence. Also, as a heterosexual female, in a heterosexist culture, this author may carry biases and hypotheses to the study that do not fit the worldviews of the participants. Further discussion on measures to avoid this contamination of the data is presented in the methodology section of the paper.

Definition of Terms

Adolescent. For purposes of this study this term is used interchangeably as a time

period, age grouping, and developmental stage determined by the interview participants and the authors of literature presented in the paper. Typically this time period begins at the onset of puberty and ends in the early 20's.

Bisexual/Bisexuality. For purposes of this study, one who identifies as “bi,” or bisexual, one who is attracted to and has relationships with others of both similar and different genders.

Coming Out. This term describes the process of accepting sexual identity for one's self and creating a public identity to match.

Cruise or Cruising. This is a slang term that describes the act of checking out another person for the purpose of having a sexual encounter.

Cruisey. This is a slang term that describes a public place where individuals meet to engage in sexual encounters.

GLBT. This is an acronym for Gay Lesbian Bisexual and/or Transgendered individual.

Homosexual/Homosexuality. For the purposes of this study, one who identifies as homosexual or gay, who is attracted to and has relationships with others of the same gender.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of the study would be corrected with an expanded version of the research with more participants. With only four participants, results cannot be interpreted as a definitive description of gay male adolescence, merely a glimpse of these four experiences. In addition to the number of participants included in the study, the study may have benefited from a greater variety of participants. Specifically, participants

from several age groups may have offered more richness and depth to the study.

One age group in particular that is absent from this study is that of an adolescent group. Adolescents who have self-identified as gay, who are available to participate in studies such as this, and who can provide parental consent to participate are often found in centers or organizations that are designed to offer support for high-risk youth. By choosing not to select participants from this group there will be a larger variety of participants to choose from. The risk, however, is that the distance from the experience of being an adolescent may potentially alter the memory of the experience. Specifically, memories of past events and perceptions of past events may not be the same as describing a current experience. Over time the participants may have forgotten details or significant moments that would have altered the depiction of their stories.

Strengths of the Study

A primary strength of this study is the researcher's use of grounded theory and phenomenology to prevent contamination of the research with her own views, and to acknowledge when her views are present. For example, the case studies were constructed by the researcher using excerpts of longer interviews. Though the researcher has made efforts to use the participants' own language to validate the interpretation, an interpretation it remains. For another example, the researcher acknowledges throughout the study that her theoretical, personal, and professional worldviews come from heterosexist systems; this enhances the readers' awareness of the pervasive nature of heterosexist bias.

A second strength of phenomenological research is that it encourages a state of self-awareness and self-examination throughout the research process. The inductive

process of grounded theory invites researchers to alter the research plan as new information presents itself. This research study was not rigidly designed. For example, the flexibility of the methodology allowed for the researcher to present her data mostly in case study format as the participants' narratives became more central to her focus than the analysis of recurring themes.

Additional strengths of this study lie with the participants. Each individual who offered to participate and share his personal story of adolescence was unique. The participants shared their stories with an openness and vulnerability that cannot be denied. Their depth of analysis and passion for others to learn from their stories is inspiring.

Methodology

This is a phenomenological study based in the inductive process of grounded theory. The goal of the study was to gain greater understanding of the experience of being a gay male adolescent through interviewing gay men about their experiences as teenagers. The interviews are presented as case studies about being a gay male adolescent. In addition to the case studies, the interviews are also cross-coded for significant, repeating, and noticeable themes. These topics are compared with existing literature and discussed for future research. The participants' direct quotes and language are used in the results section to add richness of description of the gay male experience. Their quotes also aid in validating the author's interpretations of the interviews. Significant topics are then interpreted to fit within three larger themes.

Chapter II: Literature Review

It is clear that gay male youth are a minority in North American culture. Minimal research has been done on this group's experiences, but it is clear that as a sexual minority this group has additional adversity beyond the typical struggles of being a developing adolescent (Savin-Williams, 1994). The research on this adversity and related issues is limited, but it is intuitive that the chronic stress, secrecy, and confusion over forming a non-normative identity can create many challenges in a young person's life (American Academy of Pediatricians' Committee on Adolescence, 1983). Despite these challenges, most gay male adolescents are highly functioning, compassionate, contributing members of their communities, both during adolescence and into adulthood.

Research and Training

With such a lack of research on this group, therapists and other practitioners may have little to go on for their treatment strategies. Generally therapists are found to have liberal attitudes regarding sexual minority communities, but also a lack of information on the lifestyles (Graham et al, 1984). In addition, coming from a majority lifestyle and heterosexist system, there are concerns regarding objectivity of the therapist and the lack of personal and professional knowledge of this minority. Further investigation must be done to more fully inform therapists of the GLBT adolescent group, the unique stressors of this experience, the potential consequences of these stressors, and the individual nature of each person's experience.

Further research must be done to appreciate the disproportionate number of psychosocial health concerns for GLBT adolescents. An estimate of the number of GLBT adolescents alone is difficult to obtain (Nelson, 1994). Often surveys define

sexual identity by sexual behaviors only; therefore, results are skewed due to the sexual inexperience of the GLBT adolescents or due to the number of sexually experimenting non-GLBT adolescents.

Bagley and Tremblay (2000) write that the lack of data on GLBT adolescents is due to several factors. First, GLBT adolescents may minimally disclose their identities in surveys due to fear of repercussions. Second, there are few research questions or surveys which require GLBT adolescents to disclose their identities; this is a clear example of how this group is repeatedly neglected in the literature. Also, few GLBT adolescents may have had sexual experiences that would be defined as homosexual, and the questions in surveys are often worded to only capture those sexual experiences, not self-identification. Government statistics are not often helpful for research either due to processes of data collection. For example, capturing the number of GLBT teen suicides may be thwarted by systematic practices like when a medical examiner investigates an adolescent suicide, he or she does not note all the contributing psychosocial stressors and events prior to the death of the young person (Bagley & Tremblay, 2000).

Heterosexist bias is common in research as the human experience is often conceptualized in what is most familiar: heterosexist terms. Even the research chosen to pursue, the questions asked, sampling procedures, operationalizing variables, and data collection all come from a heterosexist system. This leads to minimal information on GLBT adolescents as a group or as subgroups (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered groups) and the increased likelihood of pathologizing the data collected (Herek et al, 1991).

Sampling issues occur for research on GLBT adolescents in general and also with

gay males specifically (Savin-Williams, 1994). Often the teens have not yet identified as GLBT at this time in their lives. Youth agencies that can provide samples of a population of GLBT adolescents are providing samples that have self-identified their sexualities, sought help or support from the agency, and may have had trouble with the legal system; as such, this is a non-representative sample of the GLBT group.

Unique Stressors

It appears that many gay male adolescents respond successfully to adversity and develop positive coping strategies that may serve them later in life. Many in this group suffer unique and chronic stress, however, due to their developmental age, social context, and ethnic minority status (Savin-Williams, 1994). Savin-Williams (1994) cites several types of stress inflicted on this group in disproportionate amounts, specifically verbal and physical abuse by peers and adults, which threatens both the well-being and physical survival of the individual. As a sexual minority, gay male adolescents are discredited and isolated from peers, families, religion, and both educational and social institutions (Savin-Williams, 1994). In essence, gay youth are marginalized in our culture. Often these teens fear expulsion from home or violent rejection, neglect, ridicule, assault, rape, and sexual abuse. To protect themselves from these risks, gay youth often live invisible and private lives, hiding or denying their identities. There is no data that harassment for gay males is worse than that experienced by other adolescents, but it is clear that the harassment is due to their identities and that this stress is detrimental to their well-being (Savin-Williams, 1994).

Saewyc et al (2006) write that negative messages about homosexuality are common in North American culture. These messages are found in school hallways,

institutional policies, religious sermons, court rulings, US Congress, and popular media. This societal disapproval can come in the form of verbal discrimination and threats or from hate crimes. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has documented an increase in hate crimes against homosexuals over time (FBI, US Department of Justice, 2005). This confirms the atmosphere of disapproval of sexual minorities in North American culture that Saewyc et al (2006) describe when they report an increase in reports of physical and sexual abuse of sexual minority youth in the last decade. The authors also report that the abuse of gay youth and the threat of abuse lead to a disproportionate amount of homelessness, runaways, and foster care for this group.

The American Academy of Pediatricians Committee on Adolescence (1983) described several consequences for sexual minority youth should their identity become suspected or known. These social consequences include: trouble with peer group acceptance, potential family rejection, school and institutional harassment, limited employment opportunities, legal difficulties, and social isolation.

Schools appear to be particularly stressful places for GLBT youth, in addition to their homes and communities. Elze (2003) surveyed adolescents about their perceptions of their school settings. A majority of the GLBT youth (over 60%) report victimization directly related to their sexual orientation, this included verbal abuse, threats, and physical assault of varying degrees. A majority of the sexual minority youth also reported that they felt the staff at their school was helpful and available should they need them, but that there was a noticeable lack of discussion on sexual orientation or coursework. A majority of respondents also describe witnessing antigay graffiti, harassment, or even their teachers telling homophobic jokes in class. Elze (2003) found

that teens with better ratings of their school experiences also have more positive feelings about their sexual orientations, report higher self-esteem, more heterosexual peers, and more openness with their families about their sexuality compared with teens with poorer ratings of their school experiences.

Coping

The ability to adapt to stress and adversity is at the core of human development. Successful adaptation means to be able to manage one's emotions, problem solve, manage behaviors, control autonomic arousal, and act on social and non-social environments (Compas et al, 2001). Several definitions of coping are available in the literature, but most coping efforts are directed at protection against threats and challenges under stressful conditions or repairing damage after stress. The nature and methods of coping for an individual are important for treatment interventions, but they can also affect social context (Compas et al, 2001). For example, coping mechanisms that involve drug use can affect school performance, relationships with loved ones, and involvement in the legal system.

Manley and Leichner (2003) studied adolescents with a history of both eating disorders and suicidality. The authors found that profound pain and social isolation lead to several self-harming behaviors including negative thoughts and behaviors, self-mutilation, suicide ideation, suicidal gestures, and suicide attempts. These methods, in the authors' opinions, were forms of coping with the pain of being socially different during the difficult time of adolescence. The authors also suggest that struggling with these issues long-term creates feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Gay adolescents may face a parallel process as they also suffer from profound pain and social isolation

during a difficult time of development.

Self-Destructive Coping

In a report to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Gibson (1989) reported that 30% of suicide attempts by adolescents are committed by gay youth. This number is severely disproportionate to the estimated number of teens who identify as homosexual. Cole (1989) cites several reasons for adolescent suicide in general, including hopelessness, coping skill deficits, and personal characteristics predisposing the teen to suicide ideation. Cole also names several risk factors for adolescent suicide specifically. He writes that adolescents often have a developmental belief that they are indestructible. If an individual has rigid or poor problem solving skills, this can lead to many failures; suicide would then be, as Cole hypothesizes, a response to the dissolved "myth of omnipotence." Cole also reports that adolescence is a time of increased self-consciousness and concern with social acceptance, as well as a time of increased conformity and inhibition of unpopular behaviors. He offers this as a reason for increased suicidality in teens who cannot handle the pressure he described. Nelson (1994) writes that constant exclusion and invalidation for GLBT adolescents can create internalized hate. This self-hatred leads to destructive behaviors such as homelessness, suicide, and substance abuse.

Savin-Williams (1994) writes that the causal link between chronic stress and self-destructive behaviors is not clear, but the consequences of chronic threats to physical and emotional well-being are clear. He writes that homosexual adolescents tend to have a greater number of self-destructive behaviors than other minority groups. For example, a disproportionate number of gay youth drop out of school due to chronic harassment,

truancy, and resulting failed classes. Besides truancy, other conflicts with the law may be related to acts of runaway, prostitution, or substance abuse. Various sources cite as much as 40% of street youth are homosexual or bisexual, many of which are prostitutes (Bagley & Tremblay, 2000; Cole, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Molloy, McLaren & McLachlan (2003) describe disturbing results of a survey of 1400 Australian subjects. They found that suicide of a gay teenager was viewed as more justified, acceptable, necessary and psychologically healthy than the same act by a heterosexual teenager. These results were consistent among both homosexual and heterosexual survey participants. Lastly, they found that suicide is considered both a recognized and acceptable response to discovering that you are homosexual. This again reiterates the cultural atmosphere that is perpetuating disapproval of homosexuality and sexual minorities, not only in North American culture but all over the world.

Identity Formation and Coming Out

Saewyc et al (2006) write that sexual identity formation is a developmental task of adolescence that begins at puberty for all adolescents. This development is influenced by societal and cultural contexts as the adolescent tries to make sense of his or her physical, emotional and cognitive changes. For sexual minority youth, however, they are forming their sexual identity in a homophobic climate.

The American Academy of Pediatricians' Committee on Adolescence (1983) presents four assertions about homosexual adolescents. First, homosexual experimentation occurs between many adolescents and is common in heterosexual development. Second, homosexual characteristics are present as a psychological state before adolescence even begins. Third, homosexual behaviors can occur between

individuals who identify as heterosexual, particularly if there are no other heterosexual alternatives (i.e. when the individual is incarcerated). Last, the same pattern is common to all young people, male or female.

Floyd & Stein (2002) summarize several developmental theories on identity formation for sexual minority teens. Frequently, these models include recognizing same-sex attraction, gaining sense of self over time, and finally taking on a public identity which includes their sexuality. They also explain that part of sexual identity formation for sexual minority youth includes a questioning of heterosexual (normative) identity. This leads to fears of rejection, self-doubt, and low self-esteem about being different than others. At this point, an individual may disclose his or her identity and reach out to others, or he or she may begin a pattern of denial and invisibility. The general pattern, they describe, begins with same-gender attraction at the onset of puberty, sexual exploration, identity confusion, sexual experiences, assuming the sexual identity for themselves, disclosing the identity, and then finally self-acceptance and forming a public identity.

Families of origin play significant roles in the lives of their members and for the coming out process of GLBT youth. Savin-Williams (1998) describes the coming out process with families. He reports that first disclosure is rarely to family members, but when disclosure occurs, sibling disclosure often occurs before parents. He reports that most GLBT youth tend to come out to their mothers before their fathers, inner city youth come out to their families more often, and more youth are coming out to their families in recent years than previously noted. He also discusses the glaringly missing research on the decision making process of coming out. For example, some youth come out to

families in person, others via letter or email. Some youths' decisions of when to come out have to do with the question of whether they anticipate their lives being easier or more difficult if their identities are known. These two pieces of the decision making process, among others, are examples of the neglect in this area of research.

Protective Factors and Institutional Change

Despite the minimal literature on the topic, some protective factors may be in place to minimize the risk of self-destructive and even suicidal behaviors in homosexual adolescents. Connor and Reuter (2006) found that, in general, parental warmth and support can protect a child from psychopathology in the future, specifically suicidality. In the same study, the authors found that fatherly warmth and support was particularly protective for adolescents over other factors.

Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) found that there is a positive relationship between spirituality and religion and mental health, though the relationship is less clear for the gay community. A common myth, for example, is that one cannot be both gay and Christian. Negative messages about homosexuality and other sexual identities through religious teachings, groups aimed at heterosexuals only, prohibition of gay leaders, and other isolating behaviors, can create internalized self-hatred or hatred of homosexuality and other minority sexualities. Results of this study concluded that having a positive connection to the divine increased mental health in the subject. A connection to the divine might be as simple as honoring personal beliefs and morals, or by finding houses of worship that accept the individual's lifestyle.

Saewyc et al (2006) argue that for further protection of this vulnerable group, change must occur at the institutional level. Professionals who work with sexual

minority youth need to routinely assess for physical and sexual abuse in their lives. An increased awareness of the vulnerability of this group to these types of abuses must occur as well. The authors also suggest that community interventions are required to support GLBT youth. For example, community education must include the message that emotional pressure and threat of physical punishment will not change an adolescent's sexual orientation. In addition, awareness must be raised that violence against sexual minority youth is unacceptable.

Several articles in the literature specifically attend to changes that should occur at the school level for advocacy of sexual minority youth. Elze (2003) encourages social workers to advocate for GLBT youth by advocating for school environments that support and affirm their identities. The author also invites administrators to create peer support programs for youth to gain support from fellow students. Nichols (1999) also discusses change in schools to create support for GLBT youth. She writes that the implementation of a diversity room in schools with diversity room specialists will help create safe acceptance for all youth. This is a safe space geared towards students where the staff would teach about the value of diversity amongst individuals and encourage tolerance and acceptance. She argues that schools develop norms, values and beliefs in their students, and they must also communicate rejection of intolerance for differences. Caywood (1993) discusses the simple change school libraries can make to support GLBT youth. She advocates for including materials in each library catalog that provide support, information, role models, and religious diversity for GLBT youth.

These issues of intolerance, rejection, and disapproval are themes throughout the lives of young, gay adolescents. This study hopes to remedy this intolerance and

ignorance by adding to the body of knowledge on gay male adolescence and encouraging future research to help MFTs become better providers for this population.

Chapter III: Methodology

This phenomenological study aims to understand the lived experience of being a gay male adolescent in the Midwestern United States. Four participants ranging in age from 19 to 42 were interviewed and asked to describe their experiences as gay adolescents. Interview notes and transcripts were used to construct case studies for each participant based on their self-reports. A discussion of significant and recurring topics is presented as well.

Participant Selection and Description

The participants selected for this study were all individuals who have experienced being a gay male adolescent. Frequently in the literature, samples of gay male adolescents have been selected from a specific group. They are often self-identified as gay, found at youth service agencies, and they can provide parental consent. In an attempt to pull participants from a larger, more representative sample of the gay male population, participants in this study were selected from the adult age group. A benefit of this age group is that they may have less identity confusion or fewer unresolved identity issues than a younger cohort, and thus be more honest and insightful in their reporting. An older group of participants may also better understand the informed consent. By selecting participants from a more representative group, the aim is to also obtain participants from a broader range of life experiences. For example, youth found at service agencies are often homeless or troubled; the sample would neglect individuals who did not need or use those services, those who were not homeless, mentally ill, or high-risk for drug use and chemical dependency.

Four participants were recruited from friends and colleagues who have

connections to gay men. Each participant was considered a legal adult (ages ranged from 19 to 42) and self-identified as a gay male. Dual relationships with the researcher were avoided as the participants were not previously known by the researcher. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was provided.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted in person with each of the four participants. Each interview last approximately three hours. Participants One and Two are partners and chose to be interviewed together. Unlike participants Three and Four, the first two participants declined to be tape recorded. Notes from these interviews were thorough, and quotes were documented when possible, but a complete verbatim transcript is not available. Participants Three and Four were interviewed individually and the interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

Interviews were focused on learning more about each participant's individual experience of being a gay teenager. Initial questions were intentionally open-ended so to avoid imposing the researcher's expectations onto the participants. Each interview began with the question: "How would you describe your adolescence? What was it like for you?" Several other prepared questions were available to be asked during appropriate times of the interview if the participant did not already address the question in an earlier narrative. For example, "What do you want people to know about what it was like to be a gay adolescent?" Potential follow up questions were included as well so as to attend to issues the researcher anticipated being raised, such as "What challenges did you face in your life as a result of being gay?"

After completing all interviews with the four participants, and while coding the

data and completing the literature review, the researcher contacted some participants by phone and by email to clarify specifics within the interviews. For example, the researcher contacted one participant for a clearer definition of specific slang words used in the interview. Also, since the personal narratives of the participants were not often chronological, the researcher clarified ambiguous timelines with one participant to confirm accuracy in the case study.

Data Analysis

The interview for the first two participants was not audio taped and could not be transcribed. Instead, the researcher took detailed notes during and after the interview. These notes and the transcripts of interviews with the third and fourth participants were used to construct case studies of the participants' lived experiences of being gay male adolescents. The notes and transcripts were then coded by the researcher to highlight key topics of discussion (i.e., "secrecy," "bisexuality," "pornography," etc.) Such specific topics of discussion were determined by the researcher to fit within three larger, more general themes having to do with identity, sexuality, feeling different, or a combination thereof.

Methodology Limitations

An initial weakness of this study is related to the number and variety of participants. Four participants from one relatively small area of the Midwest can offer valuable information on the experience of being a gay male adolescent, but a larger sample of data could add to the richness of the description. Also, participants with diverse races, ethnicities, spiritual beliefs, ages, geographic locations, and other differences would add much to the description of various life experiences of gay male

adolescents and the understanding of those experiences.

Cohort differences may exist between the age groups of the participants and the current adolescent population in the United States. There could be cultural changes and sociopolitical climate changes in the time since the participants were adolescents that may not be clearly reflected in the collected data.

Other method specific limitations of this study are related to data collection. Two of the four participants declined to be tape recorded during the interview. Without verbatim transcripts, data is more vulnerable to researcher-error related to interpretation and biases. In addition, descriptions of the participants' life experiences lose richness and depth without direct quotes from the interviews.

Chapter IV: Results

This phenomenological study was conducted to present the reader with a meaningful description of four participants' experiences of being gay male adolescents. Case studies are constructed and, when possible, participant quotes are provided for to enhance the richness of the descriptions of gay male adolescents. Participant quotes are also used to validate the researcher's construct of the participants' narratives. Interview notes and transcripts were coded by the researcher to highlight key topics of discussion (i.e., "coming out," "depression," "religion," etc.). These topics are compared to existing literature and discussed for potential future research. The topics of discussion were also determined by the researcher to fit within three larger, more general themes having to do with identity formation, sexuality, and diversity, or a combination thereof. Finally, the author presents an interpretation of significant themes across the interviews. All names have been changed for privacy.

Case Studies

Case Study One, Nathan

Nathan is a 24 year old male living in the Northern suburbs of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. He grew up in the same area and now lives with his partner Jason. The interview was conducted with both Nathan and Jason (participant two) present. Per the participants' request, the interview was not tape recorded. Direct quotes are provided when available from the researcher's notes.

Nathan knew he was gay in third grade, or at least he knew he was "different" than others. He sexually experimented with a friend until the summer before sixth grade when his friend moved out of state. Nathan recalls several significant moments in this

time period related to his sexual identity development. One such moment was in fifth grade when his class was going through their sex education unit. Nathan recalls:

“I remember being excited for the sex ed day where they talked about the male [development] because I wanted to see a real organ.”

Another moment of his sexual identity development revolved around pornography.

“Then before 6th grade my best friend’s dad was into porn and I saw straight porn. I remember noticing that I was watching the man; that I wanted to watch the man and not the woman.”

During this time of sexual awakening, Nathan also saw gay porn and this created an urge to experience this type of sexuality for himself. He explains,

“Deciding to have anal sex the first time was about wanting to be gay, knowing we’re gay, and feeling like that’s part of the gay experience.”

The summer before sixth grade, he and his friend chose to have sex for the first time. He describes that it “blew [his] mind.” This experience solidified Nathan’s sense that he needs sexual connection with other men for fulfillment in his life, but it did not solidify his understanding or acceptance of his gay identity. After his friend moved to Texas, Nathan felt alone from sixth to eighth grade. He describes this feeling of fear and isolation in the excerpt below.

“I thought, ‘Am I the only one like this?’ I had crushes on guys, but didn’t date anyone. So for a while I thought, ‘If I’m the only one like this, maybe I should date girls too.’ So I acted like it was a choice [to be gay or not], but now I know I was born gay... Society doesn’t like it [homosexuality] and I was confused. I tried to like girls: I self-pleasured to girls in porn, I dated a girl in 8th grade even.

I always would think, why would you choose it? Why would you choose to be treated like crap by society? Made fun of? Tortured? I was sick of trying to be someone I'm not. Like when I dated a girl in 8th grade, I loved her, but it wasn't the same. [Researcher: "It wasn't as fulfilling?"] Yeah. I mean, I'm compatible with girls. They can be my friends. My companions. But with a partner, you share everything."

To stave off loneliness and isolation, Nathan tried to connect with females in a romantic way. He fought a constant internal battle between knowing he was different than others and trying to fit in and be the same. Nathan did find a group where he felt he fit in, but he still feared that coming out would bring consequences that were worse than keeping his secret and feeling alone.

"People just aren't cultured. They don't understand gay, or bi, or Black, Asian, whatever. I didn't have a lot of friends, but in 9th grade I was attracted to minorities. Not to date, but it was like, 'they're different too, so they'll accept me.' I fit in better with them. You want to tell someone [that you're gay], but you don't know who is [gay] and who isn't. Or who'll hate you. It could be worse to tell people."

Nathan describes the confusion of society's messages about homosexuality.

"And when we're not invisible, when we're in the news for Gay Pride [Parade] or something, they show the most glittered, stereotyped drag queen. I just read an article about Iran and how they are killing gay people like in the Holocaust. They're forming underground railroads to get people out. No one talk about that. Or Mathew Sheppard. Like when they talk about HIV, instead of talking about

Human Immune Deficiency Virus, it's like it's Gay Men's Immune Deficiency Virus...Religion pushes gay people away by saying they're wrong or bad. I used to be [atheist] for that reason. But I'm confused because there are so many churches and things at Gay Pride [Parade], so what's right?"

Nathan went on to explain that the judgment from organized religions and being told what's right and what's wrong, including his way of life, makes him doubt himself. His inner morals and beliefs feel true to him until powerful religious groups preach hatred and use words like "evil" and "sin." Nathan feels this is what has pushed him away from his Christian upbringing, but he still has positive feelings about spirituality.

At age 15, a series of events began that lead to both Nathan's acceptance of his sexual identity and his coming out to his family.

"It's not considered 'dating,' but it was dating in my eyes: my best-friend thought it was just an over-close friendship, but when I was 15 I dated my best-friend. I loved him, or whatever. But you don't understand love that young, [whether you are] gay or straight. My best-friend broke up with me after his mom found out he was gay. She was a Jehovah's Witness and basically brain-washed him into not talking to me for two years, from 16 to 18. So I was really heartbroken and told my sister while we were lying on her waterbed one day. She laughed at me and told me she'd known all along. Then my mom wanted to know what was wrong because I was so upset and I remember thinking, 'There's no way my mom couldn't [already] know [that I'm gay]' and I came out to her. She claimed she didn't know, but one time after my best-friend spent the night, she came into my room and pulled the covers off of us to be funny. She woke us up and said,

“Breakfast’s ready!” But we were naked under the covers and had our arms around each other and she still never thought anything of it... You have to kind of break out and realize: you aren’t going to change. Like, ‘I don’t care what other people think.’ I don’t care [about my family’s approval] because I wanted to live a life without hiding [who I am]. I didn’t want questions all the time, like “are you gay?” I was sick of trying to be someone I’m not.”

Nathan describes several ways during this time in his life that he tried to reach out for connection with others. At 16 he went to a sex party with much older men and had a sexual encounter with a man in his 30’s. Nathan lied about his age to get in. He asserts that this type of situation is not common, but that he was intentionally searching for someone who would understand him and he put himself in a risky situation to do so. More commonly, he describes, sexual experiences start on the internet with older men. This is useful because older gay men have more knowledge of the gay lifestyle and can usher younger gay men into it. For support, Nathan had a counselor at school he could talk to. He recalls that there was a GLBT support group at his high school, but that he feared going to the meetings because people might see him there and his secret would be out. Instead, he often wrote in a journal about his feelings.

Nathan’s description of his adolescence began just before puberty and continued into his early 20’s. The story includes confusion, isolation, and heartache, but it also is a story of resiliency, self-awareness, and growth. Now Nathan is so confident in his own identity that he has developed a hobby as a female impersonator and hopes to participate in Miss Gay Minnesota next year. As a 24 year old man who is now secure in his identity and living a happy and successful life, he declares:

“Put a star next to this. Bold it, star it, underline it [he says to the researcher]. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t be different [than I am now]. I love who I am. I love my lifestyle. I wouldn’t change [for any reason].

Case Study Two, Jason

Jason is a nineteen year old male. He now lives with his partner Nathan (from case study one) in the Northern suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jason grew up in a small town in rural, central Minnesota in a Catholic family.

Jason knew he was gay at about age fifteen. He describes coming to understanding his sexual attractions by noticing they were not what he was expecting:

“I saw guys in the hall at school and thought ‘He’s cute.’ I thought girls were cute too, but not as cute as boys. I was probably 15, maybe younger.”

When asked how it felt to have the realization that he was gay, Jason replies,

“Nervous, shocked, happy... What will people think? Will my family accept me? No one was thinking the same way as me, so ‘What’s going to happen now?’ [The happy part was] I knew I was different than other people, and everyone [in my town] is the same, so it felt good to be a little different... I read research that in a school of 300, like 15% of people are gay. So I was always like, ‘Is he gay? Is he?’ In my town, if you weren’t into hockey, you weren’t nothing. I was afraid to talk because I thought people would figure it out [that I was gay]. So I just sort of sat in my own little corner.”

Jason describes in detail feelings of isolation and invisibility. It was both the most difficult part of his adolescence and his greatest protection from harm.

“No one ever called me names because no one saw who I was. I was just in my

own little corner. [Researcher: "Was that hard?"] It was. [Researcher: "It sounds lonely."] Yeah, I was down a lot and lonely. There's no one to talk to. It's hard to know if you can talk about it. Everyone has friends in middle school, and then in high school everyone drifts off. So I was in my own corner and would talk if someone, like, approached me, but I didn't go to them... Well, [invisibility] it's ok when you are hiding something and you don't want people to know, but the bad thing is being alone your whole life and no one knowing you or who you are."

Jason describes a few incidents of having gum thrown in his hair or names called. His partner Nathan describes the scenario:

"Because he was confused and shy, he doesn't know how to act. So people singled him out. Like when you're drunk and you shouldn't be. You are held back. You act awkward and you worry that people know [what you don't want them to know]. Then they treat you different because of the way you are acting."

Jason began dating men in his late teens, but never peers his own age. He thinks that if he had grown up in a larger city that he may have found other gay teens that were in his own age group, but instead he describes a different scenario.

"The internet is huge [for connecting with other gay men]. A lot of people start [dating other men] there. I started dating men when I was 17, but I hid my age. Age doesn't matter. The first guy I dated was 27, that's a ten year age difference! But we connected... Older men are wiser. They have more experience; they can teach you things."

Also in his late teens, Jason came out to his family. Jason discovered his brother

was also gay when he found his brother's profile on a website for gay men. But they did not talk about it, they just "lived our lives," Jason describes. Jason thinks his mom always knew he was gay because "mothers know all." He describes his coming out process below.

"Not in middle school, but in high school when I started dating guys my mom would see me with guys all the time and not with girls. So she kind of figured it out but didn't understand it. It's hard to explain. Some of my family still doesn't know. Like my grandma is super Christian and my dad's the same. Maybe [she always knew I was gay] but she finally got it at 17. She said, 'I accept it, but I don't understand it.' We've always been close and she said, 'You're my son and I love you no matter what.'... Sometimes she asks what she did wrong, like it's her fault [I'm gay]... You can ask for acceptance, but not approval."

Jason's story is not complete yet. While he feels like he is finished with adolescence, he also acknowledges that he is new to the gay lifestyle and has not finished developing his public identity. Jason has found happiness and fulfillment in his long-term relationship with Nathan. Together they have entered the gay community of the Twin Cities and feel that they are no longer isolated. Jason has also developed a successful hobby as a female impersonator and feels this is a way to foster his developing identity; he is no longer hiding in his "little corner."

Case Study Three, Matt

Matt is a 42 year old man who lives in St Paul, Minnesota. He grew up in the same area in a large, Catholic family. Matt reports that he always knew he was gay, even when he was very young.

"I feel like I had a pretty normal childhood in general. I mean, your experiences add the flavor. But yes I do [feel like I had a pretty normal childhood]. Like I said before, everything comes in stages of understanding. Like when I was a small kid, you know, I knew I was attracted to men, but I had no idea [what that meant]. When you're young you don't understand the sexual part of it, you know? So I had the attraction but I ... wasn't consciously sexual because I wasn't there yet."

Matt describes entering puberty and learning more about sexuality.

"As I entered puberty and all that, which started I think when I was 12. I was young, a young guy. I started becoming more aware. Even in school, even in grade school I remember the 'click' of getting it even though my mother at a young age told me about sex and "intercourse" and she used all the proper terminology and stuff. Until actually one day in school as a young kid, I actually got it, like, 'Oh, so that's what happens!' And kind of, you know, went from that realization to more of the sexual [part] in adolescence. So this is the part where I might delve into different details I guess... but I was kind of a horny boy. Even when I was twelve I was already sexual. It's kind of funny too because it's almost like, my mother knew the difference between, like, say one of my brothers. She knew. She could tell I was more a sexual teenager. But when I was twelve when I was actually started masturbating... And she was at the point where 'Ok, as long as they're just masturbating and not having sex with a girl and getting her pregnant.' Once it started I was... Yeah, it was just ok with her, just fine, but I think she knew. She definitely knew I was somehow more sexual than my

brother.”

Matt describes more about his family dynamic.

“Yep, good Catholic mother... One of the other things that’s kind of important just for my upbringing story, is the fact that my dad was an alcoholic. And he wasn’t so much physically abusive as, you know, verbally and emotionally abusive. So that makes a big difference on your outlook on life. Just the whole family dynamic, the subservient wife that puts up with the alcoholism and never stands up for her children and the raging alcoholic father with the temper tantrums. And that kind of stuff. So that’s a whole part of my upbringing that created who I am. For good or bad [laughs]... So anyway, so I have the whole real perfect Catholic, very, very Catholic background where we always went to church every Sunday. I was the altar boy and did all that stuff.”

Researcher: “How did the alcoholism fit into the “perfect” catholic family picture?”

Matt laughs, “Pretty unperfectly!”

He goes on to give further background information on his family.

“You know my mother was the one who always believed in living your beliefs through action. Where my father believed that if you went to church early then you’re holier than everyone else. He didn’t believe in Vatican II where you actually have to believe what you said.”

Researcher: “So if you get the good spot in the church parking lot, you’re a better Catholic?”

“Exactly. So that was my upbringing. So I was really raised... morally I really got my beliefs from my mother. And I think, I think that played into my having an easier acceptance of my own sexuality because at an early age I really got being honest with yourself and what you really feel is what you need to go with.”

Researcher: “Listen to your heart. Listen to your gut.”

“Right. And part of it has a lot to do with, I know this sounds corny, but a lot of it had to do with one of my favorite books as a kid was the different parables from the old testament and stuff. You know, about Joseph and his brothers, throwing him in the well and that kind of stuff. And knowing how to balance... what the right thing is in your heart. So that’s kind of where I feel a lot my basis for my belief system comes from is being true to your inner conscience and following it. Like with my dad, I always knew he was wrong when he was being abusive and verbally attacking us. I always knew... his fault, not mine. I wasn’t internalizing it saying ‘I was the bad kid.’ I think it might have been different had I not been a youngest child. I had older brothers and sisters to bounce stuff off of too, where if... Think if you were growing up a single kid and you had no one else to say ‘Hey, he’s out of control.’ You know, my dad would come home and we’d all run to our rooms. ‘Dad’s home!’ And everybody would scatter and run to their rooms and close the doors because we didn’t know [what would happen].”

Matt describes the beginning of his sexual identity formation.

“So like I said at a young age I was a little horn dog and I remember there are different depths and points, even at adolescence, where you go through different stages. When I was a young kid I heard some other kids in the neighborhood

joking around and making fun and saying something about going down to where there was a cruisey spot down by the river. And I was totally curious. And so I had no idea where it was... Looking back at it, I was 13. When you're an adolescent you just think you're all grown up. But I was just 13, you know? I was bound and determined one day to find out what this place was. I road my bike for hours. Up and down trying to figure out where. And then I finally figured it out by the vibes and watching people, where it was.

Researcher: "You were hungry for an education."

[Matt laughs] "Very much so. Even though, you know, if my nephew did that I'd be freaking... Well, it was a little scary because you know I'd never been in that kind of cruisey situation before. I want to be clear that I was a very young boy. But I actually, even though I was young, I was always big. I was always the biggest, tallest kid. So people thought I was older. I was always the tallest, biggest kid in school. So, who knows? But it was kind of strange because there was a bunch of guys following me."

At this point in the interview there were technical difficulties with the tape recorder.

Direct quotes were not available for a small segment of the interview.

Matt reports several older men following him at the cruising spot. They may have known his age, maybe not. But he did have his first sexual experience with another man who was about 35 years old or older. Matt was "grossed out by the guy," otherwise he thinks he might have let the sexual experience "go further." Matt went to this place a couple of times. One time his bike got stolen and so he had his mom drive him back to find his bike lock. He's not sure if she knew about the cruising that happened there.

Mostly, he described, he just watched other men interact and learned more about the lifestyle of being a gay man.

Matt tells a story about a time he got really mad at his brother. His brother had attacked him over borrowing a pair of shorts to go jogging. Matt went for a run after the fight and saw a man “cruising” him. Matt said he played along when the man made really obvious moves that he wanted a sexual encounter with him. Matt’s mood after fighting with his brother gave him the adrenaline and confidence to pursue the opportunity: he went back to the man’s apartment and has sex for the first time. Matt reports that the experience was great, but that he knew he had committed the most “heinous carnal sin.” Matt knew he needed to be gay, he needed to have more of these experiences to be fulfilled, but he had always assumed he’d grow up, get married to a woman, and have kids. In an attempt to incorporate this new piece of information of needing to be gay with his previous assumptions, Matt started to think that maybe he was bisexual.

“There was a little bit. You know when I was fifteen, I tried to push it

[homosexuality] away. [I] remember I thought maybe I was bi. So not pushing it

[homosexuality] away entirely, because I still wanted men.”

Matt started to integrate homosexuality into his identity, but he did so privately. This was a time of secrecy and caution.

“I can even remember, even though I knew I was gay pretty much deep down, I would distance myself from people who were easy prey. The people that were so easily attacked. [I flew] under the radar, because of the whole safety factor for myself of wanting to be cool and wanting to be accepted. And it’s such a survival

of the fittest, in adolescence especially. Kids can be so cruel. And so there wasn't any way I was going to give away any sign. I'd even distance myself from kids that clearly seemed they were more effeminate or something. I am lucky, you know. I think it's more difficult for a more naturally effeminate... or maybe it's hard to put it into words. But you know when you see a kid that may be gay, or may be feminine, but that's what we go by. Whatever you call that, that human nature picks up on that, no matter what it is. Especially in adolescence when everything is taken to the extreme."

Researcher: "It's all about fitting in?"

"Right. So I remember in high school one guy wanted to get in my pants [laughs] but I didn't want to go there because it wasn't safe enough. It was too close... doing something with somebody in high school was too dangerous because what if it got out? I do remember hearing about this party where this guy who was gay, who I know is gay now, was drunk and went off in the bushes and [he and another guy] were making out. Other people saw it. So I can't take the risk of being associated with him and being ostracized. Looking back on it now, I understand. When you're going through the process it's a lot more confusing than when it's done and you're looking back on it. But when it's done and you're looking back on it, going through the process is really difficult. I don't think people realize the internal struggle. I mean the fact that you cannot tell a soul in most cases. It's pretty overwhelming to keep that huge of a secret... I think it's important for your inner circle, the people you live with and love and care about. But if you know that they're not going to accept it, like if you grow up in a religious family...

Like how do you know for sure? How do you know if you'll be rejected or not? So I guess that's the question. I'm one of those people that doesn't like to take that risk all the time. If I know I'm gonna be safe I will take the chance [and come out to someone], but if I don't know [how they'll respond]... I guess it's hard to say for most kids. But I knew for myself. I just knew for myself and my family that my parents would never get it. Or they'd never be able to. Somehow [coming out] changes their feelings for me even though I haven't changed who I am. And I think that's the sad part. I think that it's the most overwhelming thing for an adolescent because at that point in time it's so crucial to be part of a team, a network of friends. That is the most important thing. Even when I was an adolescent, the most important thing was my friends, and being cool. To belong. And the last thing you want to do at that age is alienate yourself from anyone. So I think that's the biggest thing, the biggest fear for an adolescent at that age is struggling with that internally. And knowing that they don't want to be ostracized. And I don't really have any regrets about how I did it. You know, I did what I thought would be safest for me. The other thing too is that I went to an all boys Catholic school so I probably would've gotten the shit beat out of me if I'd come out as a gay boy. Because actually I went to a high school where one kid came out as gay and he was incredibly effeminate and it was almost like an abuse magnet. And I never said or did anything bad to him, because I was [gay] too. But, I just knew that I would never want to go through that."

Matt's mom passed away when he was seventeen. Afterwards, his father kicked him and two other siblings out of the house. Matt moved in with a friend temporarily.

He remembers still hiding his sexuality. He hid gay porn and any “evidence” of being gay that he had. Matt knew the situation wasn’t meant to last, so he “begged” his aunt to stay with her until the end of the summer after he turned eighteen.

Then at eighteen Matt got his first apartment and “had to be an adult.” Matt went to a gay bar for the first time around this time. The funny thing, he said, is that he remembers asking his mom about this particular place when he was little. Why were men coming in and out of this place and there was no sign over the door, he wondered. Matt still wonders if his mom knew it was a gay bar or not. But he remembers it felt really weird to see two men dancing together or kissing. In fact, he recalls feeling “grossed out.” A man danced with him and he was grossed out by him too. When he sat down after the dance, the man touched him on the chest and Matt had to leave because he was so uncomfortable. Not long after this experience he started to drink a lot and do a lot of drugs. He went to a lot of clubs and tried to “fit in and be cool.” Looking back, Matt thinks his choices were due to a combination of trying to fit in, dealing with his mom’s recent death, and dealing with brand new adulthood and all its responsibilities.

After fully accepting his gay identity around age nineteen, Matt went through a depression after he realized what this might mean for his life. He did not know what being gay would mean for his expectations of marriage and kids, or his beliefs in Catholicism. At this point he broke down and told one of his sisters that he was gay. Matt reports that she laughed at him; she already knew, she said. Matt isn’t surprised that she had always known. He remembers his sister coming back from San Francisco at one point and after that she wouldn’t let their other siblings say degrading things about gay people around him.

Coming out was a lonely process for Matt. He had expectations that all gay people would accept him and he disconnected from all his straight friends for fear of rejection.

“I told you about getting to that depression when I was 19 and I was realizing that I even had a fairy tale idea of what being gay was. When I was younger, when I first found my little click of friends, I thought things would last like that forever. Just like anything in life I think, how do I put this into words? Just because you know gay people it doesn’t give you a secure dependable network of friends. There’s not any difference when it comes down to it in terms of finding somebody that means something to you and something to your life and how do you maintain that. For me it’s just as difficult for straight people or for gay people. Whether they’re straight or gay. One thing I still always do regret that I didn’t make more of an effort to see if my straight friends would accept me still. Kind of. To a degree. I just went cold turkey and cut them off because I didn’t want to deal with being rejected even though I wonder how it would’ve been, still looking back on it, I still wonder what would’ve happened if I had told them. I still think I probably would’ve been pushed away. I would’ve liked to have given them a chance, but it still would’ve been heart breaking if they would’ve [rejected me]. But I’d like to think they would’ve accepted me for who I am, to a degree. But I know a lot of people say they can, they can’t follow through with... I think the biggest thing that the problem is straight men are taught they can’t be ok if they’re friends with a gay guy.”

Matt still wishes he knew if his mom would accept him and love him, since she passed away before he had a chance to find out. But he believes that she knew all along. He also believes that if she were alive she would have accepted his gay identity, but also “been at church lighting candles and praying for [him] every day to change.” Matt’s mom always told him to pray about his dad’s alcoholism. He tried, but it never stopped his dad from drinking, so he stopped praying for things.

“I’m proud of my Catholic background and going to a Catholic school and how it formed me and questioned what I believe. I mean, I’m proud of the fact that I was part of it, but I don’t really believe in all the details. I don’t feel that they’re necessarily fair. So I can’t really consider myself a Catholic if they won’t even accept me as a human being just because, you know, I need love and touch and affection. You know, I’m human. So basically the Catholic teachings say that you can be human but you can’t have affection. And they kind of go together.”

Matt summarizes the transition he has gone through over time.

“That’s the thing. I totally grew up thinking I was a normal middle class American kid and then realizing ‘Oh my god, I’m one of the minorities,’ how weird.”

Researcher: “I’m an Other.”

“I’m an Other. I’m not in the American dream. And I’m totally in different place in my life now than I was then. And even in adolescence and early adulthood you’re still seeking, want and need, part of a network of friends, part or even the whole fantasy of being with a partner. I’ve come to, I mean, now that I’m an adult I’ve come to a point in my life where it’s not crucial anymore. It mattered

more then. Now I'm just ok. I don't have that network of friends I had when I was younger. I don't have a significant other, and it's perfectly ok. There's a comfort level too, and I think it's a natural progression of younger to older. When you're younger you just need so much more social networking or approval. Where you get to a certain point now and whether people approve or not, it doesn't matter. Where it really matters as an adolescent."

Towards the end of his adolescence, in his early 20's, Matt was physically assaulted due to his sexual identity. Two strangers accosted him and a friend on their way back from a party. They were able to escape due to the good luck of some friends driving by, but another young gay man was not so lucky. The same men that attacked Matt also assaulted another gay man that same night after Matt escaped. He was beaten severely. Matt does not see this event as a defining moment in his life, but as evidence that even with the protection of a large city and a community of other gay men, he is not always safe because of his identity. He sees himself as fortunate, citing countries in which men who come out as gay routinely fear for their lives. Matt feels this risk of violence is still pervasive in small towns and rural areas of the country, particularly in the Southern United States, as well as in high schools across the country.

Matt has settled his identity struggles at this point in his life. He is an advocate for civil rights. He volunteers with high risk youth who need adult guidance and connection. By knowing he is making a difference with these kids, Matt can better accept his plans to not have children. Matt has a set of spiritual beliefs that meet his needs. He also has a large support system of people who accept him and his lifestyle. He hopes that the climate for current adolescents is safer and more accepting, but he has

doubts that this is true.

Case Study Four, Carl

Carl is a 24 year old young gay man who lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was raised in mid-sized town in central Wisconsin in a Catholic family. Carl begins by summarizing his adolescence.

“When I was living it I felt very trapped. I never felt I could really express myself or be who I wanted to be. I felt like a lot of times I was, like, upset, not only about myself but about other people. When I look back on it I think of it as a time of figuring out who I was. But when I look back on it now in retrospect I think about how I have I feel like I have because of my experiences of being gay, that is a part of who I am, and I don’t really think of it as a lot of me, but it is a lot of me. And it’s always there, it’s like a label, it’s like a stigma. And there wasn’t a day growing up and still that I don’t think about I’m gay and what does that mean? So it’s always there. And when I look back on how it was, and look back on what that means, yeah it was a struggle and it was difficult but like I said earlier I really feel privileged. And I always have to remember that I’m alive and I’m breathing and it really wasn’t that tough compared to everything else everybody else had to deal with. I think all too often, like society, people can play the victim card really easily. Like you know I’m black or I’m gay and now I end up being abused by society. And I don’t necessarily see it that way, but at the same time it opens up my eyes to being really accepting of other people and trying to figure out how other people work, which is why I’m a play write. So to answer your question, I look back on my adolescence fondly... So it’s how I look at adolescence, how I

look back on it. I don't think there's anything I would have done differently. Everything in life happens for a reason, and you know it makes me want to do better things."

When asked about the difficult parts of his adolescence that Carl referred to, he describes the teasing, constant vigilance to protect his secret, and coming to know that he is gay.

"High school was fine. I had no difficulties because I had already kind of come to terms with who I am and accepting myself as a gay man. Being a freshman in high school going into junior high, well really in junior high, well middle school really because high school started your sophomore year, I felt that I was like, I had accepted myself and that's when all the teasing stopped. But before that in middle school I was ridiculed about being gay; people would accuse me of it they would taunt me. I can't actually tell if it happens a lot or if just affected me so much that those moments stuck with me. But I remember feeling scared and it made me really angry at times. And you know it says something about stereotypes too because stereotypes in general are very real in some respects. They always start with some truth. So I don't know if people can tell what stereotypes are true, but people could tell that I was gay and I, I knew inside and I always knew since I was born that I was different. When I was a small child I could tell that people were different, I couldn't look people in the eye. I could tell that I was different. I didn't know how to explain it. As I grew up it kind of melded into my sexuality but I remember the moment when I was in homeroom my freshman year of high school and I was like oh I'm gay, that's what it means. I don't know why that moment, but I understood everything."

Carl describes his process of forming his sexual identity. It begins with the moment he knew he was gay.

“Well, I was always attracted to guys. But I never really thought about a label for it at first. I hadn’t really come up with a meaning for it. And I guess my mind kept pushing the label away at first. I think because we’re so conditioned for maybe a normative lifestyle because so many people think there’s only one way to think or we’re not exposed to other ways of living. And so I didn’t find the words to define what it was very easily and that’s when I started to realize I knew what society thought and I started to push it away. For instance, my first time seeing a man kissing another man I was really turned off by it. Umm and I don’t know why per say. I just thought it was weird even though I sort of longed for it. And I was finally able to come to terms with myself in order to be able to sort of accept it and then realized there was really nothing wrong with it. So that moment it was sort of a culmination of all these things of realizing I liked guys, why did I have crushes on my male friends? I’m not gonna lie, the internet had a lot to do with it. Because there are a lot things for kids to go out and explore and try so I, through my friends, I was exposed to pornography on the internet and I would see these images and wonder ‘Why do I want to look at the men and not the woman?’ And I had no reason to explain it and eventually it just clicked. It was really there all the time, I just never had words for it until that moment when I was sitting there in Mr. Anderson’s [name changed for privacy] homeroom. I looked up and I was at a desk by myself and I was like, ‘Oh that’s it.’ From there on it’s just been a slow, slow process of becoming comfortable with it and slowly

letting myself accept what it means to be gay... Actually, this year really for me, 24th year of life, I really feel I've completed that process to a degree. Like I'm totally comfortable with myself. I have no qualms with what I do in public. I should take that back, because I think growing up and living in general no matter who you are you're aware that you're performing. You're aware that there are these societal expectations and there's things you just have to do to function in society and be accepted. I think that the society we live in now, the American life, I feel that I'm realizing now there are a lot of other ways to live and it doesn't have to be prescribed by what a society says. And a society can be wrong and laws can be wrong. And so I kind of live my life by checking with, like am I offending another person? Am I hurting another person? What are the stakes of offending that other person? Like is it a situation where it might open the eyes of that other person? Like in theater, being in theater, learning about different types of seeing things, I know that there are ways to perform plays without going to the theater. Like in live theater where you can, like reality TV, where you have sort of candid camera type stuff where you pull a prank on someone and they don't know it's a prank and in the end they kind of learn something new about themselves they never thought about before. That's kind of what I'm about I guess. So, in that process I don't know if I've completed it but I'm most definitely on my way to really understanding. Like being comfortable with it completely."

Carl explains where his desire to question the status quo and challenge others' world views comes from.

“I think it comes from, really, like being oppressed so to speak. Growing up and wanting to be certain things, living a certain way and being ridiculed about it.

Like, for instance in middle school I always, as a stereotypical gay man I loved the theater. I don't listen to normal pop music. At the time it was very nonpopular way of liking music that other people didn't like and so it was always like, now I can laugh at myself for it, but at the time I was very rigid and serious I realized that like to challenge things because I've never thought the same way.

And I want other people who feel trapped to think the way they want to think and there's nothing wrong with that. Because a lot of times I think things are set up for people in our society... and it happens a lot because certain people want certain things a certain way so they can stay in power. You know what I mean?

It's a power struggle and I'm always about breaking that down. Always.”

Carl's process of identifying as a gay man and accepting this identity begins in early adolescence.

“My story would probably start, as far as adolescence is concerned, probably about 12. For me, I just, it was when I figured out that maybe I was... I didn't know what or why, I just knew I was. That became an exploratory process, like figuring out myself and midway through that like maybe fourteen. Fourteen was when it clicked for me. Like, ‘Oh. I'm gay.’ And then it continued at that time of coming out. I had a lot of friends at that time, I had several relationships with guys. Even now, I don't think it's ended [adolescence]. Maybe, finally now that I'm done with school I finally feel like an adult, but I don't always feel like an adult.”

Carl tells a detailed story of his first relationship with another young man. His friend's name was Bobby [name changed for privacy] and at age fourteen they met and became friends. Carl feared coming out to Bobby and risking ostracism, rejection, and being outed to others against his will. To protect himself, Carl created a fake online identity as a young man from Idaho named "Paul." Over time, "Paul" became friends with Bobby online and eventually came out as gay. Once Bobby supported "Paul" and admitted he was also attracted to other males, then Carl knew he could safely come out to Bobby in their real-life friendship. In the mean time, through a series of events, Bobby discovered that "Paul" was really Carl. Bobby and Carl began a sexual relationship at this time that lasted off and on through high school. Bobby, however, would also date girls and maintain a straight public persona. At one point, this was too much for Carl and he became hurt "like a jealous lover." Also during this time, Bobby cut Carl out of his life because Carl was openly out to some of their mutual friends in high school. Bobby temporarily rejected Carl for fear of others learning about his sexuality. Carl came out to his sister simply because he needed support and someone to talk to and he needed her to understand the full situation.

About two years later Carl had a fight with a friend named Allison [name changed for privacy]. Allison had a crush on Carl and was obsessed with him. After Carl explained to her that he was gay, Allison told several other people. They were fighting because she had outed him and he no longer wanted her in his life. Allison threatened to hurt herself, so Carl contacted Allison's mom to warn her. Allison's mom verbally attacked Carl about his homosexuality in the phone call. At this point, Carl recalls:

"Eventually hung up with her and then I had these really big feelings of guilt

because I was like, other people's parents know about me but my own parents don't know about me? Like my mom has always been one of my really good friends and I could tell her anything. So I felt at that time had to just come clean and be honest, you know? Like, she's my friend, I want her to trust me. And I lied to her for a couple of years. So I remember we were in the back hallways of my house and she was like, "how was the phone call?" And I was like, "oh fine" and she said "that's good." But I said "there's something else I need to tell you though." And she's like "what. Is it a money issue?" And I said "no." And she said "is it a girl issue?" And I said "kind of." And we drove around the city and I just told her everything. The weirdest thing about that though is I came out my senior year of high school because I wanted to get a taste of it before I went to the real world, to college. And I was so worried that something was going to happen to me, but when I look back, after middle school was over, after I just admitted who I was, everything was over. It solved a lot of problems, I mean I know it didn't. Like there are times something will happen and I'll feel kind of vulnerable, but for the most part that doesn't happen. I came out my senior year but my dad didn't know until right before I went to college; I never told him... I thought that it was something he should know, so I took him out to dinner and I was like, "there's something I should tell you." And he's like "what? You can never go out to dinner with your dad without something being wrong?" And I was like, "kind of." And the weird thing was he was just like my mom. He reacted just like my mom. He was like, "is it money?" And I was like "no." "Is it a girl?" And I said "kind of." He said, "ok." But he was more quick to get it

though. But when I told him, he sat there, kind of like I am now, chewing food, and he sat there thinking for awhile and then he said, “well, whatever makes you happy.” And he’s ok with it to this day, like one of my boyfriends I brought home from college, who I’m not dating now. I usually don’t tell him when I’m dating someone, like I tell my mom, you know, but I tell him what he needs to know I guess.”

Carl is a successful, passionate young man who has already earned two undergraduate degrees. He plans to continue his education in the next year or two at graduate school. He also plans to continue to challenge peoples’ world views and to help them “learn things they didn’t already know about themselves” through personal interactions and with his plays.

Chapter V: Discussion

As Donalek (2004) suggests, providers have an obligation in the helping professions to get the deep meaning of lived experiences of clients. Phenomenological research aids the endeavor to gain insight into clients' lives for both sensitive and effective practice. A phenomenological study was conducted in which four participants explored and created meaning of their experiences of being gay male adolescents. Interviews were presented as case studies and then coded for significant topics. A presentation of the essential themes is discussed based on the researcher's interpretations of the participants' experiences. Lastly, a description of potential future research questions is discussed.

Topics

Interview notes and transcriptions were coded for recurring topics across interviews. Each of the topics listed below was selected based on several things. First, the topic either fit the existing literature on gay male youth or it may be new to the literature. Second, the topic was perceived by the researcher to have some significance to one or more participants of the study. Or third, the topic was repeated across interviews and appeared to be a noteworthy piece of the gay male experience. These topics include "bisexuality," "coming out," "current adolescents," "depression," "pornography," "religion and spirituality," "searching for connection," "searching for knowledge," "secrecy and fear," "self destructive coping," "sexual experiences," "sexual mentoring," and "societal messages." Examples of each topic are pulled from interviews with the participants.

Bisexuality. Bisexuality was discussed in all four interviews. Nathan and Matt

both describe a point in their sexual identity formation when they knew they needed and wanted male companionship and male sexual experiences for fulfillment in their lives, but this piece of information did not fit with their expectations for the future. Matt, for example, anticipated growing up, getting married, and having children with a woman. Both men experienced a time in which they wondered if this new piece of information meant that they were bisexual. They each dated women during this time and continued to try both homosexual and heterosexual experiences.

Jason and Carl, however, did not go through a stage of bisexuality. Neither man had the urge to date women or experiment with physical intimacy with women. The literature tends to agree with the experience of all four participants. Some sexual minority youth do go through a phase of bisexuality on the road to assuming a homosexual identity and others do not.

Coming Out. Each participant had a coming out story. The stories indicated that coming out as a gay male is a process of many choices, risks, and self-doubts. The literature seems to fit with the participants' descriptions: coming out is about telling the people in your life about your sexuality and taking on a public identity that includes homosexuality.

Each of the four participants had homosexual experiences years before coming out. Also before coming out to others they each fully took on the gay identity for themselves. The participants each had similar stories of coming out. The first piece of coming out was telling people in their lives that they are gay.

The second piece of coming out was assuming the public identity that the literature talks about. The difference between participants, however, was the way they

discussed the milestone of “being out.” For Nathan, he came out to people in his life in his late teens, but he was “out” once his family knew he was gay and when he started openly dating other men. Jason did not come out to his mom in a pronounced way. Instead, he let her figure it out along the way and then answered her questions honestly when she asked. He considers himself “out,” but will not tell the “super Christian” members of his family that he is gay. Matt considered himself “out” after moving out of his family home into his own apartment, openly dating men, and being part of the gay community. Carl came out to many friends during his teen years, but his milestone for being truly “out” was after both his mother and his father knew he was gay the summer before leaving for college.

The literature does not discuss the decision making pieces of coming out such as when to do it, who to tell, or why. The literature describes coming out to individual people such as friends and family and coworkers, and there is discussion on the process of developing a public identity. The literature does not, however, discuss what the complexities of the difference between “coming out” to people and “being out.”

Current Adolescents. Since the participants of the study were not currently adolescents, though some were on the cusp of exiting this time period, each participant discussed the climate for current adolescents. Nathan is highly concerned that schools are not doing enough to educate young people on safe sex and that, instead, they only teach about the dangers of drugs. Matt fears that current adolescents are still hiding in fear of negative consequences, especially in the Southern United States and in highly religious communities. Jason reports that there are no support groups or discussion on GLBT issues in rural areas of the Midwest. Nathan agrees and comments that though

there are some youth agencies available and other safe places for GLBT youth, they are mostly in urban settings and service homeless youth. The suburban teen with no transportation cannot access these places and does not feel comfortable there. These three men hope for change for today's youth. Carl is more optimistic. He thinks that with each passing generation, GLBT teens are safer and more accepted.

Depression. Each participant described battling depression with feelings of isolation and loneliness. The Depression seemed come at two distinct points in their narratives. First, Nathan and Jason describe experiencing depression when they could not tell anyone in their lives about their sexuality or their inner turmoil due to the fear of rejection. Feeling unsure about their sexuality and not being able to discuss it with those they love caused additional pain and heartache for Nathan and Matt.

Matt specifically reports a period of depression towards the end of his adolescence once he had accepted his sexual identity. This was the second and more surprising description of depression. It began when he understood what being gay may mean for his life and his future. In his eyes, being gay meant the promise of continued battles with prejudice, secrecy and fear as well as the disappointment of not getting his expected "all American" lifestyle with a house, a wife, children, and a dog.

The literature hypothesizes that many GLBT adolescents experience this first type of depression that is directly related to isolation, confusion, self-doubt, low self-esteem, hopelessness, and helplessness. The second type of depression that Matt described in which he felt overwhelmed by the lifestyle he was born to lead, this is not explicitly discussed in the current literature. Instead, the literature seems to describe depression lifting once a young person accepts their identity, receives support from others and leads

their life openly. This depression which arises after a person fully accepts their sexual minority status is an area that deserves further attention.

Pornography. All four participants described watching pornography early in their adolescence. They were often first exposed to heterosexual porn through friends or the internet. Nathan, Matt, and Carl all describe the same observation in themselves from an early age: they were more interested in watching the men in the videos than the women. For Nathan and his best friend at the time, they used the pornography as an educational tool on how to be sexual with other men. In fact, the porn inspired them to have anal sex for the first time so they could “fully experience the lifestyle.” Matt used the pornography more as a sexual release than as an educational tool, but recalls being terrified that others would find his “evidence” of being gay.

The literature does not discuss pornography as an educational tool for gay youth, though there is a vein of feminist literature that discusses the harm of heterosexual men using pornography for sex education. This phenomenon needs further exploration in future research.

Religion and Spirituality. All four participants were raised in Christian homes that taught moral objections to homosexuality. This similarity between the four participants was not intentional during participant selection, but it may be due to the geographic location or other demographic parallels such as Catholicism. Nathan, Matt, and Carl all expressed gratitude in their interviews for some of the teachings and morals they learned as children. None of the men, however, agree with any religious teachings that condemn their sexual identities or their homosexual lifestyles. To incorporate pieces of their religious upbringing without accepting condemnation for who they are as

individuals, these men have all compromised to find forms of spirituality that do agree with more of their beliefs and affirm their identities. Matt and Carl do not identify with specific religions, but they do have spiritual beliefs that guide their decisions and bring them peace. Nathan remains confused about religion and is looking for guidance. He cites that all he hears from the media is that the Christian church hates gay people but then at Gay Pride Parade half the floats are sponsored by churches who claim to be open to GLBT members. For now he has taken on Kabala as his religion, but he still seeks a spiritual community that accepts all of him for who he is. Jason says that the anti-gay hate messages he has received from the Christian church have made him an atheist. He is not sure he will ever return to religion.

The available literature seems to agree with this picture: many GLBT youth want a relationship with the divine but pervasive messages of hate towards sexual minorities seem to push them away or leave them confused. Little research is available on the spirituality that gay men find for themselves when traditional religions seem unfitting or unwelcoming.

Searching for Connection. The narratives of the four participants each had several examples of the young men searching for connection in their lives. Sometimes this was a helpful and successful method of coping with a stressful time in their lives. Nathan found other young men going through similar issues, as did Carl. Jason, Nathan, and Carl all found people to talk to online. Their isolation, however, also lead these young men to search for connections in dangerous places. Matt had several anonymous sexual experiences with much older men, as did Nathan and Jason. Even though it felt unfulfilling, Nathan and Matt both tried to date women in order to have connection. Each

man described hiding his identity so that he could maintain connections with friends and family. The impression that came through after comparing the four narratives is that the adolescence of a gay male is a lonely and secretive time in which he wants and needs love and connection with others. He simultaneously is not fulfilled by the connections he has because no one knows the “real” him, and terrified of losing the relationships that do exist if people find out he is gay.

The literature discusses the chronic stress of loneliness and isolation for gay adolescents, but the complexity of feeling unfulfilled in relationships because the friend of family member does not know about the gay teen’s sexuality has not been explored in previous research.

Searching for Knowledge. Though not a primary theme in the narratives, an interesting phenomenon that came up in the participants’ stories was the report that throughout their adolescence the men felt they did not have enough information on homosexuality. Instead, most of their information and misinformation came through mass media and school yard conversations. All of them desire more information and role models for current adolescents. Research literature in the field of education encourages schools to produce more information for sexual minorities, but therapy literature does not discuss the issue of accurate information.

The narratives of these four participants tell us that young gay men are getting mixed and confusing messages about homosexuality, along with many negative and hateful messages. The narratives also tell us that very little accurate, factual information is available to contradict the homophobic messages.

Secrecy and Fear. This topic was mentioned so often in the participants’ stories

that it was also interpreted by the researcher to be one of the main themes of gay male adolescence. Each participant describes his budding sexuality as a “secret,” something that must be kept safe and hidden. Each young man was afraid that if his secret got out, he would be ostracized, rejected, harassed, even hated. Not only did they fear this negative reaction from peers, but from friends, family, loved ones, and society in general.

Part of developing their identities was developing them in secret and away from the support and love of others. Carl alone out of the four participants was able to come out to several friends around him much earlier in this adolescence. His is a story of support and open mindedness, but even he went to great lengths to protect who had information about his sexual identity.

All four of these young men broke their secrecy out of necessity: a broken heart that needed support, fear of others revealing the secret, guilt that the people who know them the best do not know one of the most important things, no longer being able to deny who they were to themselves or anyone else. Keeping the secret seems to cause much emotional stress. It creates a state of hyper-vigilance and monitoring. Revealing the secret seems to offer much relief as the young men were able to let go of their fears. Not every reveal was a success, however, and it caused much pain when their fears of rejection came into being.

The literature does talk about the unique stress of developing a homosexual identity in a homophobic culture and how this can lead to isolation and invisibility, similar to the participants’ experiences. Carrying a secret of such weight can be overwhelming for a young person, particularly if the individual does not have one or two allies to whom they can reveal it. More research ought to be done on the complexity of

this secrecy and how it might be related to isolation, self-esteem, coping behaviors, or even the process of coming out.

Self-Destructive Coping. These four participants have success stories compared with GLBT youth who drop out of school, runaway, become homeless, prostitute for money, or commit suicide. Some of the participants did participate in risky behaviors however. Nathan and Jason both had anonymous sexual experiences with much older men in order to cope with their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Nathan had sexual experiences at a very early age in an attempt to understand more about what he was going through. Matt also had risky sex with much older men to deal with loneliness. He also turned to drugs and alcohol in his late adolescence to cope with depression, loneliness, and fear of an unknown future.

Carl, on the other hand, did not report any sort of negative coping behaviors. Again, Carl was also the participant with the most unconditional support from friends and family from an earlier age than the other participants. Carl also had less moral conflict with homosexuality than the other participants were raised to have. He was in a larger city that provided more anonymity. Carl also seems to have personality characteristics that support open-mindedness, confidence, charisma, and resilience; he is a natural people-person who gets along well with everyone. In this way, Carl may have been less likely to reach for extreme coping behaviors because he had success with more positive ones.

The literature discusses the extreme situations of abuse and threat to physical and mental safety that often lead GLBT youth to self-destructive behaviors, as well as the personality characteristics that may help one individual cope more successfully than

another. The exact relationship, however, is not as clear. For example, Jason and Nathan do not describe excessive drug or alcohol use like Matt, why not? Why didn't Jason runaway from his small rural town to a big city like some isolated sexual minority youth? With the sexual availability of willing men, why didn't Matt prostitute himself when another individual might have? The complexity of coping with the unique stress of developing a minority sexual identity needs more attention in future research.

Sexual Experiences. Each participant describes several sexual experiences as pivotal moments in their sexual identity development. First, each participant mentioned seeing pornography and noticing that their response was not what they expected or what their friends may have been feeling: they were more interested in watching the men in the videos than the women. Early sexual experimentation helped several of the participants acknowledge that they needed and wanted more sexual contact with other males to be fulfilled. Sexual experiences with women confirmed similar feelings: they did not need or want more sexual contact with females to be fulfilled.

All four participants made it clear that being gay is not just about sex, but the sexual side of their identities was developed through these experiences. The literature discusses sexual experimentation and sexual experiences as phases of the coming out process, but does not go into detail on how these events may impact the adolescent. Matt, for example, describes feeling grossed out, thrilled, and terrified of his "heinous carnal sin" after different sexual experiences. Further exploration is needed in this area, particularly surrounding the riskier sexual experiences of youth.

Sexual "Mentoring." Three of the four participants described relationships and sexual encounters during their youth with much older men. The participants present

these experiences like mentorship relationships in which they were ushered into the gay lifestyle by older, wiser men who understand their feelings. Even with the participants' perceptions to provide the context, the encounters they describe are usually adult male predators cruising parks and internet websites for young, adolescent boys. More research is needed in this area to understand the full, complex nature of these encounters.

Nathan and Jason report that older men know more and are more experienced, they can "teach" things to younger men. Matt did not describe the experience quite the same, though he did acknowledge he wanted to learn things from the older men. For him, it merely seemed that older adult men were the ones that were sexually available. Carl, however, had none of these experiences and had not heard of such experiences for gay youth. All of them acknowledged that the internet provided access to older, more experienced men. Several of these sexual encounters posed risks to the participants' health, danger to their physical and emotional safety, and even included predatory behaviors from older men. The participants, however, do not interpret them as such. Their descriptions of the encounters tended to minimize the dangers and the potential victimization. Matt does acknowledge though, that he would not want his niece or nephew going to public sex locations like he did when he was twelve and thirteen years old. More information is needed on this topic as the literature does not seem to have other reports of this phenomenon.

Societal Messages. All four participants had very clear descriptions that a large, powerful segment of "society" is against gay men, homosexuality, and gay lifestyles. These messages came from friends, family, teachers, peers, the news, the media, songs, movies, TV shows, classrooms, churches, and many other places. The messages came in

the form of hate speech and cruel humor as well as simple neglect. Each participant seemed to get the same message from society: being gay is not ok, something is wrong with it.

These messages cause much distress during a time of life when being different is the worst offense a young person can make. The literature describes cultural homophobia as one of the unique stressors for gay male youth, but it is not clear how these messages specifically interact with self-image, self-esteem, coping strategies, or other areas of functioning. Again, more research is needed to better understand how cultural messages affect young gay men.

Themes

After describing the significant topics from the participant interviews the topics were interpreted by the researcher to fit within three repeating themes. The themes are not meant to give a conclusive picture of gay male adolescence, but to summarize some general perceptions from the study. These themes fit not only the individual stories of each participant, but the collection of interviews together. These themes do not represent the entirety of each person's experience, but a glimpse into some of the noticeable patterns amongst the group. In addition, these themes are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are often inclusive, overlapping, and difficult to pull apart from one another.

The literature on gay male adolescence also seems to have these themes of identity formation and sexuality development. It appears that these are central to the experience of gay male adolescence not only in the eyes of gay men, but in the eyes of the research community as well. Issues of diversity for gay male adolescents are usually addressed in the chronic stress and adversity a young gay adolescent faces. Comparisons

to heterosexual youth are not often made in the literature; information on how adolescence is experienced similarly or differently for gay youth and straight youth is not readily available. Sameness and difference comparisons between sexual majority youth and sexual minority youth would help us understand the complexity of both experiences.

Identity. The interviews with the participants asked them to describe their adolescence. Each participant's description of their adolescence included stories about developing their identities. Continuous questions about "Who am I?" Or "What does it mean to be gay?" Each story included examples of searching for new information about what it means to be gay or what it would be like to experience pieces of the gay lifestyle. All of the participants' experiences included avoiding the discovery of their identities by other people. Their sexual identities were the one thing they were searching for and the one thing that was most dangerous to find and reveal. Each new moment or experience was one more clue on the search for who they are and who they wanted to be. But these moments were confusing and frightening because they revealed information that didn't always fit with their expectations. Sexual identity is not the whole identity for these men, but it was one of the most significant pieces of their development as it was constantly at the fore front of their experience.

Sexuality. Stories of sexual experiences, sexual awakenings, experimentation, and longings were described throughout the interviews as pivotal moments of understanding. Each experience taught the young men something new about the gay lifestyle, the world, and themselves. Some used sex to connect, some used it to rebel, others to explore. Sexuality is a vital and meaningful piece to any young person's development and to every romantic relationship. With a minority sexuality, these young

men had to discover a difficult and often mysterious piece of themselves with very little guidance or information to go on. It appears to place them at high risk for sexual abuse and exploitation by older men. In fact, they often they only had their own feelings and attractions to guide them. Clearly, developing sexual identity is very much connected to sexuality, but the theme of sexuality was significant for each of these men in other areas too. Sexuality had much to do with the adolescents' self-image and relationships too. It would be interesting to know if this developmental task of adolescence plays as much of a key role in the lives of sexual majority youth.

Sameness and Difference. One detail of the interviews continued to add richness and flavor to the narratives: each participant frequently described sameness and difference. They were able to see the complexity of their experiences by noticing when an experience felt the same as the majority, normative culture and when something felt different from the majority culture. For example, each participant remembers "being different" from an early age, but not knowing that it was related to sexuality. Each participant described watching pornography with friends or self-pleasuring to erotic material. This was presented as something that was the same as other young men. The difference was explained that each of them was more interested in watching the men in the videos than the women. The participants describe sameness in difference not only between themselves and heterosexual male adolescents, but compared to adolescents in general. Nathan describes how no one can really know what love is at a young age, but they all think they do when they are experiencing it; everyone experiences a broken heart. This example of sameness makes his story more understandable for someone who is not a sexual minority.

This theme seems significant for several reasons, but from the experience of the participants, it is interesting to note that a lot of energy was spent at this time in their lives noticing how they fit and how they did not fit the dominant culture. Adolescence is a time when young people try to fit in and non-normative behaviors are prohibited with the threat of social consequences (i.e. rejection, teasing, etc.). To know that they are different than their peers may mean there will be negative consequences for that difference. But to also know that that they are human, and that they are the same in all the ways that matter, seems to leave these young men feeling persecuted.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to bear witness to participants' experiences of being a gay male adolescent. The importance of this study is to contribute to research that seeks to reverse the years of minimization and neglect of this social minority. By attending to this group's experiences, the researcher has brought the voices of gay male adolescents in to the current body of literature. Lastly, studies that add to current knowledge on the subject of sexual minority youth support systemic change for adolescents and families. Community education, awareness among helping professionals, and education of MFTs will challenge assumptions, create new knowledge, and motivate social change for this marginalized group.

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Appendix A

Pre-Prepared Interview Questions

Opening question:

- How would you describe your adolescence? What was it like for you?

Questions for each participant:

- What do you want people to know about what it is like to be a gay adolescent?
- How has your perspective on your adolescence changed over time?
- How do you think society sees gay adolescent males? And how do you think that may fit or not fit how you see yourself?
- Are there things you want to make sure we talk about today?

Potential follow up questions:

- Why were you interested in participating in this study?
- What are the costs and benefits of being a gay adolescent?
- Considering less than 10% of teens are gay, what do you think it means that one in three teens who commit suicide is gay, or that almost half of homeless teens are gay? What is your reaction to those statistics?
- If you think of your adolescence as a story, with a beginning, a middle, an end, with heroes, villains, and a plot, how does your story unfold?
- What challenges did you face in your life as a result of being gay?
- How did you cope with those challenges?
- How were challenges in your teen years different than or the same as now?
- How has the situation for gay teens improved and deteriorated since you were an adolescent?