

Coming Out in Rural America: Stories of Disclosure and Identity

By

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the gender norm construction process within rural communities and the possible association it might have on non-heterosexuals' sexual identity formation. The study also examined the decision-making processes non-heterosexuals tend to use when disclosing their sexuality. In addition, the study explored the expected and actual reactions these individuals perceived when "coming out" to others. The research exploring the communication of rural non-heterosexuals is growing, but still sparse. This research aimed to help to fill that gap. Extant literature reveals the possible and probable difficulties facing non-heterosexuals in small-town environments due to the culture's emphasis on the continuation of the family and hyper-masculinity norms. The social support literature also reveals the importance of care, acceptance, and positive reactions to disclosure at the time non-heterosexuals come out. Interview data was collected from 25 participants and a thematic analysis revealed that non-heterosexuals sought their own LGBTQ identity in a heteronormative community, often using external resources to educate themselves. Participants also reported a large number of expected negative reactions that influenced the manner in which they disclosed their sexuality. Theoretical and practical implications arising from this study are offered, as well as a discussion of future directions and limitations of this research.

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction and Rationale**

When my brother came out to me via an emotional text message in October 2011, I was initially stunned. While life had introduced me to sexual minority friends and acquaintances, or those individuals whose sexual orientation was something other than heterosexuality, I had yet to have a family member reveal his or her sexuality as anything other than heterosexual. The researcher in me immediately wanted to know as much as possible about his experience, but the primary question I asked him was, “When did you know?” He said he had known since puberty but for some reason had waited until he was 21 to come out. This begged the question, “Why?”

My suspicion was that it had much to do with the community we were raised in. At a staggering population of just over 2500 for the entire county (“State and County Quick Facts,” 2013), our childhood was spent in a very rural, conservative community. Between our two high school classes, we averaged an enrollment of approximately 34 students. In addition, the community was quite conservative politically. Did my brother refrain from coming out due to fear that his friends and family would not accept him; that we would not support him? This question ultimately became the springboard for this thesis project.

The literature and research on homosexuality and other forms of non-heterosexuality is prevalent, but research specifically focusing on rural non-heterosexuals is limited, as most studies tend to focus on LGBTQ individuals in urban settings (Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2008). Research often depicts rural communities as somewhat hostile in that they might outright reject sexual orientations or presentations other than heterosexuality, though they often pride themselves on being a friendly and polite community (Kazyak, 2012). This is confounded by a growing use of non-heterosexual language in a negative or hurtful fashion. For example, the



word “gay” is now slang for “lame” or “dumb” (Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007). Hall and LaFrance (2012) found that words like “gay” or “faggot” are more likely used with distinctly negative connotations, specifically among highly masculine individuals. Other research indicates that these words are some of the most insulting among adolescents (Plummer, 2001). For those reasons, it comes as no surprise that sexual minorities in rural environments may hide their sexuality in an effort to avoid being ostracized by the community (Annes & Redlin, 2012).

In early 2013, many Facebook profile pictures were changed to the Human Rights Campaign’s equality sign and sections of the Defense of Marriage Act were declared unconstitutional. Currently, the Supreme Court has yet to rule on the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry on a national level, but the court has ruled that those couples that are married are entitled to federal benefits (Liptak, 2013). However, there are court cases challenging those amendments in nearly every state that currently bans same-sex marriage, (“Marriage in the courts,” 2014). In the 2014 National Football League’s draft, the St. Louis Rams chose the first openly gay professional football player, Michael Sam. Celebrities, such as actresses Jodie Foster and Ellen Page, along with newscaster Robin Roberts, are coming out with increasing frequency. It would seem that the time is ripe for additional scholarship in the field of sexuality, specifically the interaction of geography and sexuality (Kazyak, 2011).

This study utilized data gathered from 25 in-depth, qualitative interviews in an effort to explore the experience of these individuals as they process and make sense of their own sexuality and how that interacts with, and is influenced by, the rural culture of their community. The interviews explored the community the respondent grew up in, their sexual narrative history, and their expectations of family and community reactions to disclosure of their sexuality.

Before detailing the methodology of the project and the associated findings, the existing literature and research on the interaction of rurality, social support, and sexuality is reviewed. Specifically, Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant literature, while Chapter Three details the method employed in this project. Chapter Four provides a summary of results, and Chapter Five offers a discussion and interpretation of the results, along with the practical implications highlighted in this research. Chapter Five also provides ideas for future research, along with a set of limitations relevant to this particular research project.

## Chapter Two:

### Review of Literature

#### **Building the Rural Community**

The introduction of this project gave a cursory overview of rural communities, but in order to comprehend the reasons that these less-populated locales would be hostile or “intolerant” to sexual minority individuals, it is important to examine the manner in which these communities are structured around the continuation of family and masculinity shown through physical toughness and emotional stoicism (Kazyak, 2012).

Boswell (1980) suggests that rural communities are structured around kinship and family. “Traditional” family values of fidelity and heterosexuality are heavily emphasized, the latter in an effort to continue the family line. These family values also tout the importance of traditional gender roles where the men work and the women keep house (Kazyak, 2012). These types of cultures also resist change in an effort to preserve traditional values and community ideals (McMahan, 2011). To that end, individuals who run counter to the culture (i.e., those who threaten the community values) are pressured to conform (Boswell, 1980). Non-heterosexuals surely threaten the social order of rural-based communities that tend to embrace traditional family values, as they herald social change and their presence would usually not be welcomed by heteronormative society.

Research on rural non-heterosexuals has revealed that there is more than a simple clash of values. Often those who are not heterosexual in a rural environment face a lack of community support, experience different civil rights than their peers, and perceive a general homophobic attitude from the population of these communities (Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2008; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2005). While not to downplay the

experience of coming out in an urban environment, research indicates that there is often a disparity in the amount of resources available to these rural persons who often turn to the media or the internet in an effort to educate themselves (Gray, 2009).

Savin-Williams (2005) indicates that these conservative areas may cause individuals to reject “gay” as an identity as it is “unwise or imprudent” (p. 16). It is conceivable that these individuals may accept their own sexuality, but feel as though their current space would not accept them, so they put off disclosing until they are among like-minded peers (Savin-Williams, 2005). Due to this possibility, many rural non-heterosexuals will behave in ways that disguise or downplay their sexuality in order to blend in as a matter of “survival” (Oswald & Culton, 2003, p. 75). Specifically for men, such behaviors usually include strategic portrayals of components of masculinity such as toughness or strength. Some non-heterosexual individuals use excessive smoking as a way to bolster their appearance of ruggedness or toughness (Pachankis, Westmaas, & Dougherty, 2011) while others may go to extreme lengths to appear physically fit and/or desirable in order to increase their sexual appeal (Sumerau, 2012). These masking behaviors are all an effort to enact some aspect of the gender norms of the individual’s community.

### **Common Gender Norms**

Research depicts common gender norms in a very traditional sense. Broadly speaking, sources agree that masculinity tends to be representative of the hard working, tough, physically strong, and heterosexual male (Kazyak, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). On the other hand, femininity tends to be representative of the soft, domestic, and heterosexual female (Kazyak, 2012; Lucas & Steimel, 2009). It is interesting to note that, in both instances, heterosexuality is an essential, “normal” characteristic. However, in more provincial areas, heterosexuality, while still a component of masculinity and femininity, takes on additional importance.

**Masculinity.** The first component of traditional rural masculinity is that of being a hard worker and being able to provide for one's family by embodying a good work ethic (Kazyak, 2012; Lucas & Steimel, 2009). According to McMahan (2011), "Men are expected to be the breadwinners and unequivocal leaders of the home, and doing so is an affirmation of masculinity" (p. 53). Indeed, the components of masculinity are inextricably tied together. For instance, a man is supposed to be a hard worker in order to provide for his wife and children. Yet if he does not adhere to the heterosexual component of masculinity or have children, then what need is there to be a provider? Furthermore, a business owner who employs others so that they may provide for their families is also seen as masculine in that the owner is providing for the community at large (Kazyak, 2012).

The second aspect of masculinity is toughness or a resistance to danger. The fact that some masculine jobs (e.g., firefighting, operating heavy machinery, raising animals) sometimes requires the worker to put the job before their safety showcases this toughness. These masculine individuals often exhibit another aspect of toughness in that they practice "emotional restraint" (Lucas & Steimel, 2009, p. 322). In an ethnographic study of tavern patrons in the Midwest, McMahan (2011) found that as economic concerns threaten the hard working/provider component of masculinity, individuals turn more often to this idea of toughness by participating in fights and physical confrontations to establish more, or repair, lost masculinity. As McMahan (2011) noted, "In Heartland and other rural communities, displays of toughness and the ability to fight remain benchmarks by which masculinity is measured, and have become increasingly critical as other components of masculinity are challenged" (p. 53). In order to manifest this toughness idea in a simpler, less physical way, non-heterosexual men may be inclined to adopt certain negative health behaviors (e.g., smoking cigarettes, engaging in unnecessary roughness)

in an effort to increase their outward masculinity as these types of behaviors are often characteristic of “rugged” or “fearless” individuals (Pachankis, Westmaas, & Dougherty, 2011).

The next aspect of the masculine individual is physical strength. In Lucas and Steimel’s (2009) examination of women in coalmines, one of the biggest concerns of the male coworkers they found was that the female miners would not be strong enough to complete the job. Likewise, in his ethnography, McMahan (2011) found that rural tavern customers partake in fighting to establish dominance and masculinity by physically subjugating others. The willingness to fight and the ability to win the fight are admired characteristics among these hyper-masculine bar-goers. As McMahan (2011) notes, “Winners [of fights] are praised for their ability to fight, whereas those who lose or back down from a fight are ostracized” (p. 56). In other words, dominating another, or proving one’s physical superiority, is the high epitome of traditional rural masculinity.

The final piece of masculinity, and the one of primary interest to this project, is that of heterosexuality. This aspect is tied to the provider component and contributes to individuals enacting toughness and physical strength. The underlying premise of heterosexuality is that a man’s virility or ability to continue the family line is tied to his manhood. This “hegemonic ideal” is discussed throughout the literature on masculinity (e.g., see Pachankis, Westmaas, & Dougherty, 2011; Sumerau, 2012; Weber, 2012) and proposes that individuals will turn to these idealized notions of “what a man is” to receive direction on how to behave in order to “pass” as more masculine.

For example, in a study done of teen fathers, Weber (2012, p. 901) found that interviewed participants drew upon sociocultural norms of masculinity in order to lessen their perceived stigma “while still maintaining their reputations and identities as ‘good guys.’” Further, one of

Weber's (2012, p. 907) other findings was that participants expressed a belief that their male sexuality was "uncontrollable," whereas the sexuality of their child's mother was a choice. Other research reveals that while homosexual men may cast aside the heterosexual notion of masculinity, they will often compensate by focusing on one of the other aspects, such as strength or toughness (Pachankis et al., 2011; Sumerau, 2012).

In rural areas, as described above, the continuation of the family is emphasized and, by association, so is heterosexuality. Combining that lineage continuation with the toughness and strength expected of rural area masculine individuals reveals a rural culture that prizes hard work and individualism (Boswell, 1980). Since depictions of non-heterosexual men stereotypically include more feminine aspects, often they find rural communities unwelcoming or hostile, due to the notion that "sissy boys" and "faggots" are un-masculine (Hall & LaFrance, 2012). Therefore, prizing toughness might be inhospitable to non-heterosexual individuals (Kazyak, 2011) if they did not exhibit these traits of masculinity.

**Femininity.** On the other side of the masculinity coin is femininity, which the literature has characterized as soft, domestic, and heterosexual (Gray, 2009; Kazyak, 2012; Lucas & Steimel, 2009). First, while masculine individuals are characterized as tough and physically strong, feminine individuals are portrayed as soft and demure. Women who are tiny, cute, and stylish are seen as more feminine, while those who can operate heavy machinery and can get dirty are viewed as un-feminine (Lucas & Steimel, 2009). Women in rural and blue-collar areas are often viewed as needing protection from the evil world, unable to care for themselves, which further emphasizes the softness of femininity (Kazyak, 2012). Women who do not adhere to this soft, reserved component, that is women who are hard, tough, and more masculine, are often described as "butch" instead of "femme" or feminine (Kazyak, 2012, p. 833).

The second aspect of femininity is that of domesticity or that a woman is supposed to find a man, settle down, and have children (Gray, 2009). This is the flip side of the masculine provider/hard worker aspect. Specifically, among rural communities, taking “care of the home and family are important routes to achieve femininity” (Kazyak, 2012, p. 831) and this ties directly into the final and broadest aspect of the traditional feminine role.

Much like masculinity, feminine individuals are expected to exhibit heterosexuality as a component of themselves so that they may continue the line of kinship. As Kazyak (2012) notes, heterosexuality is one of the foundations of rural femininity, and combined with the heavy emphasis on domesticity, rural women can embrace more masculine behaviors like farm work without social stigma. Therefore, lesbians in more rural locales may not face the same hostility that plagues rural gay men. Non-heterosexual women, often depicted as more masculine than their heterosexual peers, may not face the same immediate prejudice due to the acceptance in rural communities of women being outdoors and helping with farm work (Kazyak, 2012). If a community treasures hard work and toughness (i.e., traits of masculine individuals), then a non-heterosexual woman who exhibits those traits might find acceptance (or at least less rejection) than if she were non-heterosexual and overtly feminine (Kazyak, 2012). In other words, because a more rural community accepts and often needs masculine women, who are often tough and hardworking, for domestic and economic portions of the community, then non-heterosexual women may not face the same pushback as their male peers who are perceived as more feminine. According to Kazyak (2012), masculine “gender presentations are acceptable for all rural women, regardless of sexuality” (p. 827).

This tacit acceptance of masculine women in a community that is often unaccepting of norm violations can offer a protective shield for a young female struggling with her sexuality in



the form of a “tomboy.” While the research is conflicted on how to specifically define tomboy, the essence is that a tomboy is a female who chooses to participate in behaviors typically considered more masculine (Carr, 1998). Tomboyism, then, allows its participants access to behaviors and contexts typically reserved for males while still enforcing the norms of a gendered binary (Carr, 1998). This can be particularly alluring to a young lesbian attempting to get a handle on her sexuality as it offers her protection or a non-threatening way to express herself without upsetting the heteronormative hegemony of the community (Craig & LaCroix, 2011). Effectively, closeted lesbians can use tomboyism to “explain any masculine behavior that would otherwise be read as an indicator of sexual orientation” (Craig & LaCroix, 2011, p. 454). However, the simple fact that these masculine behaviors are only acceptable under the guise of tomboyism and are considered deviant otherwise is evidence of the existing power structure surrounding gender norms. If the individual believes they are being deviant, it may affect their decision to disclose. This conflict can be further complicated if the individual expects a negative reaction from the person he or she is disclosing to.

### **Influence of Reactions to Disclosure**

Coming out, and revealing oneself as something other than heterosexual, can be a watershed moment for many individuals. To further complicate the matter, the responses a non-heterosexual individual receives from family, friends, and their community can have long-lasting effects, for good or ill, on that person. According to Goldfried and Goldfried (2001), “One does not have to be a mental health professional to recognize the devastating effect that parental non-acceptance or outright rejection can have on the psychological well-being of individuals” (p. 682). Thus, it stands to reason that if a son or daughter anticipates a negative reaction from his or her parents concerning his or her sexuality, they would be less open about the matter. These

negative reactions or anxiety about possible verbal abuse often reduce the openness an individual utilizes when discussing his or her sexuality (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Heteronormative discourses among the school system, in addition to the family, can have a silencing or marginalizing affect on a young LGBTQ individual (Dalley & Campbell, 2006). While attitudes may be changing somewhat, if the societal or community message surrounding homosexuality is that it is deviant or shameful, young LGBTQ individuals will absorb that message and live with the resulting stigmatization (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). This moment of disclosure is monumental in the individual's life and causes no small amount of anxiety.

Therefore, the lack of a positive reaction in these situations can lead to a variety of negative consequences. Studies show that LGBTQ youths run a high risk of suicide and also report more symptoms of mental health issues than their heterosexual peers (D'Augelli, 2002). Additionally, LGBTQ individuals are also at a higher risk of being the victims of physical violence (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). The process can also take a social, as well as a physical toll. Sexual minorities report that often during the coming out process, they experience a loss of friends (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Other negative behaviors that are tied to a negative parental response during this process include higher levels of binge drinking, drug use, and a generally poorer health status (Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012; see also Manning, 2014a, 2014b).

Why might parents react negatively to the coming out admission of their child? Research indicates that an individual's social tools influence reactions to these disclosures. These "discourses are not free-floating and often have institutional roots" (Martin, Hutson, Kazyak, & Scherrer, 2010, p. 964). Frequently these tools conflict with each other as in the case of a parent's love for his or her child coupled with the community's disdain for sexual minorities.

Parents may turn to experts in order to make sense of what they perceive to be a sudden change in their child, such as the media, the internet, or advice books (Martin et al., 2010).

Communities, both physical and virtual, have the power to create meaning among the individual members of its ranks, which influence the tools that the parents use to control unsettling situations (Lucas & Steimel, 2009).

This study, therefore, examined the types of reactions received by individuals at the time, and after, they came out in an effort to further explore the link between expected reactions to disclosure and the decision to disclose. Additionally, the methods participants employed in order to disclose were also investigated. As many of the issues being examined within this project have a basis in power structure, the theoretical lens utilized for this study is queer theory. Queer theory is used in this project as a means to further understand the “coming out” process and how individuals create, construct, and navigate their sexual identities among the morass of community gender norms.

### **Queer Theory**

First entering the academic scene in the early to mid-1990s (Kates, 1999; Tindall & Waters, 2012), queer theory has become an emerging area of focus for many scholars seeking a better or clearer understanding of identity and self-representation. While not focused wholly on sexuality, the theory is rooted in sexuality studies in that it is often used as a means of examining sexuality and gender, which the theory maintains are individually created via the social and historical contexts in which the individual exists (Kates, 1999). At its core, queer theory entails a self-construction of identity, rather than a centered notion of “I think, therefore I am” (Kates, 1999, p. 26). It begins with a very basic premise that identity is not given; rather it is formed (Wendland, 2011). Queer theory can examine the ties between identity and existing power

structures (e.g., rural community gender norms). Queer theory seeks to “destabilize the stability often ascribed to particular identities, to disconnect the presumed connections between and among various behaviors and identities” (Wendland, 2011, p. 10). Queer theorists strive to break down the boundaries of heteronormativity, which claims heterosexuality is the “normal” sexuality (Tindall & Waters, 2012) by examining the ways in which the sociocultural discourse creates notions of sexuality and gender. The word “queer” in queer theory has a dual meaning. First, it can refer to an identity of a person or object. However, and perhaps of more interest to this project, queer can also mean a position against the normal (Kates, 1999). Much of queer theory proposes an attempt to remove the hierarchical notions of gender and sexual identity in an effort to balance or equalize them, perhaps opening the door for a rethinking of gender and sexuality (Cover, 2010).

In the realm of essentialists, sexuality or sexual preference is something that is sewn into the very biology of each human being (Kates, 1999). In contrast, social constructionists argue that sexuality is something that is created through shared “cultural meanings” or the interaction between historical influences and sociocultural relations (Kates, 1999, p. 27). Queer theory challenges the notion that nature dictates the roles that women and men must follow and the power structures that reinforce those roles (Tindall & Waters, 2012; Wendland, 2011) and adds support to the idea that these individual identities are a result of the individual’s personal, social, and political context (Kates, 1999).

The other aspect of identity that queer theorists focus research on is the relationship of power structures with regard to sexuality and gender. In research that is not informed by queer theory, what is popular and powerful is often viewed as “normal,” with behaviors that challenge those power structures viewed as threats or deviant (Cover, 2010). Minimizing the experience of

the individual by reducing them to categorical interpretations limits the understanding of that individual. Thus, queer theory argues that an individual's identity is a mesh of many influences and that using simply sexuality or gender is reductionist. To group two different homosexual men into the same broad category simply based on their shared sexuality "negates the individual experiences that have shaped their lived existence" (Tindall & Waters, 2012, p. 453). Sexuality is often a reflection of the times and culture the individual exists in and, as such, queer theory challenges these often "oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender" (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 620). In essence, queer theory examines the idea that identity is fixed and unchanging and, instead, argues that an individual's identity is fluid, dynamic, and ever changing through discourse and sociocultural relations (Kates, 1999; Tindall & Waters, 2012). Therefore, this study examined, using a queer theory lens, the ways rural power structures educate and reinforce gender and sexuality norms and how individuals that do not ascribe to those norms disclose their sexual identities.

### **Research Questions**

After examining the literature, the following research questions were posed to structure and guide this study.

RQ1: How are the rural community norms surrounding sexuality and gender constructed?

RQ2: How do sexual minorities in a rural community discursively construct their own sense of sexual identity?

RQ3: How do sexual minorities in a rural community disclose their sexual identity?

RQ4: What reactions do sexual minorities in a rural community receive upon disclosing their sexual identity?

## Chapter Three:

### Method

#### Participants

To answer the four research questions posed in this study, I used information and data gathered from non-heterosexual individuals who had grown up in a rural community. For the purposes of this study, it was more important that participants self-identify the area as rural than the community be rural according to census data or the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). As such, 25 individuals were interviewed ( $M_{\text{age}} = 27.4$  years, age range: 18-64 years). At the time of the interviews, 16 participants identified as female and 9 as male. Additionally, 17 identified as homosexual, 6 as queer, and 2 as pansexual. Homosexuals are those individuals that are sexually attracted to members of the same sex (Homosexual, n.d.). Different persons interpret queer, as a sexual orientation, differently. In order to differentiate it for the purposes of this study from homosexual or pansexual, queer includes those individuals who feel that their sexuality does not fall completely within the realm societal norms regarding sexuality or would rather not identify with another, more specific, label (“A Definition of Queer,” n.d.). Pansexuals, while the specifics, like queer, may change from individual to individual, are those that are not “limited in sexual choice with regard to biological sex, gender, or gender identity” (Pansexual, n.d.). Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form for the study (see Appendix A) that was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB, see Appendix C) before the interview took place.

#### Procedures

In order to answer the research questions posed; I utilized a qualitative research design. The underlying purpose of this study was to discover the ways that individual participants

construct their own views of sexuality in a rural space and how that space affected their sexuality (i.e., essentially what swayed these individuals to act in the way that they did). For this purpose, interviews were the ideal tool (Lazarsfeld, 1944; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Volunteers were solicited to participate in semi-structured interviews probing rurality, sexuality, and social support (see Appendix B for a copy of the interview protocol that was utilized).

The interview protocol enabled me to gather data concerning the nature of the reactions the individuals *expected to receive* at the time they came out in their community, as well as the reactions *actually received* after they came out. Volunteers were initially recruited through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. I made inquiries of my friends and colleagues in order to contact individuals fitting the research criteria who were interested in participating. Following the interview, I then asked each volunteer if they knew of anyone who might also want to be interviewed for the project. Unfortunately, this technique did not gather nearly enough research participants, so after gaining approval for a modification from IRB, I put out a call for participants through my department's research participation website, several LGBTQ campus organizations, by visiting colleagues' classrooms, and via Facebook; all of which collectively resulted in the remainder of the desired number of interviews.

The local interviews took place in public areas such as coffee shops or campus park benches ( $n = 13$ ), while the non-local interviews were conducted mostly via Skype or FaceTime ( $n = 10$ ). Two interviews were conducted over the phone. All interviewees consented and the interviews were digitally recorded. The protocol consisted of four sections with the first gathering basic demographic data (e.g., "What is your sex?" "What is your highest level of education?"). The second section examined the views the individual holds of their community (e.g., "In general, could you describe that community?" "What did you like least about growing

up in that community?”). The third section asked participants about their sexuality (e.g., “How would you describe your sexuality?”, “How was sexuality discussed in your community?”). The final section asked about the reactions the participant received at, and after, the time they came out (e.g., “Who provided social support when you came out?”, “What sort of messages did people say that you consider unsupportive?”) (see Appendix B for the full interview protocol). At the end of each interview, participants were allowed time to discuss any issue that they thought particularly important to their story that was not discussed during the interview.

The interviews took place between January 2014 and May 2014. The average interview length was 36 minutes with interviews ranging from 21 minutes to 50 minutes. A freelance transcriptionist transcribed all digital files (found through odesk.com, a freelance employment website). I then checked the transcriptions for accuracy (i.e., digital file versus transcript). Participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. Single-spaced transcriptions resulted in 292 pages of text.

### **Data Analysis**

An inductive data analytic technique comprised of open and axial coding along with thematic analysis was employed to explore the participant responses given as answers to the interview protocol. I did not use preexisting categories, but rather the codes and categories that were formed and created from those that emerged from the discourse and the participants’ words (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I went through each line of the data and openly coded the responses using a digital comment on the electronic transcript. I also wrote memos throughout this process in order to record and further explore the connections and themes that occurred during this initial coding process. I then moved each code and memo into a spreadsheet so that the data could be sorted more easily. Next, I continued coding by generating a list of the recurring themes that



materialized from these responses. After creating a preliminary list of themes, I went through the data multiple times because for a robust coding scheme to be developed, the open coding process must be employed numerous times.

While using this process, I visited and revised the themes and emergent themes were further condensed into categories via the axial coding process (Charmaz, 2006). All combined, this process of revisiting and revising the themes allowed for the development of more succinct categories and themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also had multiple conversations with my adviser for this project (as she also had access to the data) before finalizing categories and themes.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Results**

Links between the norms of rural communities and the interactions between that geographical location and non-heterosexual identity formation were examined in this study. A rural population was selected for this study due to the lack of research investigating the intersection of geography and sexuality (Kazyak, 2012). Moreover, the methods individuals employed to disclose their non-heterosexual identity to community members, including friends and family, were also examined. Finally, the reactions participants expected to receive and actually received, for positive, negative, or neutral, were explored.

The insight and wisdom provided by the individuals interviewed as part of this research offers a very close look into the experience of sexual minorities in rural communities, specifically in reference to the research questions posed at the end of Chapter Two. The excerpts from interviews presented in this chapter are in the participants' own words in order to preserve the true self of the individual and to be consistent with other qualitative interviewing research (e.g., see Goodall, 2000; Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Therefore, participants' words have not been altered in terms of content or grammar except in those instances necessary to preserve confidentiality.

#### **Research Question 1: Rural Community Norms Surrounding Sexuality and Gender Roles**

The first research question addressed the construction of rural community norms surrounding sexuality and gender. In that regard, participants reported five clear themes: gender norms of their communities, consequences of violating those norms, a lack of LGBTQ visibility in these rural communities, heteronormative sexual education practice, and a tension between religion and sexuality.

**Gender norms.** When asked to describe the gender norms of their communities, participants provided unsurprising answers of norms that conform to what is thought of as the “traditional” roles for males and females. Bert said the following about being masculine:

*Masculine is you work with your hands, you grit through pain, you take leadership roles and in many cases have the horrible cases of “male answer syndrome,” where you have to know everything. And females, somewhere in being reserved, and more submissive positions in the community, worked in the home and with their hands in that manner instead of outside.*

Otto said the men in his community, “[Men] like do sports and men like to hunt and fish and stuff like that,” while Vera said of the males in her community, “it was expected that they would all learn how to drive all the tractors, and the planters, and everything.” Harriet saw a strict division in the household chores of her parents, though both were physicians. She said, “My dad, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him wash a single plate. Maybe once or twice, but I mean, for the most part or do laundry. I’ve never seen him do laundry in my entire life.” Melvin, a trans\* man, spoke of growing up as a female and the difference in the way he and his twin brother were treated by their parents:

*I was expected to dress a certain way to go to church, dress nice, whereas my brother could wear jeans to church. I was expected to be more kind of a youth leader. My brother kind of wasn't expected to be as responsible. So there were clearly higher standards for “girls” and I’m like using scare quotes around girl because that’s not really how I identified.*

Similarly, Flossie noted of women in her hometown that, “Girls were supposed to have long pretty hair and makeup done. Tight clothing to show off their tops and I don’t know, dresses,

*jeans, skirts.” Wilma said in her community the young girls were told, “It’s better to be a housewife, to not have a career. I mean going to college was a good thing, but that was mostly so you could meet someone and get married.” Charlotte echoed that she, too, was taught that the woman’s role was in the home:*

*It was very much girls wear dresses, girls are skinny, girls do this, girls clean house, girls do that. Like, I enjoyed hunting and fishing and, but that was just like a big taboo because it wasn’t okay because that’s the men’s thing to do.*

Individuals who did not conform to these standards of femaleness and maleness did so in a variety of ways. For some, the norm violation took shape in their choice of clothing or personal attire as it did for Juliet. She said, *“I stopped wearing the dresses that (my mother) made me wear, like I just refused to wear the dresses, I refused to wear pantyhose, I was wearing more masculine clothing. I was getting my hair cut shorter and shorter.”* Cora also violated the female gender norms of her community through appearance, saying *“My mom was like, don’t, you know, I can’t believe you’re going to cut your hair in a boy hair cut.”* Other individuals violated their community norms by not enacting the ideals of either masculinity or femininity, particularly through athletics. For example, Calvin said, *“I wasn’t good at sports and I tried a few sports in junior high but I just, I also didn’t really have the desire to succeed in sports.”* This sentiment was echoed by others, including Rudolph, when he said, *“Yeah I think that people expected me to be a certain way, like to be athletic or like, ‘Why aren’t you like on at least one sports team?’ I’m like, I mean, ‘Because I’m not into that.’”* Likewise, Vivian said she *“wanted to play football”* because she knew she *“could kill some boys.”* Otto said he often found himself acting feminine during recess, *“we would always play tag at recess, and it would be girls against the guys. However I would always be on the girls’ side and like I didn’t think anything of it.”*

Several interviewees conveyed that a female violating prescribed female norms was acceptable, including Vivian who said, *“I always kind of related that back to my mom though because my mom is very much a tomboy and so I thought it was normal like ‘Oh mom’s the tomboy, so am I, oh whatever.’”* However, this violation was only accepted up to a certain point as Wilma noted, *“we’ll let you be like hang out with the guys and do like these boy things with us so long but now you’re in high school, this is getting kind of weird.”* At no point or age, though, did participants express that a feminine acting male was acceptable in their community. Bert summed it up as *“But for a male, being more feminine in a male group would not be accepted.”*

**Consequences of violating gender norms.** The data revealed that violations of gender norms were not definitely not free of consequences. Almost half of the participants said that violations of these norms resulted in negative behaviors from others towards the violator, whether it was the participant him- or herself, or another individual in the community. Calvin said that in his community, the harassment was often relatively mild in that it usually resulted in other members of the community *“look[ing] down on them [the violator] and degrad[ing] them essentially.”* Similarly, Daisy said that violating norms in her community *“was very dangerous”* and Melvin, a trans\* man, said that as a young female he *“got bullied a bunch in middle school for being different.”* Often this harassment would take a verbal form employing the use of various sexual orientation identifiers as pejorative terms. In fact, the majority interviewees had examples of words such as *“faggot”* or *“dyke”* that had been used to hurt either themselves or another in the community. While she did not experience this herself, Flossie related the story of one of her classmates who violated a female gender appearance norm:

*She’s had, she’s short hair like two inches long, that’s how she likes to keep it. She wore baggier T-Shirts and baggy jeans and, no, she got bullied all the time, called dyke and*

*lesbian. She's not, she has a boyfriend, she's being with him for three years, everybody knows this, but she still gets called lesbian.*

Similarly, Amelia saw this same behavior from her own family:

*With my brothers, my oldest brother, before I even came out, he always used to call me, like, "carpet muncher" and stuff like that. So like that was like, kind of like a hindrance on, when I decided to come out, like it, kind of like rolled around in my mind about him, probably being the most judgmental out of my family.*

**Lack of LGBTQ visibility.** Perhaps one reason the individuals that participated in this study were viewed as "different" was due to the lack of LGBTQ visibility in their "rural" communities. Archie said "*those of us that were homosexual or gay were so hidden, we were even hidden from each other back in those days.*" Daisy agreed with this sentiment and said:

*I mean there were gay rights and movements happening in New York City and California and in places, but not in [my hometown] and if they were, they were underground and if there was anybody who was queer in our community, they were definitely closeted, that wasn't something that you saw.*

Some of the younger participants that were interviewed did not express that their communities were too much different. Rudolph said that in his community, "*you don't see like openly gay people or whatever in public, in real life. **It doesn't exist** [emphasis added].*" Vera expressed something very similar, "*I mean, it wasn't a thing. There weren't any gay people there.*" Wilma agreed, saying, "*I'm sure they were like, gay and queer people I just don't think that they just definitely weren't visible.*" Melvin, a trans\* man, felt this lack of community and visibility very acutely, "*I started getting that like, there were people who were different and maybe they were just like somewhere else and I needed to go somewhere else and find them because I just, it*

*wasn't working for me anymore.*” This lack of LGBTQ visibility was evident most clearly through the heteronormative behaviors of the community.

**Sexual education.** While almost all the participants said they received some sort of sexual education either from their school system or their family, none of them told stories of anything other than heterosexual education. For instance, Calvin was taught that, *“Eventually, boys would meet a girl and in enough time they will get married, have kids, start a family, grow old together.”* Daisy experienced something very similar because in her community, *“you know, you’re a girl, you dated boys.”* Most often participants’ sex education took the form of either abstinence-only education or simply a discussion of sexual safety. In Rudolph’s case, *“I think that I knew everything that I needed to know to like not get AIDS and die. I knew I wasn’t going to get anybody pregnant.”* Similarly, Charlie said he was told, *“Sex can sometimes lead to pregnancy or disease. Don’t get pregnant. Don’t get anyone pregnant, or don’t get a disease.”* Again, the sex talks most participants spoke of simply consisted of pregnancy and/or the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or sexually transmitted infections (STI). Harriet said her school focused primarily on male sexual education, forgoing that of a female sexual education entirely:

*I guess, sex ed-wise, you would only be taught about really, the male anatomy, and like how to use condoms. But I feel like we were never told any other way like, nobody says anything about dental dams or I guess, I was never even taught about a tampon or anything like that, like the menstrual cycle, which is like outrageous, because it’s a part of everyone’s life.*

One interesting story came from Sadie who said, *“My mother actually several times suggested that I might want to think about experimenting with women in high school, rather than*

*men. Because I was unlikely to contract an STI, and certainly wasn't going to get pregnant."*

Sadie's parents had an unusually open attitude towards sexual activities, thus her story was the exception, rather than the rule. Sadie continued, *"So my parents talked about sex, I think more than I would have liked, actually."* Most individuals reported that their parents either didn't discuss sex at all as in the case of Melvin, *"It was just something that was clearly not to be discussed."* Similarly, Mollie said, *"We never discussed it at all."*

**The tension between religion and sexuality.** Participants also discussed the prevalence of churches and religion in their rural communities. As Opal said:

*It was very insular, and religion, really was, a large part of growing up, because like you, you had to go to church. Like I had to go to church every week, if not once a week, for like special, you know, like Saint's Days or etcetera. Like my priest used to like come over for dinner and game night, for board games and stuff. It was a very religious community.*

Mollie also mentioned that her community was a very *"strict, Catholic community, they're really into the church scene, and if you're not into the church, shame on you, basically."* Archie agreed with both Opal and Mollie when he said that in his area, *"Everything was very, very strongly Catholic."* Melvin said church *"was like the primary way the community organized itself"* and Calvin reported of his community that *"most everyone gets to church on Sundays."* Harriet echoed the other participants saying, *"There's a very religious influence in that community."* In sum, nearly every interviewee commented on the influence religion exerted in their community, even if their families weren't particularly religious, such as Mollie's family. She said, *"Like my family's not religious and even I had to go take religion classes, because it was just like, the thing you had to do."*



Often, interviewees mentioned that the different churches held sway over many of their fellow community member's beliefs, even going so far as to affect the education system and, in one specific case, an election. Specifically, individuals saw the community's religious beliefs entering the classroom in the form of sexual education as in the case of Cora and her school.

Cora noted:

*We might have talked about condoms and kind of protection, but it definitely was a kind of more abstinence system, of just say no. And this idea of kind of purity, save yourself until marriage, even though there were pregnant, I mean there were girls who got pregnant in high school, who were pregnant in high school because abor, and abortion was one of those things that like, don't have sex before marriage and abortion was not ever talked about openly or if it was, it was a sin and not, you shouldn't have one.*

Daisy said her school taught her that “*it was the penis goes in the vagina, with the sperm, and this is how you make a baby, you know, don't have sex until after marriage, like sort of that Christian application was definitely there.*” However, the most interesting story of religious influence came again from Sadie.

*They put a referendum up for like town vote, on introducing prayer into the public school. And like yeah, sure, right, that's not even constitutional, but whatever, small towns do crazy shit. So, and, it was very, very, very heavily supported . . . [The pastor] gave a sermon that Sunday, proceeding election day that said this is not okay. Right, like religion is for our church and for our families, and for our home. Religion is not for our public schools . . . And that when we start shoving religion into people's throats, like that, we turn them away from what we're trying to get, and we alienate people in our community who we are trying to get, trying to like, create as a whole community. And it*

*failed, by a pretty sizable margin, actually. I think if he had not made that sermon, I am positive it would have passed. I think they were, the Methodists, took the styles of agreement, and I think were sort of waiting to hear his verdict on this, before they made a decision, if he was going to say something. And then he made, in a place like that, it made all the difference.*

Overall, most participants talked about the idea that the religion in their community disapproved of any sexuality other than heterosexuality. Several participants specifically mentioned some form of non-acceptance by community members or family that had religious tones structuring it. As Archie put it, *“there’s a deficit, there’s something wrong with me from a religious perspective.”* Vera experienced this after coming out to a close friend. *“[Her] response was, you know that’s not okay, you’re going to hell, I’m praying for you, here’s a list of like 5,000 Bible verses that I looked up, that you know, condemn what you say you are.”* Cora’s community viewed homosexuality as a *“sin”* while Flossie said who she came out to was affected by religious beliefs:

*I knew like my assistant principal who had a friend who was gay. So I knew that if I came out he would probably support me. And I knew that my really religious Bible thumping math teacher would probably not.*

Rudolph’s church drew parallels between homosexuality and other sins. Rudolph said:

*I think one time one of our ministers maybe said something like we have to love everybody; even people who like were murderers, have abortions, people who were homosexuals, pissed me off that that was in the same category, but whatever.*

Bert’s churches took it a step further in that *“when people found out that I had had feelings for guys, my churches that I went to and like participated in started coming down upon me and so*

*ex-communicated me in some cases.*” Charlotte experienced religious condemnation as well after coming out:

*I was told quite frequently that I was going to hell. And as, I’m kind of religious. I mean I’m not going to church every Sunday but I believe in God. The whole going to hell notion kind of scares me, I think that was like the biggest negative thing that affected me the most, is the thought that I’m going to hell.*

Now that the communities of these interviewees have been explained in terms of their norms regarding sexuality and gender, the next section examines the methods and resources individuals used, in or out of their communities, in order to construct their own sense of a sexual identity.

### **Research Question 2: Discursively Constructing a Sense of Sexual Identity**

The second research question addressed how non-heterosexual individuals discursively constructed their sense of sexual identity in a rural environment. The data collected for this question revealed four themes: heterosexual exploration in order to fit in, shame after the individual realized he or she was somehow “different,” a common narrative of conducting sexuality research, often using technology, and finally, a current identity.

**Heterosexuality.** Often, identity creation began with the individual attempting to conform to the heterosexual norm they observed in their community. It was common that participants mentioned at least one past relationship that resembled a heterosexual partnership, including Vivian who said, “*I had dated a guy for six years,*” and Calvin:

*I guess you’d call it dated a girl for three months. Nothing ever happened. We went on, nothing sexually ever happened. We went on one date to a movie during that entire three*

*months and eventually, I ended things because I knew I was just lying and she's a really a good friend now.*

Opal did something similar, saying, *"I dated men, up until I was 21, and I had some, I had two, two or three pretty serious relationships with men."*

Vera also tried her hand at heterosexual relationships and said, *"All throughout high school, I dated boys, and I just kept thinking, well, maybe if I can just find like one boy that I'm okay with, then like I won't have to deal with this at all."* Melvin, a trans\* man, said as a young female he used heterosexual relationships with men as a method of identity discovery as well as a way to conform to gender norms:

*I dated some guys in high school, but for me those relationships always were kind of gay (laughs), meaning that I, not for me and probably not for them but I kind of always identified as male and so it was part of exploring men's bodies and trying to figure out like how I related to that body or what.*

Overall, though, Daisy's attempt at being heterosexual went the furthest:

*[I] got married to a guy, I was 19 years old, because I thought that was what I was supposed to do. My mother, you know, my family was so excited, I'm 19 years old getting married, they were worried, I think, but not. I think they were just happy that I found a boy.*

**Difference and shame.** Even as attempts at heterosexual relationships were forged, several interviewees expressed the idea that they knew they were not being totally honest with themselves or others. As Calvin said above, *"I knew I was just lying."* Several participants knew at an early age they were attracted to different people than their peers. As Lydia put it *"I kind of*

started realizing probably from the time I was like nine or ten that I really wasn't only attracted to boys." Oscar also said he recalled a curiosity about men's bodies as a young child. He said:

*I remember watching Rambo, First Blood, as a kid, and they had like a scene where you see his butt in the shower, and I was like, oh, I wonder if he's going to turn around, or that kind of thing. That was like, four or five years old.*

Unfortunately, the knowledge of being different led some participants to either be ashamed of themselves or to feel as though they were flawed in some fundamental manner. Bert conveyed that idea:

*[Then] in middle school when I started to realize that I had developed feelings for guys instead of for girls, I immediately thought it was something that I shouldn't be doing, it was weird and wrong.*

Rudolph spoke of one of the first times he received the phone number from another man and said, "Oh my gosh, this was really thrilling, like I was doing something bad. I thought I was doing something bad." Otto agreed with the sentiments of the other interviewees in that he, too, felt he was different than his peers:

*I did feel that I was different and I could actually tell, because other boys and in my elementary school class, would vocalize their opinions of me and it obviously wasn't always positive. So like that made me realize I was different and as I grew up I learnt more about the different types of sexuality and realized where I fit into the spectrum of sexuality.*

Of all the participants interviewed in this study, Archie seemed to have had the most difficulty coming to terms with his identity, when he said, "I thought there was something very, very

wrong with me, and I kind of didn't want to be in this world either.” Archie also claimed that his identity process took decades:

*[By] that time I had access to a lot of therapy and had gone through quite a bit in my life. And including two attempted like suicides, you know, because I couldn't get rid of this damn thing. I couldn't shake it. And so I, it was not until 1995, that I, and you have to recall that I was born in 1950's, so it was a long time, that I come to terms with it on a, I would say on a cognitive basis and an intellectual basis. On an emotional basis, it has taken even longer, you know, to come to terms of acceptance and recognition between heart and mind that I'm okay, just okay. I'm just the way I was put together, and that's just fine.*

Aside from Archie, no other interviewees mentioned harming themselves.

**Sexuality research.** Eventually, each interviewee became aware that they were not attracted to members of the opposite sex, or at least not *only* members of the opposite sex. Sometimes this awareness was not recognized for the sexual attraction it was as in the case of Opal. She said, “*I understood that I was like attracted to girls, but I just thought that's because girls were attractive.*” In Pearl's case, she said “*when I would like getting crush on women when I was younger I always thought it was because I was like jealous of how she looked or like I was close to them like as a friend.*” A few participants mentioned that they were able to approach their same-sex attraction in an innocuous manner like Daisy said, “*I always knew I thought girls were real pretty*” or Harriet mentioned, “*I had always liked girls.*” Others examined these feelings more in-depth and conducted various forms of research in order to identify what they were feeling. Otto was one participant that engaged in this type of research. He said, “*As I grew up I learnt more about the different types of sexuality and realized where I fit into the spectrum*

of sexuality.” Victor, even at a young age, took a very academic approach to identifying his attraction:

*I would realize, you know, as I hit puberty that I was attracted towards other guys but they didn't know what this was. I would have this feeling and this tingly feeling and my stomach would get all tingly. So I started keeping a journal and noting, well when would this happen. And I was very crazy, like in a research kind of perspective and I was trying to understand, and I called them flare ups, well I had 3 flare ups today and later I would realize well that's adrenalin and that's attraction and hormones and how all that happens.*

This initial identity confusion would be somewhat rectified as Cora noted, “*I fell for one of my friends [while studying abroad] which then made me realize, okay, these feelings that I’ve kind of had for women aren’t just a phase, it’s not just passing, something is going on.*” This awareness left many interviewees with a new problem: if they weren’t heterosexual, what were they?

As was established in the results for the first research question, most of the individuals who participated in this study did not feel as though their community had much in the way of LGBTQ visibility and therefore they lacked formal educational resources to assist them in their process of identity construction. Quite a few interviewees explicitly mentioned that they took it upon themselves to seek out resources in order to educate themselves about sexual identity, which took a variety of forms. Bert said his resources were quite sparse, “*And so the only place or source of information with any reference to homosexuality or anything like it was churches and what they said was bad.*” In Oscar’s case, he turned to print resources:

*I remember reading like booklets or stuff you'd find in the library. And it would say stuff like, well it's perfectly normal to have same sex crushes or you might feel weird because you look at a friend and you admire their body and that's perfectly normal, but you're probably still straight.*

Sadie said her parents were “*unusually open*” about discussing sexuality and said, “*My parents talked about like the sort of range of sexual identity, and they talked about homosexuality at length. Talked about, I mean, we knew, I knew at least lesbian adults, from pretty small childhood.*” Melvin, a trans\* man, was able to access the resources of a nearby community:

*[What] I started doing was driving to this bookstore 25 miles away with my mom's minivan, this huge conspicuous gold minivan, parking at the bookstore, going in, it was a, I think it was a Barnes & Noble. Going to the, like, lifestyle section, I think it was labeled then in the late 90's, and just reading, and reading whatever was there, like reading all the gay literature, then putting it back and driving home. And I started learning about gay culture that way.*

The most common tool individuals in this study utilized in trying to understand and construct their identity was technology. Whether it was research on the internet or identifying quite closely with characters in the media, approximately half of the participants in this study mentioned that technology played a crucial role in their sexuality education and identity development. Melvin, a trans\* man, commented, “*I think I largely figured it all out through reading and, and watching films and stuff.*” In Cora's case, she sought a specific answer, “*I was probably thirteen or fourteen, I actually typed into Yahoo like 'am I gay?'*” Harriet said she used the social media platform Tumblr in order to put a name to the things she was feeling:



*Because it's a media platform that's very liberal, and it's a big platform for feminism, and you know, a lot of acceptance for those kinds of things. It's a really great way to learn about a lot of things that I was feeling that I didn't really know how to express or how to think about.*

Juliet also expressed the importance of the internet in her identity creation process:

*I did a whole lot of research on the internet about lesbians, being gay and coming out. That was a tremendous tool for me, like I would come home every day after school, get on the internet and just look up stuff about being gay.*

Flossie, who said she identified as “pansexual,” also said the internet was instrumental in creating her sense of sexual identity:

*Flossie: I thought I was asexual, first I couldn't find people attractive, then after I'd gotten into a serious relationship I realized I could. So, but I realized I could with both genders, and I said maybe I'm just a weird bisexual, and then I found pansexual online, and I was like, "That's what I am." So that's how I found out what I was. It was like a three-year process to find the term that was me.*

*Interviewer: Okay. And when you say you found it online, what were you looking for there?*

*Flossie: I was looking for LGBT resources, because there were none where I was from, and there was a lot of, I was looking at like, "It Gets Better Project" and stuff, because just no support from where I am from, at all. And so I was kind of looking online to find that kind of support and to find ways to "come out" and just stumbled upon it like that. Because I found a lot of pansexual people have problems with coming out, because they get told, "Well, that's bisexual, you're bisexual." I mean, you're not. And then a lot of*

*people think you're polygamist at the same time. They're like, well oh, you're bisexual polygamist. No, that's not what I'm saying.*

As the examples above indicate, each individual sought out the necessary information in order to craft or solidify their identity in a very deliberate manner. In other cases, interviewees said that technology unintentionally pushed concepts into place. Vera was one such person. She said:

*So, it wasn't until I was 13, and I was home by myself watching Lifetime or something, and there was a television movie that came on, about a girl in high school that like discovered she was gay and started liking another girl in that relationship. And as soon as I was watching that movie, I was like, oh my God, that's me, that's what I am. And so that's, I guess the point when I understood that being a lesbian was a fit.*

Victor said he experienced something very similar to Vera and that it was reassuring:

*I was watching a television show, it was a, a talk show and they had gay youth on there and I think, and I watched it and I remember really identifying with these individuals and thinking this, this must be it, this must be what I am, this is the name and they weren't, it wasn't a negative thing, it was a positive thing.*

After the participants in this study had a chance to conduct their research and begin their process of self-discovery, they were presented with a new identity, but it seemed to mean something different to each individual.

**Current identity.** As was noted in the previous chapter, the participants in this study included 17 self-identified homosexuals, six queers, and two pansexuals. Though they fell into these three different categories, even among those that used the same identifier, they did not always present the same explanation of their current identity. In some cases, those that identified

as homosexuals expressed themselves very succinctly, as with Calvin, when he said, “*I am a gay individual*,” or Oscar who said he was, “*Gay*.” Some chose to expand and express a concept of sexuality as a moving target, like Charlie:

*Charlie: Gay. [snickers] At least at this point, I mean I don't figure it as something that's going to be a hundred percent certain all the time. But . . .*

*Interviewer: What do you mean by that?*

*Charlie: Well, so, I guess that, right now I feel like maybe I'm 95% gay, but I don't know if that percentage is going to be static. I mean, I'm pretty sure that in some ways, well maybe as a defining part of myself that you know, it means something. But I think that a lot of the times for me, my feelings are for individual people, not for gender or naughty bits.*

Charlotte echoed Charlie's interpretation of sexuality, “*I'm little bit more fluid than that but I would describe myself if I had to put a label on it as lesbian.*”

Among the six participants that identified as queer, their explanations of identity were often more expansive. Sadie and Melvin provide two examples of the general theme that those identifying as queer discussed: their sexuality simply did not fit the boundaries of other sexualities such as homosexual or bisexual. As Sadie explained:

*I identify as queer because it is one, because I know what people are asking when they ask me who I am, a lot of the time it's, “who are you having sex with or do you want to have sex with?” And I think that's actually a real creepy question to ask someone you don't know very well. I mean, this is obviously very different, you're intentionally studying this, but like, in sort of casual conversations, it's actually a little invasive. But, I think, more importantly for me, is sort of, that's a clear identifier word, identifying with a*

*larger community, not just sort of solely, like I don't think that I'm in sort of solely in community with other bisexuals. I actually find that happens very rarely. But that I am in community with sort of a much larger umbrella queer community, that involves like a pretty wide range of both sexual and gender minority folks, and that's sort of where I see myself. Rather than like hanging out in like special bisexual land.*

Melvin, though some might actually consider him heterosexual, did not agree that his sexuality is so easily defined. He said:

*It's complicated. Before I transitioned to male I identified as, well I started out identifying as gay. I was never comfortable with the label lesbian. I just didn't really identify with the female aspect of that identity, but I, but I knew I was different. So I, I started out identifying as gay, then when I started learning more about history and politics, I started identifying as queer in college. And now I identify as, this is kind of funny, but I identify as a queer, straight, trans man. So I'm attracted primarily to women but because of my history, I just feel like my identity is too complicated to fit into like the straight box, so queer straight works for me kind of, even though they are opposites.*

Wilma also described her sexuality as queer and said:

*I kind of like to think of it as fluid I guess. It feels like it's kind, it like the more I like, learn about different things like the more I'm, the more I'm exposed to more like different types of like people, well, this is how it is for me I'm like, oh okay I can totally see that. I mean I just never thought of that and so like I can kind of like, I don't know. But I guess I would say like I don't really, like, I would use the word queer to describe myself.*

Finally, there were two participants that identified as pansexual, although their explanations of what pansexual meant differed between them. For Flossie, she says she must establish a connection with the person first, before an attraction can occur:

*If that's not something you've heard before, it's where you don't see a gender. I thought I was asexual for a long time because I just wasn't attracted to anybody, but pansexual is where you have to know somebody's personality before you can find them physically attractive. So often times I would start dating someone but I won't know because I'm not physically attracted to them in any way till I have been dating them for a while. So I just have to get to know them like them as a person first.*

Harriet explained that she is attracted to everyone, with no mention of sexuality:

*I identify as pansexual, which means that to me, it's more about the person that I'm attracted to, than necessarily what's between their legs. So, really I'm just attracted to everything. Like it doesn't matter if you're trans, if you're a guy, if you're a girl. If I'm attracted to you, then I'm attracted to you, and then that's just it, I'm just attracted to everything. People, I think, find it really hard to wrap their head around that, but honestly, I think it's the easiest, one of the easiest sexualities to understand, and it's like everything, and I'm like that's it. It's not really that complicated.*

After going through the process of discovering and creating their sense of sexual identity in these rural and possibly intolerant communities, the next section of this project highlights the means through which individuals chose to disclose, or not disclose, this information to their family and community members.

### **Research Question 3: Disclosure Methods and Concealment**

At the time of the interviews, all participants had come out to at least one other person. In fact, most had come out to their family or other community members. The third research question addressed the strategies and methods LGBTQ individuals utilized in order to disclose their sexual identity. This section details two themes of disclosure: methods of disclosure and whether it was direct, indirect, or via a third party, and non-disclosure including any reasons the individual may have chosen to fabricate or omit their sexuality.

**Methods of disclosure.** Participants chose to use a variety of methods to disclose their sexuality to others, but these methods fell into one of three types: direct, indirect, or third party. Direct disclosure occurred when the participant intentionally and explicitly revealed their sexuality to another. Indirect disclosure took place when participants used circuitous or ambiguous language or behavior in order to provide enough clues for another to draw the correct conclusion. Third-party disclosure occurred when an individual other than the interviewee revealed the interviewee's sexuality.

**Direct disclosure.** In some cases, direct disclosure took place when someone approached the participant and directly asked, as discussed by Rudolph: "*So he's like, 'So you know, I'm just curious, are you like gay?' And I'm like, 'Yeah I think so.'*" In Flossie's case, the person that approached her was her father. "*And my dad asked me one day, 'Do you like girls?' and I said, 'Yes.'*" The same type of thing happened to Juliet after she went on a day trip with her then-girlfriend:

*The next day I was driving with my mom to the grocery store and she asked me what exactly I did in Topeka, and I wasn't really expecting that question so I didn't really have time to like try to think of a lie, so I just said that we went to gay pride. And she asked me*

*if I was gay, and I said, "Yes." And she asked me if Karen was my girlfriend and I said, "Yes."*

In other cases, the interviewee sought out specific individuals to come out to. Daisy did this immediately after completing her own identity realization process. *"I danced all night, had an amazing time, called my family like that evening when we got back to base and said oh my God! I've finally figured it out, I'm gay."* Wilma directly disclosed to her parents, *"I said, 'mom, dad, I'm bisexual.'" Harriet recounted of a time she came out to a friend after a high school dance:*

*On my way back, I was kind of like, I had thought that one of the girls was really hot. And so I was talking to my friend Thaddeus, and I said, "You know what? Like I'm not really sure right now, but I might be bi, I don't really know what it is, I just know that I am very attracted to things other than just men."*

Pearl, Otto, and Melvin, wrote family members letters explaining themselves. For example, Pearl wrote a letter and delivered it to her mother:

*I wrote her a letter, and she was reading a book in the living room, and I like sat next to her and chatted, I was shaking and I was telling her how I could talk to her about anything, and then, I was just like, "Well, I wrote this letter." I handed it to her, and she read over it.*

Otto chose the letter method in order to avoid immediate consequences. Otto said:

*I mean, I don't like confrontation very much, so I didn't want to vocally tell my parents, like sit them down, so I told my mom first and I actually wrote a note and stuck it on her steering wheel of her car so she would see it on her way to work, because she goes to*

*work like 3'o clock in the morning, so I would be asleep and then I would just talk to her when she came home.*

Direct disclosure was not always the route participants used in order to come out to community members. Indirect methods were also often used in the hopes that the people being disclosed to would draw the correct conclusion themselves.

***Indirect disclosure.*** Participants occasionally utilized indirect disclosure methods in order to portray and reveal their sexuality. Indirect disclosure occurred when the individual did not explicitly express their sexuality, but rather deliberately used clues or behaviors in order to lead someone to draw a conclusion about the participant's sexuality, or unintentionally disclosed using clues or behaviors. Charlie did not mention any specific action he took in order to practice indirect disclosure, but rather that he just behaved in a way that accomplished the disclosure for him. Charlie said, "*[It] wasn't something like there was like a coming out event. It was really just a thing that, people eventually caught on.*" Rudolph also employed indirect disclosure in order to subtly come out to people, "*I would maybe mention something like, 'Oh wow, he looks cute.' And I figure that that was enough of a hint that somebody would know, you know?'"* In Calvin's case, he used indirect disclosure in order to come out to his mother, the first person in his community he told:

*Eventually, I, I tried to hint at it as much as I could with experiences from the past like, me saying in the car that I don't think ever going to get married also saying that I don't have a desire to have any kids. I kind of brought up those things that I had said to her and I never actually said the phrase "Mom, I'm gay." I basically said as much as I possibly could to her to where she could say it and I don't why I couldn't say it but, well because I wasn't out to anybody I suppose but eventually she guessed it. Surprise!*



Mollie told a story of her indirectly disclosing to two close friends while they were spending time together:

*They were just like saying, of course like, "What's a secret about yourself?" And I didn't like say it specifically, but they're like, "do you guys ever like kiss the same sex like when you're drunk or anything?" I was just like, I didn't say anything. And they're like, "You have!" and I just didn't say anything. And my friend was like, "Are you gay?" And I just like, started crying, because I was like drunk, and I was like, "oh no, they found out!"*

Juliet said she unwittingly indirectly disclosed her sexuality to her roommate:

*I had a friend from high school whom I had that major crush on, come visit me one time, like, my roommate said that when she visited us, that's when it hit for her because just how I changed, how I acted around her, rather than how I acted around my regular friends.*

Participants that used either indirect or direct disclosure made an intentional decision to do so. In some cases, however, another individual made the disclosure, a third party.

***Third-party disclosure.*** Third-party disclosure occurred when the participant was "outed" or had their sexuality revealed to another by a third party, either with or without the individual's permission. Amelia experienced one of these third-party disclosures after coming out to a friend, "[She] like got drunk at a party, and told the entire party that I was a lesbian." Mollie also endured third-party disclosure in her school, "Nobody actually said anything to me specifically, they would just like say things behind my back, and to my friends, and ask from them." In Olive's case, it was her mother that outed her to the rest of her family after coming across a personal email. She said, "But the next thing she did was forward it to every one of her close friends and all of my aunts and uncles." Oscar's cousin acted very similarly. He said, "My cousin went over

*to my grandma's house, and outed me."* Cora said her grandmother disclosed Cora's sexuality to other family members, but in a positive manner. Cora said of her grandmother, *"she's actually been the one who helped paved the path for telling my extended family in England, and did some of that kind of work for me, telling her sisters."* Otto also enlisted the aid of a family member in order to disclose to others:

*I told my sister that I wasn't going to tell them [father and brother] yet and then she asked if I wanted her to tell them for me. And I was like, "Okay, yeah, that's fine with me." So while I was at school one day she called and told my brother and called and told my dad.*

After participants employed a method of disclosure, they began to see whether the reaction they anticipated or expected actually occurred, as well as whether the reaction was positive or negative, the results of which are reported with the results for the final research question of this study (Research Question 4).

**Non-disclosure.** When participants spoke of their decision to keep their sexuality hidden, it was really in one of two ways: fabrication/masking or omission (i.e., not revealing one's sexual preferences). When participants masked, they practiced some form of deception in order to, as Lydia said, *"pass as straight."* When they practiced non-disclosure, there was no deception involved, they simply chose not to divulge their sexuality. For instance, Charlie describes his masking experiences, *"So it was definitely something all through high school that I knew that I was essentially hiding from people, that I really didn't want to bring it up, to discuss with anyone."* Amelia mentioned a link between her decision to mask and her expectations of receiving negative reactions. *"I was like, I knew that I had this attraction, but, you know, I just*

*felt like I was going to get judged, because of the community that I was in, so I covered it up for a while.”* Others were more explicit about practicing this deception, such as Charlotte:

*Sexuality in my family was very much girls are with boys and boys are with girls and it's not okay to do anything other than that. So, when I really started coming to the conclusion that, holy crap, I like girls! It was like, oh shit! Now, I need to prove myself. Excuse my language. I need to prove that I'm straight to these people.*

Flossie said she hid her sexuality from her family for some time. She said, *“My family didn't find out until that relationship ended. And that relationship ended a year. Because I just hid it and lied.”* Pearl was also open about deceiving her family and said, *“I'm just going to keep it a secret as long as I can.”* Mollie said she also masked her sexuality by acting heterosexual after an attempt to come out:

*I kind of almost came out. But then my friend was like, “what? you cannot be blah, blah, blah.” So, “I was like, okay, I'm not. I don't know what I was thinking.” Basically, so I just like, shut it off, and like preoccupied it with dating boys that I didn't really like.*

Some participants chose to not disclose, which involved omission. Far fewer interviews discussed non-disclosure. Sadie reported the results of omission when meeting old colleagues and past partners for the first time since coming out as queer. She said:

*[So] there's a lot of like, so this is my partner, and the person sort of reread my face a little bit, and said, “Oh, things have changed.” And we'd be like yeah, we can talk about it later if you want. Which is not like hard, it's sort of like, whoops, I didn't realize, sorry. When I also clashed with men I used to date. Like wait, what? And I'm like, sorry, didn't think I really needed to call and tell you, since we're actually not friends anymore.*

In Cora's case, the decision to not disclose led to a loss of friendship:

*I don't really know why we stopped talking, but we graduated and we just lost, we just stopped contacting each other and, I think part of it was that there was this huge thing that I wasn't telling her and I couldn't tell her and we just stopped talking about other things as well kind of in the process.*

By the time the interviews for this study were conducted, all participants had come out to at least one person in their community (e.g., a family member, a friend, or an acquaintance). However, as the next section reveals, the reactions to that coming out were quite varied.

#### **Research Question 4: Reactions to Disclosure**

The fourth, and final, research question investigated the expected and actual reactions of community members to “coming out.” This section reveals exactly those two themes: expected reactions and actual reactions. The actual reactions fell into three subthemes: negative reactions, neutral reactions, and positive reactions.

**Expected reactions to disclosure.** Almost every interviewee mentioned some expected reaction to the individual’s disclosure concerning his or her sexuality. Of the many explicit instances in which a reaction was mentioned, only a small number of those expressed an expectation of a *positive* reaction. The vast majority of these instances were all of an expected *negative* reaction.

The positive expectations consisted mostly of a simple acceptance of the individual’s sexuality. Juliet said, about her mother, “*I thought she was going to take it well*” and Mollie said virtually the same about her father, “*Well my dad was actually very, very gay friendly, like even before I came out. And so I knew that when I came out it would be just fine.*” However, as Juliet mentioned, expected reactions weren’t certain: “*I thought that you know they’ll be supportive, but like, there is still that nagging in my head that you, maybe they thought it was fine for other*

*kids to be gay, but not their own, you know.”* Sadie said she thought she would be accepted once she came out based on the social network she had established for herself:

*I knew that this was a place that I could be a queer person, right? And I knew that because I had been embedded in that community for years. Both inside and outside of the university. So I felt very, and like my most important mentor in graduate school, is a lesbian . . . I felt very certain in the sexual orientation piece was not going to be an issue here.*

Many others shared Juliet’s doubt, in that they perceived that their disclosure would lead to a profoundly negative reaction. These negative reactions fell in three broad groups: verbal, relational, and physical. In the first group (i.e., verbal), these expectations were those that the individual’s disclosure would result in verbal harassment. Charlie said this was a reason he did not disclose to many members of his community, *“I didn’t think that they would have anything to say that I wanted to hear.”* Amelia also expressed that fear, *“So I felt like I was the most nervous about them [other students], like singling me out, and like, you know, like calling me like a ‘dyke’ or a ‘cunt.’”* Vera expected a comparable reaction. *“I don’t think I would have gotten beat up or anything, but I think I would have gotten stifled and yelled at.”*

In the second group of negative reactions, participants presented an expectation and fear of losing relationships and the support that went with that relationship. Calvin highlighted this common sentiment:

*Calvin: I knew it would be really difficult to tell my father and because I’m one of his two sons and I know eventually it was going to happen but I just didn’t want anything negative to come out of it so I think that’s why I put it off for so long and avoided it*

*because I didn't feel like it needed to happen now. It could eventually happen somewhere down the line.*

*Interviewer: What do you mean by negative?*

*Calvin: Like, to an extreme, I didn't want him like, disowning me or something like that. I didn't want there to be any bad blood for no big reason. I mean we don't talk all that often but I didn't want the possibility of him exiting my life essentially.*

Vivian shared a similar fear of being disowned, “[At] first I wasn't going to tell my parents ever, because I was pretty darn convinced they were going to disown me and it just wasn't going to be a good thing.” As Pearl says about her father, “I know that if he found out, I would stop, and I know when he finds out is when I stop having a dad.” Harriet also spoke of disclosure as an event that would end some of her relationships. She said, “It would end a lot of things for me that I don't want to end. I don't want my relationship with my parents to end, or with my grandparents. I just don't, I just don't want that right now.”

The final type of negative expectation was that a disclosure would result in physical harm to the disclosing individual. Flossie said she worried about her safety from her classmates, “I was really worried about getting jumped like in an alleyway or something like that.” Daisy agreed with this idea of individuals reacting violently to her:

*I still have extreme anxiety when I got to the rest room, it sucks I hate it, it's like one of the worst experiences a person can have, being terrified to go to the rest room because for fear you might get your ass kicked or somebody might react before they asked or whatever. Most butch girls deal with that on a daily.*

Archie, who came of age in the 50s and 60s, had a particularly frightening expectation from his community, which was near the Mexican-United States border. He said, “I guess the most

*negative message, is that, that you are broken. You are broken, and some populations, they perceive that you are broken in that area, and that you need to be exterminated.” Archie expanded this idea about the value of homosexuals’ lives in his area:*

*So the Coyotes tried to herd people across the border, and you know, not get caught by the immigration. Let’s say an officer, when they perceived somebody that they are gay, or whatever, they would just shoot them and leave them dead in the desert, and you know, stuff like that. So, it was just, they determined their life meant nothing if they were gay, and that’s the messages that I got when I was a kid, and one reason I was so terrified to come out, and the second reason is, I thought they were right.*

**Actual reactions to disclosure.** As was reported when discussing the anticipated (or expected) reaction to disclosure, participants overwhelmingly mentioned that they had expected negative reactions to coming out. However, when they spoke of the actual reactions they received, the proportion between negative and positive reactions was much more equivocal, though negative reactions still comprised the majority. There were also several mentions of neutral reactions, but these were not nearly as plentiful as the negative or positive ones.

**Negative reactions.** Negative reactions ran the gamut between verbal abuse, emotional blackmail, and condemnation. When Charlie came out to his grandmother, the result was less than ideal, *“But when I told her she started telling me how gross and disgusting that that kind of lifestyle was and all that stuff.”* Mollie experienced verbal harassment after coming out to her mother, *“[She] would not stop yelling at me. She was in my room, yelling at my face, because she was so mad about it.”* Vivian had one of the most extreme narratives when she told of her father’s extreme reaction to her disclosure, *“My dad’s response was, he threatened to kill himself*

*and had to be taken to the emergency room that night.” Olive and Charlotte, a married couple, discussed the experience Charlotte went through after coming out:*

*Charlotte: And when I finally did come out, it was kind of an interesting situation because I wouldn't change it ever but I lost my apartment the same week I lost my job.*

*Olive: That was a bad week.*

*Charlotte: It was a really bad week. I, my landlord called me and said, you have 24 hours, until eight, well, it was less than 20 hours.*

*Olive: You have eight o'clock, you have until eight o'clock tomorrow morning and I'm changing locks.*

*Charlotte: And you're not to be back in this house.*

*Olive: And then, she got fired the next day.*

*Charlotte: I dented my truck.*

*Interviewer: Now was this, as a result of you coming out?*

*Charlotte: Yeah.*

Along with the outright or blatant negative reactions, other participants reported feeling a lack of support. For instance, Vivian said, *“my parents didn't come to our wedding.”* Opal also underwent negative reactions from her family members. She said, *“my twin brother disowned me . . . my mother's side of the family disowned me.”* Vera experienced a lack of support at the hands of one of her close friends after coming out, *“She wouldn't talk to me for a while, and once she finally talked to me, it was okay, we can talk, but please don't mention any of your relationships, I don't want to hear about that.”* Archie similarly discussed this theme of receiving negative reactions after disclosing his sexuality. He said he found *“outright rejection and hatred from others, that still exist to this very day.”* After receiving a negative reaction from a male family



friend, Cora sought support from her mother, but to no avail. Cora said, *“I felt unsupported by my mom because she viewed the fact that I had told him [the family friend] as, kind of, well what did you expect? Like, how did you expect him to respond?”* Flossie, though, provided one of the most compelling examples of disapproval of non-heterosexuality and a distinct lack of support from her father:

*He asked me about it, he said, “Were two boys going to beat you up after school and I said, “yes.” And he said, “Why?” And I said, “Because they think I am gay,” and he said, “Alright,” and that was it. Like he didn’t call the school, didn’t ask me how I felt about it, didn’t ask if they actually came near me or threatened me. Just like “alright, that’s nice, congrats.” Like if I can’t beat you up, because you’re not a boy, but then, maybe they can, is how it felt to me.*

**Neutral reactions.** Some participants reported simple neutral reactions to disclosure, not negative specifically, but not positive either. These were the fewest types of reactions mentioned. Calvin’s father, described as a particularly stoic person, had one such reaction, *““Hey dad, there’s something I’ve been needing to tell you, blah, blah, blah. I’m gay.’ And pause, pause, longer pause. ‘Well, we’ll stay in touch.”* Wilma said that when she came out to a family member, *“I think that all that was said was like, ‘okay.’”* Opal’s father also had a neutral reaction:

*I told him I was a lesbian, and he was like, “I have two questions for you.” I was like, oh God, “what is this going to be”, right? And the first thing my dad asked was, if I was going to stop shaving my legs. And I said, “I don’t know.” And the second one he asked, because this was 2008, “Are you going to vote for Hillary?” And I was like, “I’m voting*

*for Barack Obama,” and my dad is like super Republican. He’s like, ahh, “At least it’s not as not bad,” whatever.*

**Positive reactions.** Beyond the neutral reactions, though, were the positive (and sometimes supportive) reactions that individuals received. Otto spoke of the positive reaction after he left his note on his mother’s steering wheel telling her of his sexuality. He said, *“She came home, and said that she was totally fine with it, everything’s okay. She still loves me and things like that.”* Cora told of the affirming reaction she got from her sisters, *“she thought it was the coolest thing ever that she had a ‘bi’ sister, and like, she thought it was cool . . . So my other sister was very much like, ‘I love you and I thought this might be the case and that’s cool.”* Harriet came out to a friend and experienced something similar, *“She was like yeah, that makes sense, cool, and then we like, moved on. It’s not a big deal.”* Rudolph also received a positive reaction from a close friend after coming out to her. He said, *“She’s like, ‘Do what you want, it’s cool.”* Victor told of the time he came out to his older brother who had a positive reaction. Victor said, *“I came out to my brother James, and so I came out to him . . . and he was, it was really touching and he held me and was like it’s fine.”* In the discussion of third-party disclosure, Oscar said he was outed to his grandmother by his cousin, but he said the reaction from his grandmother was positive:

*[She] changed her Christmas plans to make sure she was at like, my parents’ Christmas. To be there, and was kind of like, you know, “I worked with a gay man once, at the hotel, and he was perfectly normal, just like you.”*

Several interviewees said their family and/or friends expressed support that was similar to unconditional love. Calvin said some of the messages he received included, *“I still love you and I’ll always love you.” ‘You’re still the same person and I’m still the same person, nothing’s going*

*to change that.” Mollie also received a supportive message from her father, “I guess my father telling me that he doesn’t care what other people think, because I always thought he did.” While not a verbal message, Melvin said eventually his family came to support him, “They came all the way to San Francisco to come to my wedding. That was huge. You know, they’re in all the, they’re in all the pictures, even my brother came.”*

Now that the results from the interview data have been reported, the final chapter discusses and interprets these findings, as well as offers practical applications of this research. Limitations of this study and directions for future research are also highlighted.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Discussion**

This project was an examination of the norms surrounding sexuality and gender roles in rural communities, as well as how those norms may have interacted with or influenced the sexual identity formation of non-heterosexual individuals. Also, this study provides valuable information concerning the methods LGBTQ individuals employ in order to disclose their sexual identity to community members, as well as knowledge about the expected and actual reactions individuals received.

Although research concerning LGBTQ communities and identity exists and is growing, research specifically focused on rural LGBTQ members is lacking (Eldridge, Mack, & Swank, 2008). The current project assists in filling that void in the literature. This chapter provides an interpretation of the results reported in Chapter Four. Further, this chapter examines the practical applications of this study, as well as the study's limitations and possible directions for future research.

#### **Research Question 1: Rural Community Norms Surrounding Sexuality and Gender Roles**

Research Question 1 explored the norms surrounding sexuality gender roles in rural communities. Results revealed that most communities were unsurprisingly traditional in that masculine behaviors such as physical prowess were emphasized while females were expected to display feminine behaviors such as acting demure and domestic. LGBTQ visibility was low and religion often played an important role in how the community views sex and/or sexual orientation. There was also a theme of religious heteronormativity in that religion condemned non-heterosexual behaviors.

Overall then, the norms surrounding sexuality and gender roles in the participants' communities typically fell in line with the traditional structures of masculinity and femininity as outlined in the research (Kazyak, 2012; Lucas & Steimel, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). The male experience was often privileged over that of the female in these communities, which were frequently described as agricultural and conservative. That knowledge, in combination with the heteronormative practices described, particularly among the formal sexual education, likely created the perception of a community-wide homophobic climate. However, this perception stands in direct contrast with the cultural narrative, supported by participant accounts, of how "friendly" and "nice" rural communities are. While perhaps nothing much surprising came of the reports of traditional gender roles in these areas, participant stories do support the idea that male femininity is incompatible with rurality but female masculinity can be normative (Kazyak, 2012). In other words, females enacting masculine traits in these communities, such as being tough, performing manual labor, or being athletic, is more acceptable than males exhibiting female traits like domesticity and disinterest in sports. This study supports the idea that "tomboys" or masculine females are an accepted part of rural culture (Kazyak, 2012) and that a "tomboy" identity provides a convenient masking tool for young women who may not be heterosexual (Carr, 1998).

Furthermore, while the aim of this study was not to probe the religious contexts and influence of religion in small towns, participants spoke of it at length. The idea of religion, specifically Christianity, being heteronormative is nothing new. In fact anyone following the national debate concerning marriage equality could probably list several Biblical paraphrases used in support of denying marriage equality. This religious disapproval was solidly supported by the number of participants that mentioned that community members explicitly told them they

were going to hell as a result of their sexuality. The question then becomes whether the perceived intolerance of homosexuality stems from the community and translates into the church or comes first from the church and spreads to the community. This seems to be a key issue as the influence of religion in most of the communities seemed quite pervasive.

### **Research Question 2: Discursively Constructing a Sense of Sexual Identity**

Research Question 2 explored how sexual minorities in a rural community discursively construct their own sense of sexual identity. Results revealed that many participants reported exploring relationships in a heterosexual fashion before accepting that they were, in fact, different. This feeling of being different often manifested itself in either shame by the individual or in harassment from others. Participants then conducted sexuality research in order to find a place where they would not be considered different. Technology often played a large role in this research process. Finally, individuals explained their current identity, which even though individuals may have used the same identifier, they often described their sexuality in different ways.

Overall, individuals' creation and exploration of their sense of sexual identity as reported in this project seemed to follow a pattern. In general, the pattern began with an attempt to fit into the bounds of heterosexuality, although they knew they were different, because that's how the community operated sexually. Then, once that failed, they conducted research about their sexuality and identified it cognitively. Participants then used that newfound knowledge to ascribe to a new identity. Finally, that identity was shared with others. These reported steps align well with, and further contribute to, the four frames of identity as presented by Hecht (1993) in his Communication Theory of Identity (CTI).

The Communication Theory of Identity was developed by Hecht (1993) in an effort to incorporate the “psychological, sociological, and anthropological” aspects of studying identity (p. 78). The argument behind CTI is that identity is largely created through communicative acts, even if the act is primarily symbolic, and can be used to examine the ways the different realms of an individual’s life, personal or societal, interact to shape identity (Hecht, 1993). In other words, the theory offers a framework with which a researcher can investigate the ways in which a person’s communication acts may interweave in order to construct an identity. Hecht (1993) identified four frames of identity.

Hecht’s (1993) frames are personal (how one sees oneself), enactment (the messages one relays about oneself), relationship (identity jointly created as property of a relationship), and community (identity as a frame which bonds a community). As Hecht (1993) notes, “Thus identity may be understood as a characteristic of the person, the enactment, the relationship, and the community” (p. 79). The frames can also be examined in combination with one another in order to better understand the ways in which they interact (Hecht, 1993).

As the previously mentioned, the identity process revealed in this project was created by the researcher rather than explicitly described by the interviewees, that itself can be taken as evidence agreeing with Hecht’s (1993) assertion that these frames are juxtaposed and layered together. In Chapter Four, when Calvin mentioned he dated a young woman for several months, he is describing at least three frames, “*I guess you’d call it dated a girl for three months.*” First, this is the personal frame; Calvin is attempting to identify as heterosexual. However, it is also layered together with the community norm of heterosexuality. As Hecht (1993) notes, communities have concepts of identity, some of which are “more central to its notions of membership than others” (p. 79). Calvin goes on, “*I ended things because I knew I was just lying*

*and she's a really a good friend now.*" In this statement, the personal frame is again revealed in that Calvin knew his sexual identity was not that of heterosexuality, but something else. There is also the frame of the relational identity, as well as in the previous statement. First, together the dyad (i.e., Calvin and his partner) negotiated a partnership in that they were dating. After Calvin broke things off, ending the dyad, together he and she renegotiated a friendship in place of a romantic relationship.

Overall, CTI holds true for most of the interviews. Specifically, when individuals sought out explanations for their feelings of otherness, they were practicing the personal frame of identity and they were exploring these self-concepts and self-cognitions described in CTI (Hecht, 1993; Maeda & Hecht, 2012). The feelings of shame resulted from the idea that they were different from their peers and their community. Essentially, they knew, whether explicitly or not, that their identity was low on the hierarchy of the community concepts important to community membership mentioned earlier. As is discussed in the next section, individuals who masked or concealed their identity were acting within the relational frame of identity along with the enactment frame in which they delivered messages about their sexual identity, as well as a negotiated sexuality within their community relationships.

In addition to CTI, queer theoretical implications appeared when participants discussed their identity, specifically their current identity. In Chapter Four, those participants that discussed their sexuality in terms of fluidity or a continuum rather than a binary (i.e., male-female) furthers the idea queer theorists posit of identity as "foundationless" (Wendland, 2011, p. 13). As queer theory argues, it is more important to focus on the idea that someone is *being* gay rather than *is* gay (Wendland, 2011). As Charlie said, "*right now I feel like maybe I'm 95% gay, but I don't know if that percentage is going to be static.*" Charlie has essentially described that queer theory



concept of identity as constantly evolving as a result of cultural interactions (Wendland, 2011). These interactions are discussed further in the upcoming sections.

### **Research Question 3 and Research Question 4: Disclosure Methods, Concealment, and Reactions to Disclosure**

Research Question 3 explored how sexual minorities in a rural community disclose their sexual identity. Results revealed that the disclosure of a sexual identity other than heterosexuality was accomplished directly, indirectly, or by a third party. Participants also reported reasons they may have concealed or masked their sexuality in order to appease the community or avoid possible retribution that may have resulted from a disclosure.

Research Question 4 explored the reactions that sexual minorities received upon disclosing their sexual identity. Results revealed while some positive reactions were *expected* after disclosure, the vast majority of expected reactions were negative. Although the proportion of positive to negative among the *actual* reactions was closer, negative reactions still comprised the larger portion. However, in addition to positive and negative, some neutral reactions were also reported.

Overall, there clearly exists a link between the reaction an individual expects to receive and their decision to disclose at all. Participants repeatedly reported that they felt their community was not one in which they could be themselves due to the perceived heteronormative attitudes of the area and possibly their families. This is in line with previous research that contends expected negative reactions may lead to individuals silencing themselves or masking their sexuality as a matter of survival (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Logically, it stands to reason that one would not want to disclose something when one

expects the receiver to interpret the disclosure as bad news. Therefore, the simplest solution is to simply *not disclose*.

Furthermore, the means with which individuals disclosed was affected by their perceived reaction. Otto said the reason he chose to write his mother a letter rather than disclose face-to-face was that he does not “*like confrontation very much*.” Essentially, he expected his disclosure to result in a conflict. That suggests that perhaps one reason so many participants employed indirect means of disclosure, using ambiguous language, was to provide a shield of sorts should the disclosure be met negatively. If the receiver reacted conversely, the discloser could always claim that their message was misinterpreted, effectively providing him or herself with a safety net.

The disclosures these participants made concerning their sexuality lends support to Petronio’s (2002) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory. CPM is a framework with which researchers can examine and explain the methods individuals monitor and regulate disclosing information or not (Petronio & Durham, 2008). One assumption of the theory is that people experience a tension between revealing and concealing, or between public and private information (Lannutti, 2013; Petronio & Durham, 2008). Private information is viewed as owned and within a boundary, so when an individual discloses private information, such as sexuality, with another, the first person is expanding the boundaries of privacy and entering into co-ownership of the information with the other (Petronio & Durham, 2008). CPM also posits that this privacy management is governed by rules which are shared with the person(s) with whom the information is shared. Therefore, when the co-owners of the information fail to coordinate the handling of private information, this creates boundary turbulence (Petronio & Durham, 2008).

When examining the results concerning disclosure, it becomes apparent that CPM was definitely at work. One of CPM's assumptions, the public-private dialectical tension (Petronio & Durham, 2008), was present with those individuals who mentioned that they were hiding themselves from their community. They felt the urge to disclose in order to express their real selves, yet they felt the urge to conceal due to expected reactions and possible stigmatization. Participants that discussed disclosing, often spoke that their first disclosure was with close friends. Effectively, the friends were granted co-ownership of the information because the disclosing individual felt that the friends would respect the boundaries of the privacy. It was then that the information became such that the participant and the friends had to coordinate ownership or management. While the individual negotiated the tension between revealing and concealing, these efforts were complicated with the inclusion of other co-owners of the information. In some instances, there was only a simple dyadic privacy boundary (Petronio & Durham, 2008), in which the information was only shared between two, (i.e., the participant and their partner or friend). Boundary turbulence is seen, however, when a participant was outed by another. So when Ameila's friend told her information to an entire party, that coordination of the privacy boundary was conflicted and turbulence resulted. Oscar's privacy boundaries experienced the same turbulence when his cousin outed him to their grandmother. As Petronio and Durham (2008) explain, turbulence often causes an examination of the privacy rules that occur and an adaptation of the boundaries as a result. In other words, Oscar will likely restructure his privacy boundaries so as to not include his cousin the next time he discloses private information.

This study also revealed, via the lens of queer theory (Kates, 1999; Wendland 2011), the underlying heteronormative power structure rampant in the rural communities of these participants. One of the goals of queer theory is to destabilize the binary of male and female and

how that affects identity roles. As was noted earlier, one of the key components of both masculinity and femininity is heterosexuality. Therefore, as interviewees discussed their communities' heteronormative dynamics, it became apparent that one of the reasons these individuals felt so much shame about their sexual identity was as a result of the community narrative surrounding sexuality. Namely, "If you're in this community, you should be straight."

As was noted in Chapter Two, part of being either masculine or feminine was also being heterosexual. However, some queer theorists argue that underpinning this sense of heteronormativity is an idea of continuation and futurity (Wendland, 2011). To put that in terms of this study, heteronormativity is often wrapped up with the idea of reproduction. Biologically, two members of the same sex cannot reproduce with one another and therefore, this threatens the rural norms of both heterosexuality *and* kinship. A trauma twofor, if you will. It is thus conceivable then, when applying queer theory to these disclosures, that we may see a reason these individuals expected negative reactions: not only were they possibly going against the religious institution whose influence was so great in the community, the individual was also personifying a threat to some of the foundational ideas of both rurality and heteronormativity.

This study reveals that the heterosexual ideal is used as a means of power and, while probably not completely intentional, this contributes to an "othering" of any who do not fall within the hierarchy of heterosexuality for their disclosure may represent a threat to the community's futurity. Therefore, in order to avoid marginalization of queer individuals, the heteronormative nature of these communities needs to be addressed. If rural communities are to live up to their reputation of being friendly and nice, they will need to acknowledge the differences of their community members, including LGBTQ persons.

## **Practical Implications**

The primary and most fundamental practical implication of this study is simply a need for further education in communities about the LGBTQ community and increased visibility of, and resources from, LGBTQ individuals. Without role models or resources, several of the participants interviewed thought they were alone in their struggle of being different. This includes student or youth organizations of other LGBTQ youth or at least allies; essentially an organization to show that these young people are not on their own. This could also take the form of having access to online representations of members of the LGBTQ community or something in the media beyond what is portrayed during prime time.

An increase in education, through the schools, would likely lessen feelings of difference to some degree by showing the individual that they are not alone. This education can also be translated easily into the classroom in that sexual education practices need to become more inclusive and less heteronormative. Many of the formal sexual education experiences that participants discussed involved basic health and reproductive practices (i.e., taught the students just enough so that they knew basic contraception procedures). But the relational and mental aspects of sexual encounters were largely ignored. More comprehensive and inclusive sexual education would go a long way towards providing accurate resources concerning that sought after interaction for all youth, not just heterosexual males.

Another practical application of this research is in the area of parental reaction. There clearly exists a link between the willingness to disclose and the expected reaction to the disclosure. As a result, parents who think their child might not be heterosexual ought to reflect on their possible reaction and create methods of supporting their child, or at least methods to make the disclosure a smooth(er) process. Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that an

environment in which parents openly discuss the LGBTQ community and sexuality in general may create a more supportive atmosphere for the child to disclose within. If the family is comfortable, or at least open, with discussing sexuality, then the stigmatizing nature of the disclosure may be dampened or possibly removed.

Finally, there is a perception among rural areas that their communities are dying or that their permanent members are becoming older while their younger members are moving away (Shah, 2014). As will be discussed further in the limitations, each interviewee was a member of a rural community who left and expressed no desire to return. While it would be a large leap to attribute that lack of desire completely to the reactions they received as non-heterosexuals, it likely plays some factor based on the described homophobic nature of these communities. Therefore, if these communities could enact a cultural shift away from homophobia it may act as an enticement towards younger non-heterosexual members to stay or return.

### **Future Research**

As became apparent in the results and when considering the limitations of this study, every individual interviewed expressed thankfulness that they were no longer in their community, at least in regards to how their community viewed LGBTQ individuals. Future research might investigate younger individuals who choose to stay or return to their rural communities to find any overlap in their identity formation. Quantitative analyses can be easily paired with this research to reinforce the existing research (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995) concerning correlations between expectations of reactions and delaying, forgoing, or proceeding with disclosure, specifically among a rural population.

In addition, this project can be further expanded upon by gathering data from more participants in different rural communities to see if the heteronormativity and alternate sexuality

intolerance exhibited by the communities of these participants is the norm or simply a chance of the sampling technique. Projects expanding upon queer theory and its applications concerning heteronormative power structures in rural communities would add further still to the growing knowledge concerning the intersection of identity and geography. While this study set out to do just that, it was not apparent from the results what relationship space had to do with an individual's decision to disclose, other than expectations of negative reactions fueled by a homophobic attitude in the community, which influenced disclosure decisions. As mentioned previously, homophobia, while popularly categorized as a characteristic of small towns, may not be the norm. Therefore, data collected from individuals who did not face the expected negative reactions that so many of this study's participants mentioned would be especially valuable in determining the role that a rural space, compared to an urban space, has on the sexual identity development of a non-heterosexual individual. Research projects examining the narratives of the parents of rural LGBTQ individuals would also add to knowledge of the intersection of sexuality and geography.

One final area that future research might explore is the interplay of technology, as both an educational resource and tool to rural LGBTQ individuals that might not otherwise have access to those resources and as a space in which those same persons might utilize the enactment frame of identity (Hecht, 1998). Five participants explicitly mentioned that technology allowed them to express this non-heterosexual side of themselves in a way that they perceived their communities and other interpersonal interactions would not allow.

### **Limitations**

While this project did result in a wealth of interesting and informative data, as with any study, it did encounter a few limitations that future research should address. First, this study's

sample included only individuals who had no wish to return to their rural community as a home. This was not crafted in the research design nor was it anticipated. No single participant expressed a desire to return to his or her community in order to settle down. However, as queer theory suggests and Kazyak (2010) supports, simply because two individuals share the same sexual orientation, that does not mean they are the same (see also Wendland, 2011). In Kazyak's (2010) research, she examined the experiences of many LGBTQ individuals that either never left their rural community or that left a more urban setting in order to settle in a rural area. This suggests that the individuals who volunteered for this study did all share a common sentiment: no desire to settle in their rural community. If the sample had included individuals who were satisfied with their community, the results would have likely been different.

Second, and somewhat tied to the first limitation, the individuals interviewed were primarily young Caucasians. This is indicative more of the convenience sampling and snowball recruiting methods of the researcher than of the actual demographic of rural LGBTQ individuals. Furthermore, almost every individual interviewed either had a B.A. degree or was working towards one. The one interviewee that did not have that degree works as a trilingual interpreter. That is to say that the educational level of the study sample is above average and lacks heterogeneity. As sexual orientation is influenced by a variety of biological and cultural components, the educational homogeneity of the sample did not offer the same robustness of data as a sample that is more diverse (Garnets, 2002).

Third, this study focused on rural non-heterosexuals generally, and did not focus on a specific geographic region or age. As Kazyak's (2010) research indicates, there are LGBTQ individuals who happily moved from urban centers to rural areas, just as there are those that do the reverse. Therefore, a more focused study on either area or participant demographic might



result in different findings than that of the relatively diverse, at least in terms of age and location, sample of this study.

Finally, all participants that were interviewed volunteered for the research project. Presumably, there are non-heterosexuals from rural areas who saw the call for participation and for whatever reason declined to volunteer. The fact that these 25 individuals did volunteer suggests some commonality among them that may not be indicative of the population as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

It should be the ambition of scholars everywhere to seek knowledge that is practical, not simply knowledge for the sake of knowledge. What use is knowledge that a person cannot use in order to better his or her life, or at the very least the life of another? With that in mind, it should be clear by now that heteronormative environments and those hostile towards non-heterosexual individuals have an adverse effect on both identity formation and identity expression. Family members of LGBTQ individuals should keep in mind the importance of positive reactions to disclosure and exploration. At the very least, open lines of communication should be established in order for individuals, hetero- and non-heterosexual alike, to enact their sexual identity.

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## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM**

“Coming Out in Rural America: Stories of Disclosure and Identity”

Joshua Morgan, M.A. Student

Adrienne Kunkel, Ph.D.

University of Kansas

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to better understand how non-heterosexuals from rural communities and environments talk about their sexuality and masculinity or femininity. Additionally, the study is designed to explore the types of social support individuals received at the time they came out, and after coming out.

#### **PROCEDURES**

You will be asked to discuss different aspects of your life as it relates to a rural environment. The estimated time of completion for this interview is 60 minutes. With your consent, the interview will be digitally recorded. This file will be used by the researchers only, will be free from any information that might identify you, and will be stored in both a password-secured computer and a locked cabinet.

#### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

There are no risks associated with your participation. However, there is a slight possibility that answering some questions may make you uncomfortable. Although participation may not directly benefit you, the information you provide will be beneficial to understanding non-heterosexuals in rural America discuss their identities, sexuality, and their social support.

#### **PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your name will not be associated in any way with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. The researchers will use a study number or a pseudonym instead of your name. The researchers will not share information about you unless required by law or unless you give written permission.



### REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

### CANCELING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to:

Joshua Morgan  
 Department of Communication Studies  
 102 Bailey Hall, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd.  
 University of Kansas  
 Lawrence, KS 66045-7545

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.

### PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email HSCL@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

---

Type/Print Participant's Name

---

Date

---

Participant's Signature

Researcher Contact Information:

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## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### “Coming Out in Rural America: Stories of Disclosure and Identity”

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. *[If this is a referral from snowball sampling techniques, disclose who referred you to the contact]*. You probably noticed in the informed consent form that you filled out that I will be digitally recording the interview. There's no reason for you to be uncomfortable during this interview so if you want to stop, please let me know and we will. We will stop and none of your information will be used. You can always ask me to rephrase or repeat a question. If you don't want to answer a particular question, that's fine, you don't have to. Do you have any questions before we begin?

There are four parts to this interview protocol. First I'll get some general demographic information and then we'll talk about the community you grew up in. After that, I'll ask questions related to your sexuality. The final section covers the social support you received around the time you came out in your community. Are you ready to begin?

#### Section 1: Demographic Questions

- What is your age?
- What is your sex?
- What is your ethnicity/race?
- What is your occupation?
- What is your highest level of education?

#### Section 2: Community (RQ1)

- What makes your community rural?
- In general, could you describe that community?
- What did you like best about growing up in that community?
- What did you like least about growing up in that community?

#### Section 3: Sexuality (RQ1, RQ2, & RQ 3)

- How would you describe your sexuality?
- How was sexuality discussed in your family?
- How was sexuality discussed in your community?
- Can you tell me about your process of understanding your sexual orientation?
- To whom in your community did you first come out?
  - What was that like?
  - Who did you come out to next?

**Section 4: Social Support (RQ3 & RQ4)**

- What kinds of social support did you receive in your community before coming out?
  - Who provided social support when you came out?
  - How did the social support change after you came out?
  - What sort of messages did people say that you consider supportive?
  - What sort of messages did people say that you consider unsupportive?
  - Please tell me about a time you felt especially supported.
  - Please tell me about a time you felt specifically unsupported.
- Those are all my questions, is there anything else you would like to add? Is there anything you feel is important that I may have overlooked?

Closing: Thank you so much for your time. [During the interview you mentioned XXXX. Would it be possible for me to get their contact information so I can see if they would be interested in being interviewed? Can I use your name so they know why I'm contacting them?] Just to reiterate, there will be no personal identifiers in the data so all your answers are confidential. If I have any further questions, could I contact you for clarification if needed? If so, what is the best way to contact you? Great, thanks again for all your help! I really appreciate it.

## Appendix C: IRB Approval



### APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

December 9, 2013

Joshua Morgan  
j.morgan@ku.edu

Dear Joshua Morgan:

On 12/9/2013, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Coming Out in Rural America: Stories of Sexuality and Support
Investigator:	Joshua Morgan
IRB ID:	STUDY00000531
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

The IRB approved the study from 12/9/2013 to 12/8/2014.

1. Before 12/8/2014 submit a Continuing Review request and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.
2. Any significant change to the protocol requires a modification approval prior to altering the project.
3. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at [https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human\\_subjects\\_compliance\\_training](https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training).
4. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
5. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 12/8/2014 approval of this protocol expires on that date.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project:

<https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationandHandlingProceduresGuide.htm>

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the "Documents" tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Dyson Elms, MPA  
IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus

#### Human Subjects Committee Lawrence

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