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**GAY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS A  
PROCESS OF MEANING-MAKING DEVELOPMENT**

A Dissertation in

Counseling Psychology

by

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## ABSTRACT

Gay identity development has been described in psychological literature as a general process that begins with an individual's awareness of sexual minority identity, is followed by an exploration and acceptance of that identity, and culminates in disclosure and integration of the gay identity with other valued roles or characteristics of the self. Though the struggles and successes that sexual minority individuals experience in this process of development have been described, existing literature lacks in-depth information on what it is that actually encourages some persons to transition to more complex or adaptive stages of identity, while others struggle so profoundly with a gay identity that they attempt to ignore it, avoid it, or seek some way to become other-sex attracted. Qualitative data were collected from 33 men who identified as gay or same-sex attracted and who claimed a religious or spiritual affiliation at some time in their lives. These men participated in one- to three-hour interviews focused on their experiences of gay identity development and constructive development. Data were analyzed according to grounded theory methodology.

A theoretical model of gay identity development as a process of meaning-making development was constructed and is graphically represented through a concept map. A category entitled "The Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development" was discovered to be the core category of the grounded theory. Six other major categories, each related to the core category, emerged from the data. These included (1) distress and struggle lead to constructive development and gay identity development, (2) attempts to avoid, hide, or change being gay, (3) finding

support, (4) disclosure to others, (5) accepting self as gay, and (6) continued struggle in an oppressive context. Analysis of the data revealed that individuals processed through these categories in a cyclical fashion, with participants describing concerns related to several categories simultaneously. An example of how individuals process through the categories of the theory is provided. The findings of this study are discussed in the context of existing research. Strengths of the study are reviewed, including how the current research advances literature on constructive development, gay identity development, and gay men who identify as religious or spiritual. A discussion of the implications of the findings for clinical practice is provided.

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## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

Though the sociopolitical climate in relation to sexual minority individuals is in a period of transition in this country, lesbian women and gay men continue to struggle with an existing environment of oppression and a dominant discourse that falls short of providing them with support and validation (Beckstead & Israel, 2007; Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007; Stevenson, 2007). Such an environment creates a context of struggle for gay and lesbian persons, as they attempt to define their identities and locate community (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). Models of identity development have been proposed for sexual minority persons (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989), and the process of gay or lesbian identity development in the noted social context is often experienced as difficult by individuals (Broido, 2000; Haldeman, 2007; Liddle, 2007). Many struggle to reconcile the conflicting demands of multiple elements of personal identity with sexual identity, such as through navigating ethnic or racial group mores that are negative or oppressive toward sexual minority attraction and experience (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). The process of self-acceptance and identity development may be especially hard for gay men and lesbian women for whom a religious identity is a central and organizing identity (Bieschke, Paul & Blasko, 2007; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Davidson, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). Yet many sexual minority individuals, in spite of the challenges of development in a generally heterosexist or homonegative social milieu, come to accept their identities and celebrate themselves (Haldeman, 2007; Matthews, 2007; Stevenson, 2007). Though

existing psychological literature has explored the above concerns, it lacks a further explication of how gay men and lesbian women make meaning about their own identity development. Research literature is deficient in providing information on how it is that the process of development for some lesbian and gay individuals leads to a path of self-acceptance, and that same experience in others leads to an ongoing personal struggle with the experiences of same-sex attraction and sexual minority identity. The purpose of the current study is to explore this process of development in greater detail and to consider how the overall meaning making (e.g., Kegan, 1982, 1994) of sexual minority individuals may influence their development in this regard. I will describe that purpose and my related research questions in this chapter, along with presenting a rationale for the use of qualitative methods in this endeavor. I will, of course, provide a more detailed review of literature and explication of the qualitative methodology that is employed in this study in later chapters.

### Problem Statement

At its center, this study is about meaning making. Structural-developmental stage theories (e.g., Erickson, 1950; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; Piaget, 1950, 1952) have described development as a process in which the individual organizes and reorganizes understandings of the self in reaction to and adaptation in the social world. Development is therefore conceptualized as a delicate balance of both maintaining continuity and addressing discontinuity in meaning making. Individuals maintain continuity by encountering and making sense of new information through a personal system for constructing meaning and consequently organizing their experiences (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003). Individuals experience

dissonance and discontinuity when novel experiences and understandings cannot be explained or assimilated by the current meaning system. This experience of discontinuity may at times encourage development, when one's current meaning system is challenged to the point in which the person must consider a new way of understanding self, others, and the world. Theorists (e.g., Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Miller, 1991) have argued that the interaction of individual experience within particular social contexts greatly informs this discontinuity and development. The current study is an attempt to examine how individuals within one particular social-contextual experience, specifically those with a sexual minority cultural experience, understand and navigate their differences from the majority, and how their meaning making around this experience of difference may challenge or facilitate development.

As noted, models of gay and lesbian identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989) have been proposed that address aspects of identity formation. These models define sexual minority identity development as a process of realization, a struggle with acceptance, and finally an integration of sexual identity into the overall identity. More recent theorists (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) have also considered how contextual factors such as individual beliefs, the social context, and cultural experience inform individual development. Though these models have described the struggles that individuals endure in the process of gay identity development, the models fall short of addressing what may help individuals in navigating these struggles or what it is specifically that could actually encourage individuals to transition to more complex or adaptive stages of gay identity. According to Marszalek, Dunn, and Cashwell (2002), individuals in the later stages of

sexual minority identity formation experienced psychological distress less than other persons. Therefore, movement through stages of identity development is helpful in terms of psychological health, but a thorough examination of what it is that allows some individuals to progress through these stages of identity development to self-acceptance, while other persons struggle to ever fully accept or integrate a sexual minority identity in their lives is missing from existing literature.

I am interested in exploring the meaning making of sexual minority individuals related to the above issues. Fassinger (1998) argued that development from awareness to acceptance of an oppressed identity may increase cognitive complexity, leading to increased self-authorship and self-reliance. Kegan (1982) suggested that an individual's initial realization and questioning about a sexual minority identity could indeed lead to gay or lesbian identity development. He also contended, however, that the struggle to accept and integrate one's sexual minority identity may also be a struggle to develop in a broader sense, arguing that "our current cultural design requires of adults a qualitative transformation of mind every bit as fundamental as the transformation from magical thinking to concrete thinking" (Kegan, 1994, p.11). It could be argued that the core developmental milestone for adults in Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory is the transition to self-authored, rather than externally-authored, meaning making. Is this transition to self-authorship the developmental change that allows sexual minority individuals to more fully accept themselves in a homonegative culture and integrate a sexual minority identity into their overall experience? The lived experience that allows some persons to move through stages of development to self-acceptance and integration of sexual minority



identity, using Kegan's theory to conceptualize the process, has not been explored in existing literature.

Kegan (1982, 1994) described this constructive-developmental transition as a process of stages in which individuals encounter and take on qualitatively more complex and adaptive ways of making meaning about the self and about the interaction of the self with the world. However, no studies thus far have explored how constructive development, as conceptualized by Kegan, and gay identity development may indeed be related constructs in the experience of individuals. As I attempted to state the precise research question for the current study, I was reminded by Stern (1985) that the specific research question in grounded theory is impossible to ask before the study. Stern suggested that too specific a question cannot be identified without forcing the data supplied by participants into presupposed categories. Therefore a prestudy question that "fences off" the field for study was encouraged, while the grounded theory process is allowed to develop the specific questions and answers over the course of data analysis. The specific goal of the current study is to explore how constructive developmental stage affects the understanding and process of sexual identity development in individuals. To meet this goal, I wanted to understand the lived experience of sexual minority identity development and what encouraged or impeded the process of sexual minority identity development. I wanted to explore how an individual makes meaning of this process and how that meaning making may itself encourage or impede sexual minority identity development.

To explore these questions, I chose to recruit a sample of gay men who currently were or once had been religiously or spiritually affiliated. To thoroughly elucidate the

process of how an individual's constructive development may influence the process of sexual minority identity development, I felt it would be helpful to interview participants who represent a range of experience in relation to identity development phase. Researchers and theorists (e.g., Beckstead & Israel, 2007; Cass, 1979; Haldeman, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Tozer & Hayes, 2004) have argued that many gay or lesbian persons struggle with or hide their emerging sexual identities because they fear negative reactions from religious groups, their communities, and their loved ones. As I will discuss in detail later, Schuck and Liddle (2001) found a significant relationship between an individual's perceived conflict with his or her religious group's negative views on gays and lesbians and that person's difficulty in accepting a sexual minority identity. Further, Tozer and Hayes (2004) found that homonegativity was positively correlated with both religious conservatism and the propensity to seek to change from same-sex attracted to opposite-sex attracted through psychotherapy. In each of these studies and others I will describe in upcoming chapters, males were more likely than females to struggle in reconciling their religious identities with their sexual minority identities. Therefore, I believed that a sample of gay men who were once or currently religiously or spiritually affiliated would likely represent a range of experience in regard to gay identity development.

### Grounded Theory Methodology

A qualitative methodological approach seemed most fitting to explore the above concerns. Instead of shaping the questions in a study to fit a particular research method, the methodology should be chosen because it is the best fit for the questions the researcher seeks to explore (Giorgi, 1970; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because the purpose

of this study was to extend our understanding of sexual minority identity development and to generate theory about how one's global meaning making influences that person's understanding and experience of sexual minority identity, qualitative methods seemed most appropriate. Morrow (2005) has suggested that qualitative approaches are especially helpful in research with persons within a particular cultural framework, such as in the cultural experience of sexual minority individuals who participated in this study. Also, Pfaffenberger (2005) has suggested that quantitative methods may at times obscure the specific and sometimes idiosyncratic paths that individuals travel to more advanced development. She contended that qualitative methods may therefore be most helpful in exploring optimal adult development. Further, qualitative methods are designed to study the "experiential life" of individuals, "as it is lived and constituted in awareness" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p.138). Therefore, the focus of the qualitative approach on how individuals live and understand their own experiences makes this methodology the most appropriate approach in researching Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory. This is because the epistemological foundation underlying Kegan's work is that all human activity is indeed meaning-making activity: "There is no feeling, no experience, no thought, no perception, independent of a meaning-making context in which it *becomes* a feeling, a thought, a perception, because we *are* the meaning-making context" (Kegan, 1982, p.11).

There are, of course, a variety of qualitative approaches to inquiry (Polkinghorne, 2005). Because my intent was to generate substantive theory about how overall meaning making (e.g., Kegan, 1982, 1994) influences the way individuals understand and therefore experience gay identity development (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996), grounded theory (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005;

Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was the most appropriate approach. Not only is the purpose of grounded theory to investigate and comprehend complex phenomena, but grounded theory researchers explore how these phenomena are revealed in descriptions of lived experience and they attempt to generate theory about the phenomenon under study that is grounded in the narrative data. Further, Brown and colleagues (2002) contended that grounded theory was an appropriate methodological choice when exploring sexual minority identity development, because little existing research has explored other intersections of identity with sexual minority identity.

#### Goals of the Current Study

It is my hope that this research project will be useful to clinicians, scholars, and researchers. First, when published, my goal is that the current study will add to and therefore inform existing knowledge about the process of sexual minority identity development, specifically addressing how an individual's constructive development influences this process. In my own clinical work, I have found that the inclusion of a constructive-developmental paradigm in my conceptualization of client concerns has allowed me to have greater empathy for many struggles that my clients face. It is therefore my further hope that the many examples from the narrative data offered by participants that are provided in the results chapters of the current study are found to be useful to those who work with sexual minority individuals. Also, as I will detail in upcoming chapters, it is my intent to provide researchers and scholars with information about how to adapt an instrument currently used to measure constructive development so that its utility is increased for use in research studies. On a final note, it is my goal that by providing more information and depth about the process of sexual minority identity

development to existing literature, the current study will also encourage greater understanding of and compassion for the experiences of those individuals who struggle to accept and integrate their experiences of same-sex attraction.

## Chapter Two

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The goal of this study was to explore how constructive development and gay identity development may influence one another, and to generate theory about that process. As a grounded theory study is intended to be grounded in the data of the participants' narratives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I will attempt to ground this study in existing literature. To this end, I will review three primary areas of literature in this chapter. First, I will review the constructive-developmental theory of Robert Kegan (1982, 1994), which conceptually frames the current study. I will then describe conceptualizations of gay identity development. Finally, I will review literature related to the research design of this study. Specifically, I discuss the small body of existing literature that frames the current study and then review literature that suggested a specific sample from a subpopulation of gay men would be helpful in exploring the noted constructs.

#### Evolution in Meaning Making:

##### The Constructive-Developmental Theory of Robert Kegan

Constructive development has been conceptualized as ongoing cognitive and schemata development in individuals, allowing individuals to ever more complexly consider the ways they obtain and understand knowledge, and then use this understanding to guide interaction in relationships, in society, and with themselves (Fischer & Silvern, 1985; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Nelson, 2006; Piaget, 1950, 1952). In his constructive-developmental theory, Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) focused on changes in the structure and complexity of an individual's meaning making over the life-span. To Kegan, the way

an individual constructs meaning becomes increasingly complex over time. Kegan asserted that as this complexity increases, individuals transition through qualitatively different ways of knowing themselves, others, and the world. In what he termed a "neo-Piagetian" (1982, p.4) approach, Kegan described development in terms of Piaget's concept of equilibration (Piaget 1950, 1952; Meehan, 1999). Growth is conceptualized as an ongoing process of assimilation and accommodation. Life experiences are assimilated to fit present systems of understanding the world. New situations that cannot be accounted for by an individual's present meaning-making system may be the catalyst for an accommodation of that system. Kegan posited that an individual will at times maintain a dynamic balance or evolutionary truce, in which the individual's meaning-making system provides context and explanation for interactions between the self and the world. In such a truce, changes, life events, or new understandings may be assimilated without threatening the individual's current understandings or constructed meanings. At other times, the person's interaction with his or her context, history, or environment could lead to periods of disequilibrium or imbalance. These periods may be followed by accommodation, or the construction and integration of a new meaning-making system that is qualitatively different than the previous developmental position. In this view, development is theorized to be a series of emergences from embeddedness in one way of knowing to more complex and differentiated ways of knowing.

I will next summarize the five developmental positions theorized by Kegan (1982, 1994). Examples of ways that some adults could construct meaning at several of these stages will be provided in that summary, followed by a brief discussion of constructive-developmental theory and gender. Little empirical work related to Kegan's theory has

been published, and I will review studies that provide initial support for Kegan's approach to end this section of the literature review.

### *Systems of Meaning Making*

To Kegan (1982, 1994), meaning-making systems are organizing structures that inform the way a person constructs meaning. Some ways humans make meaning are seen as related to individual understandings and personalities. Other meaning making is informed by membership in cultural, ethnic, social, or gender groups and influenced by the principles of such groups. However, Kegan contended that it is the individual's own constructed understanding of the self in relation to these contexts that is paramount. Kegan asserted that individuals are embedded in particular systems of meaning making related to the way they understand themselves and the world, and that these systems provide a lens through which individuals view personal experience.

Kegan (1982, 1994) theorized five meaning-making systems, or orders of mind, throughout the life-span. The structure of each meaning-making system is defined by "subject-object balances." Kegan suggested that as we organize our worlds, the elements of our experience and the understandings of ourselves that are *object* are those which we are differentiated from, those we can have perspective on, or those we can knowingly engage in and have some control over. Aspects which are *subject* are those which we are subject to or embedded in. We do not have perspective on elements we are subject to because, in a sense, we are made up by them. A person *has* object. A person *is* subject. "We cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect upon that which is subject. Subject is immediate; object is mediate. Subject is ultimate or absolute; object is relative" (1994, p.32). Kegan posited that at every order of consciousness, we are both



subject to or embedded in certain understandings of the world, and we can take as object or have perspective on other elements of experience. A balance between what is subject and what is object shapes the way individuals make meaning and structure the world.

The structure that is determined by these subject-object balances becomes the organizing structure of the individual. As the individual moves through the world, his or her organizing structure is used to assimilate new experiences and preserve organizational continuity. However, when new experience or understanding cannot be explained or moderated by the current system of meaning, a process of accommodation or transformation to a new way of knowing may be undertaken.

Kegan (1982, 1994) theorized evolution from one order of mind to another as a process of adaptation. With each successive transformation in way of knowing, the way an individual knew him or herself and understood the world would be changed. Kegan noted the potential personal cost involved when evolution is characterized as an ongoing process of restructuring understandings of the self and the world. However, he asserted that each new subject-object balance is not simply a different way of knowing that is disconnected from earlier meaning-making systems. One new balance does not only replace the previous one or simply add more skills. Instead, the relationship from one balance to the next is "transformative, qualitative, and incorporative" (1994, p.33). What was subject becomes object, so that which the individual was defined by or subject to can now be reflected on and employed as an element or tool of the new system. What once the individual was subject to is subsumed, and it can now be held in perspective. Development is not simply ridding oneself of the past. It is a reconciliation of what was once embedded and confused with the self, so that though growth can be a painful

process at times, it also involves the integration of increasingly complex and adaptive ways in which the individual can view the self and others.

Details of each order of mind and examples of the related subject-object balances for each order will be discussed below. For clarity, I will discuss some elements of each balance in first person, to demonstrate how an individual making meaning in that balance may conceptualize certain concerns. I will also offer brief vignettes to elucidate each order in which adults have been found to make meaning (Kegan, 1994). Because the current study will explore connections between constructive development and gay identity development, these conceptualizations will be focused on adults making meaning related to the development of a gay identity.

#### *Subject-Object Balances*

Kegan (1982, 1994) suggested a developmental process that transitions from less to more complex or differentiated orders of mind. No ages were necessarily linked with certain meaning-making systems, but lower stages of development are generally associated with youth and the final stage associated with more life experience. General age ranges are provided for the less complex stages of development, but are not suggested as specific markers of movement through orders of mind. No specific stage of development is expected for all adults. Happiness and/or mental health are not thought to be linked to certain meaning-making systems. Kegan theorized that the way individuals construct meaning evolves in complexity, but he did not imply that such complexity determines emotional states. Therefore, these levels of constructive development are numbered for the sake of clarity in explanation and in the order that they occur in individuals. However, the numbers themselves are not intended to imply that the stages

are equal in length for each person, that every individual will necessarily travel through all stages, or that a higher numbered stage is necessarily equal to more happiness or improvement in mental health in the person's experience.

*The Incorporative Balance.* The initial subject-object balance, named the Incorporative Balance, is believed to occur *prior* to the following five orders of mind (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Therefore, if this meaning-making stage were to be numbered according to Kegan's stage conceptualization, the Incorporative Balance would be stage zero. Kegan views the first several years of life as "objectless." The activity of the infant is assimilation. In this stage, the infant's basic organizational structure is based in simply moving and sensing, and the infant is subject to its senses or reflexes. What the child senses is perceived as an extension of itself, so that the world, the self, and the senses are not separate or held in perspective. As the Incorporative Balance ends, the child begins to recognize, relate, and attach to objects outside the self, gradually differentiating between the self and the world. The child begins to *have* reflexes rather than *be* reflexes. As the child now has impulses and perceptions of the world, she or he becomes subject to those impulses.

*The Impulsive Balance or Simple Point Structure.* The first order of mind is referred to as Simple Point Structure or the Impulsive Balance (Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Meehan, 1999). Kegan theorized that children of approximately two to six years of age make meaning at this evolutionary truce. The underlying structure of this order of mind is related to Piaget's (1950, 1952) preoperational stage. The child can now differentiate self from objects (or can now take these differences *as object*), but the child is embedded in (or *subject to*) his or her perceptions and impulses. The way the

child understands objects is subject to his or her perceptions. If the perception of a thing is changed, such as by pouring water into a differently shaped container, the thing itself has changed. Also, because the child is subject to impulses, then impulses are, in a sense, who the child is. Therefore, poor impulse control is not considered unusual or viewed as a sign of deficiency in the child who makes meaning at this order of mind.

In the first order Impulsive Balance, thinking is theorized to be focused on immediate concerns and is illogical and fanciful (Kegan, 1982, 1994). His own impulses *are* the self, so his reactions *are* the definition of the event or experience. Kegan suggested that a child's tantrum may be related to the inability of the child to encounter internal conflict between his or her own impulses versus an authority figure's demands. Because of the child's inability to hold the perspective of another person, she will demonstrate no understanding that her behavior does not fit the expectations of others (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988). In the first order child's use of language, narratives may be non-sequential or incomplete. The child will not be concerned or surprised that others do not understand, because such a reaction would involve entering the perspective of others.

As the child begins to transition to the next subject-object balance, more internal controls begin to enter awareness (Lahey et al., 1988). For example, the child may be able to begin to converse with others in a more sequential fashion, but will still be committed to his or her own impulses and need others to structure the conversation. The child may begin to adopt or follow patterns of social interaction without actually understanding the point of such patterns. For example, though the child's physical behavior may continue to be impulsive, he may become more aware of social norms

regarding personal space and notice the space others are occupying in a room. The child's behavior may not noticeably change, but now she may restrict that behavior to her own area in the room to follow social norms or rules.

*The Imperial Balance or Durable Category Structure.* Kegan's second order has been termed the Imperial Balance or the Durable Category Structure (Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Meehan, 1999). It has been theorized that children typically begin to transition through this structure at the ages of seven to 10 years. At this balance, the child begins to take perceptions and impulses as object, so she no longer *is* her feelings and perceptions, but she *has* feelings and perceptions. A notion of *what* he is emerges, as opposed to the earlier notion *that* he is. Kegan described this balance as the "birth of the role" (1982, p.137). The individual can now see that others also have their own perspectives and can imagine or take the role of the other. If I speak as a second order meaning maker, I can begin to define qualities about myself and others, as I note enduring patterns rather than momentary and impulsive reactions (Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1994). I can now see that the volume of a liquid does not change when poured into a different container. I also realize that not everyone sees the world the same way I do, so I develop a point of view. Because I now can control my impulses rather than only react to them, I can take part in what happens in the world rather than suffer the consequences of being governed by my impulsivity (Kegan, 1982). However, with my new power and freedom also comes risk. Now that I have something to do with what happens in the world, if I do not take my part, things may go badly and I may be drawn back into the world of impulsivity.

At the second order of mind, I am embedded in or subject to my own perspective and needs (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Lahey, et al., 1988). I can experience and express points of view, but I cannot internalize the points of view of other persons. I can name my own point of view and see that others have views as well, but I cannot evaluate these different points of view inside myself. Because I can understand that others have needs and perspectives but I cannot yet hold and discriminate these inside myself, I have to anticipate how others will react and I understand how others feel based only on how they react. Other persons are understood on how they meet or do not meet my own needs. Because I am embedded in and see through my needs, I cannot get perspective on my needs. Therefore, I control or predict the behavior of others because my meaning making is based in knowing how the consequences of my own and others' actions affect my interests.

Though it is not common, some adults have been found to make meaning at the second order (Kegan, 1994). An example of categorical meaning making may help to clarify the Imperial Balance. I contend that a gay man at stage two could have difficulty in identifying himself as gay to self and others, also known as "coming out." This difficulty would not be based on fear of others' dissatisfaction. At stage two, this man can see that others have points of view and that those views may not agree with his own. He can understand that others may be disapproving, but he would not encounter guilty feelings about others' disapproval. He would have to be able to incorporate the other's perspective with his own to feel guilty, and this would require an internal life that can take the perspective of others and organize the self based on that perspective. This man's decision about coming out would be based on his concern with the consequences of such

an action for himself. Because self-identification as gay generally brings some type of condemnation or loss in this society, I contend that a man who makes meaning at stage two may be very hesitant to come out. This man may not even think of himself as gay. He would behave in a way that suits his needs, perhaps through seeking physical intimacy as he deems necessary, without considering his actions as related to a gay identity. Because he is embedded in his needs and interests, he simply follows his instincts and monitors the reactions of others to determine how to continue meeting his needs while suffering as few negative consequences as possible. Many other conceptualizations are possible with stage two meaning making. If the man perceived reward for publicly identifying as gay, he may not find difficulty in doing so. This and the following examples of subject-object balances are intended to illuminate possible experience rather than encapsulate the whole of a particular order of mind.

*The Interpersonal Balance or Cross-Categorical Structure.* In Kegan's (1982, 1994) third order, the individual is believed to emerge from an embeddedness in needs. As needs move from subject to object, the individual can *have* needs, instead of being *defined by* needs. It is theorized that the person who makes meaning at the third order can now hold differing points of view simultaneously inside the self, and can integrate the needs of his or her system with the needs of others. In stage two, experiences were navigated and negotiated so that the individual's needs were fulfilled (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Meehan, 1999). The individual needed to know from others what they think and feel, so that he or she could evaluate the consequences inherent in a specific situation. As the individual leaves stage two, the ability to internalize the points of view of other persons coincides with the ability to experience the feelings of both self and others. The person

at stage three can now take the other person's feelings into account. The strength of the third order is that the earlier embeddedness in only the personal point of view gives way to the ability to experience a shared reality. As a person making meaning at the Cross-Categorical stage, I can truly be interpersonal in my relationships with others because I can now truly understand and feel other worldviews. I can be in relationship, rather than find consequences (Kegan, 1982). I can begin to care about what other persons may think of me, so I may begin to make decisions based on the values of my reference group, even if I would prefer a different course of action (Hammerman, 2002). I can now see my role as part of a larger social structure.

Each new evolutionary truce also brings challenges (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Meehan, 1999). As I make meaning at the Interpersonal Balance, I can take feelings and perspectives as object and I can experience a shared reality of relationships. However, I am subject to the context that shared reality creates. In a sense, rather than *having* interpersonal relationships, I *am* my interpersonal relationships. My self becomes confused with my relationships, and I define and experience myself and my purpose in the context of my relationships. According to Meehan (1999), an individual at the Cross-Categorical Structure can feel what other persons feel, but cannot differentiate her or his own feelings from the points of view of valued others.

To regulate or mediate conflicting points of view at the third order, I need to co-determine, with an externally adopted source, a context for evaluation and action (Meehan, 1999). I may feel responsible for the feelings of others because I co-create my own feelings by taking another's feelings inside myself. Therefore, when I am met with competing expectations from valued others, I may feel overwhelmed (Hammerman,



2002). Because I am, in a way, comprised of the expectations of others, I may be unable to choose a course of action without external support or validation. Conflict is then not believed to be based on choosing between what I want and what someone else wants (Kegan, 1982). Instead, conflict arises when what I want in one relationship (or shared reality) is different than what I want as part of another relationship. I cannot mediate my experience of a shared reality with others, because I *am* that shared reality. I may find it difficult to be angry with valued others, because anger could risk or damage the relationship. In essence, if I can get fully angry at a valued other, then I have feelings that are different than that person's feelings and the other is a separate person. Kegan suggested that a person at stage three will feel sadness and incompleteness more often than anger because of that person's inability to differentiate the self from the interpersonal context.

It would be incorrect to assume that individuals who make meaning at the third order do not value their own points of view or are unassertive (Kegan, 1982). Cross-Categorical meaning makers construct the self differently. In a sense, there is not a self or identity that is separate from the co-constructed and contextual shared realities of relationships or group memberships. The ego is not missing at this stage; instead the shared psychological space is not object, so it cannot be held in perspective. The individual's ability to bring the demands of competing realities into mediation and evaluation would signal the move to stage four. According to Kegan, at the Interpersonal Balance, intimacy is experienced with others, but there is not an independent self to share with others. Instead, the presence of the other is required to bring the self to life.

The example of a gay man who makes meaning at stage three may help to further clarify this stage. This man would conceptualize coming out differently than the man discussed earlier who views the world through a stage two lens. He may experience his sexual identity in relation to the viewpoints of valued others. I contend that it would often be difficult for this man to come out as well. Perhaps his parents and his church hold negative views about his attraction to other men. The way he currently constructs meaning would not allow him to separate those viewpoints from his own. Those viewpoints would, instead, be adopted as his own. A conflict could arise as this man ages and develops new sets of friends or joins social groups in which same-sex attraction is validated and normalized. He would not be able to mediate this conflict internally from an independent or self-authored point of view. He may feel torn and show different parts of himself while in different contexts (e.g., seeming heterosexual with his parents and gay with his new friends). If one of these shared realities is more valued or is a primary source of identity, this man may internalize that person or group's beliefs as a central identity.

*The Institutional Balance or Systemic Structure.* At stage four, it is theorized that the individual can now take the interpersonal system as object (Kegan, 1982, 1994). I now *have* relationships. I used to, in effect, *be* my relationships. I can now take perspective on the shared realities of my interpersonal relationships. At stage three, I could only experience one side of a conflict or issue at a time. At stage four, I can examine both sides of a conflict simultaneously. Now that the feelings and perspectives from my shared realities are moved to object, my knowing and understanding are regulated by my self-authored point of view. It is now a self-system that organizes the

shared realities of stage three (Hammerman, 2002; Meehan, 1999). I do not abandon relationships at this point. I am still living in a context of society, history, and culture, but I am now able to have a self that is not owned by these shared contexts. I am now the judge between competing demands or expectations (Kegan, 1982; 1994). I can identify parts of myself that may lean toward different decisions or positions, and I can take responsibility for my own feelings. I may be shaped by my context, but I name my values and my own role in my construction of the world. An individual who makes meaning at stage four constructs a system that is autonomous and that person is the administrator of that system. According to Kegan (1982), stage four is ideological. Meaning making at this stage represents the truth as it is understood by the individual.

The strength of this order of mind is that I now have a system that can mediate my own values and can self-organize (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Meehan, 1999). However, I am subject to this self-authored system, so I cannot have perspective on it. I become identified with my self-authored system and embedded in it. Because I administrate and generate standards for my way of knowing, I am subject to the institution I have created and I cannot consider how the system operates. I can evaluate my systemic approach to the world and consider if my actions match with my intentions. I can see that other people have beliefs, views, and approaches to the world, but I can only judge these through the lens of the system I have generated. I cannot consider if the values I maintain are the ones that are most helpful to me overall. I can see other people's systems, respect them, and learn from them. My own system can be informed by these experiences and I can, as self-author, change elements of my own system over time. The important point is that even as I modify, I am still constructing my own system for understanding and

approaching the world. It may also be valuable to note that the system I create could be expansive and based on valuing the viewpoints of others. In itself, however, this is still a self-generated system.

How would an individual's decision to come out look from a stage four meaning-making structure? At the Institutional Balance, an individual will author her or his own system of values and process for dealing with conflict. A gay man at this stage would have the ability to consider the points of view of valued others along with his own concerns. The crucial point is that he is the author and administrator of whatever path he chooses. He could determine that his parents' problem with his sexual identity is not his own problem and choose to self-identify as a gay man. He could also decide that the experience of being an identified gay man in society is too costly, so he could mediate the contexts in which he is out and those in which he has not disclosed his identity. Consider that this man is religious and as he carefully weighs his competing loyalties, he determines that his religious identity is more central to his values than any other identity. Elements of his religious beliefs may be adopted to become part of his self-authored system. The possible ways a person who makes meaning at stage four could consider the act of self-identifying as gay or lesbian are potentially limitless. What is clear is that the person who makes meaning in the Systemic Structure will address this issue from a self-authored system.

*The Interindividual Balance or Trans-Systemic Structure.* An individual's initial transition away from the Institutional Balance to Kegan's (1982, 1994) fifth order is based in the individual's ability to consider the limitations of the institution he or she has created. The idea of the Interindividual Balance is that the self is not only *one* form.

Rather, the self *has* forms (Lahey et al., 1988). Few individuals are believed to fully develop a meaning-making system that has no transitional elements of the fourth order still remaining. In my own study and discussion of Kegan's theory, I have found the fifth order the most difficult subject-object balance to describe clearly. I consider my own meaning-making stage to be primarily fourth order, and it could be argued that the fifth order may be difficult to describe for individuals who make meaning primarily from an Institutional (fourth order) perspective. In any case, as I attempt to elucidate the workings and complexity of the fifth order, I will rely on quotations from Kegan, other authors, and some at least partially fifth order individuals more often than in previous sections of this chapter. By doing so, I hope to provide a clear description of Interindividual meaning making.

According to Meehan (1999), stage five meaning making begins "regarding other systems (or other ways of making meaning) not merely as a respectful anthropologist visiting a radically separate culture, but as a participant who shares in the opposite or alien" (p.33). At stage four, I could negotiate and re-form my institutional balance, but to do so I navigate between my own and other psychological systems to author my own form. At stage five, I now can take these psychological systems as object:

No longer embedded within its own self-system, the interindividual self orients to the process that generates systems and to the relationship between forms and systems. This "self-as-process" as opposed to "self-as-product" now *has* a self-generated system of values and standards as opposed to *being* that self-generated self. The self can seek out information about how it is operating and join others

in a transformative process by which the very principles of its own and others' systems can be altered. (Meehan, 1988, p.34).

Kegan (1994) suggested that, at stage five, conflict is created by being identified with only one primary system. A central idea of the Interindividual Balance is that in previously identifying with only one form of the self (e.g., the constructed self of the fourth order), the individual has been limited in the ways he or she can experience the world and can be experienced by the world:

My holding [these ideas] so dearly actually deadens my vitality; it drains that juice that makes me alive... as if life has become about being in a flow or motion of continuous experiencing and participating, and that being stuck is taken as a sign of having fallen out of a flow, being thrown up onto the banks of the river instead of flowing along in it, so that one finds oneself stopped, beached, stuck.

The goal is really to return to the flow (Lahey et al., 1988, p.159).

The stage five individual moves toward "an identification with the transformative process of our being rather than the formative process of our becoming" (Kegan, 1994, p.351).

The "formative process of becoming" is a defining characteristic of the fourth order.

Institutional meaning makers formulate their own systems. They self-author by comparing their own form to the forms of others and they can refine their own forms by making adjustments in their personal systems of understanding as desired or needed.

Individuals at the fourth order define and redefine a self with a particular form. The fifth order individual instead embraces the self not as a single form, but as a self with many forms and as a self-in-transformation. The Interindividual meaning maker has perspective on the idea that he or she once self-authored a particular way of viewing the

world that now seems too limiting. The fifth order individual realizes that the meaning making systems of other persons have also been constructed and they now hold as much potential merit as one's own. Stage five is transformative, because the individual identifies now with who he or she can become rather than how he or she must be defined. The constructed meanings and understandings of others may be freely explored because they are simply other possible forms of the self that may be tried on and perhaps integrated, without fear that the self will somehow be lost in the process.

With Trans-Systemic knowing, the self now authors the organization, rather than having a self that is defined by the organization (Kegan, 1982, 1994). When comparing the primary adult stages, Kegan suggested that at stage three, conflict is not recognized but is experienced as being torn between conflicting shared realities. In his words, the conflict "is the ground and I am the figure upon it" (1982, p. 106). At stage four, the conflict is held and internalized. The self now becomes the ground and the competing issues are the poles upon it (p. 106). The stage four self developed to resolve such conflict. At stage five, the individual can now recognize her or his own institutional selves and the constructed selves of others. He can release the earlier embeddedness in an individually-defined institution and embrace the interdependence of individuals. She now *has* a self, in the way that she once *was* a self. The strength of stage five is related to the ability to release the institutional and singular definition of what a self is or was. I can now, in a way, give myself fully to another person, while also maintaining a distinct self. The idea of failure in work or relationships is no longer the threat it once was, because conflict is simply too much dependence on a singular self-authored system and is

now embraced as offering transformative opportunities to the self, others, and the community.

In my personal discussions with others related to fifth-order knowing, I have been struck with the difference between describing and living Interindividual meaning making. I can describe the fifth order, noting that meaning makers at this stage can take perspective on the system they have constructed for viewing the world. They can then focus on their own transformation or evolution without fear that they will somehow lose themselves if they challenge their own constructions of the world. I wonder how it would be to live stage five meaning making? Am I truly able (or willing) to take the way I understand the world into perspective and to challenge this construction of my beliefs and values, even though this process may provide more complex and perhaps adaptive ways to view concerns? Because of these issues, I believe it is difficult to explain how an individual at stage five would address coming out as gay or lesbian. I suspect that the central issue to an individual making meaning at stage five would be *how* one is lesbian or gay, simply because this is one of the many forms of the self. At the Interindividual Balance, the concern would be how constructing the self as gay or lesbian could limit the way the individual experiences him or herself or the world. This does not imply that sexual identity necessarily changes or that all long-held viewpoints change with Trans-Systemic Structure. Instead, I contend that the individual would be able to consider multiple ideas about the formation and adoption of a sexual identity without feeling threatened that an exploration of other views must necessarily mean the loss or adaptation of one's own views. At stage five meaning making, it is theorized that the individual is



able to examine his or her own and others' constructions or worldviews while remaining open to personal growth and ongoing transformation (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

*Transitions Between Subject-Object Balances*

According to Kegan (1982, 1994), development is a process, and movement from one subject-object balance to the next is not sudden. Developmental changes are described as evolutionary holding environments occurring over time that both support an individual with the more comfortable knowing of the former order and challenge that person with new learning that acts as an impetus for development of the next subject-object balance (Hammerman, 2002). Kegan (1982, 1994) contends that individuals move from constructing meaning in one specific order to a transitional stage that involves constructing meaning with some combination of the elements of the former order and the forthcoming order. The transition from one stage to the next is not immediate. Transitions between stages involve the presence of elements of both stages simultaneously, and the period of transformation is often lengthy. Many adults may remain in a transitional stage indefinitely, feeling torn between the strengths and limitations of several orders of mind.

There are four transitional steps between any two orders (Hammerman, 2002; Lahey et al., 1988). For example, in the transition from the Interpersonal Balance (represented by the number 3 for clarity) to the Institutional Balance (represented by the number 4), then development from the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage to the 4<sup>th</sup> stage, including the four transitional positions, would be labeled: 3, 3(4), 3/4, 4/3, 4(3), and 4. In the transitional stages of 3/4 and 4/3, both orders are fully present in individual meaning making, but the order listed first is predominant. In interview narratives with individuals in these two

transitional positions, the two orders of mind seem almost to battle for predominance, but one order seems to rule more of the individual's knowing than does the other order. The transitional positions of 3(4) and 4(3) are the inverse of one another. At 3(4), the 3<sup>rd</sup> order is the fully functioning order, a full 4<sup>th</sup> order meaning-making structure is not yet functioning, but a whisper or hint of the Institutional Balance is in evidence. The individual is slowly beginning to question his or her current 3<sup>rd</sup> order constructions. At 4(3), the 4<sup>th</sup> order way of knowing is present fully, but the individual will at times need to defend against a return to meaning making with a 3<sup>rd</sup> order way of knowing. I again note that using these numbers to represent constructive-developmental transitions helps to more clearly elucidate the process of development, but is not meant to imply that the time each person spends in any stage of constructive development is equal or that one stage is necessarily more helpful than another to the person in terms of happiness or mental health.

#### *Kegan's Theory and Gender*

At a cursory glance, Kegan's (1982, 1994) construction of orders three and four could be viewed to suggest that a stereotypically female way of knowing (Cross-Categorical or relational) is less developmentally advanced than a stereotypical male way of knowing (Institutional or standing separate from embeddedness in shared realities). Are traditionally male styles of knowing imbued with greater value in this theory? Kegan (1994) addresses these concerns specifically and calls them a confusion of terms. What relational theory (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tartule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991) describes as "separateness" or "independence" and what constructive-developmental theory names "autonomy" are not to be confused (Kegan, 1994, p. 219).

An individual's ability to self-author is not to imply separateness. Individual style can be both relational and self-authoring. Also, "relational" and "connected" are not to be confused with "embedded" (Kegan, 1994, p. 219). Embeddedness, in subject-object theory, refers to a lack of differentiation in a particular psychological surround. An individual relational approach is not to be confused with a lack of differentiation.

*Empirical Support for Constructive-Developmental Theory*

The majority of empirical support for Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of constructive development has been from dissertation studies. I will first review these early dissertation studies and then turn to a more detailed summary of published empirical work. Kegan (1994) described the results of 12 dissertation studies using the Subject-Object Interview (SOI; Lahey et al., 1988) to determine the subject-object balance of 282 participants. See Table 2.1 at the end of this chapter for percentages of participants who scored in each subject-object balance and general transitional stage. The overall sample from 12 dissertations is comprised of a largely well-educated or professional population (Hammerman, 2002). The results of a subset of 75 participants (three of the 12 studies) from a wider range of socioeconomic groups are also presented. According to these dissertation studies, roughly 13% - 36% of adults make meaning fully or partially in order two. Approximately 54% to 65% of adults employed a third order structure for some elements of meaning making. Fifty-two percent to 73% of adults interviewed described a full or partial fourth order structure. Three to six percent of adults represented the fourth to fifth order transition, and no adults interviewed were assessed at a fully fifth order subject-object balance. In these 12 dissertation studies, the percentages of adults making meaning at some stages are more similar between the full sample and

the subset sample than at other stages. For example, a larger percentage of adults (36%) from the subset sample (wider range of socioeconomic experience) made meaning fully or partially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> order than did the participants (13%) in the overall sample (well-educated and professional). Further, 35% of those in the total sample (N = 282) made meaning in the 4<sup>th</sup> order, while 19% of the participants in the subset sample (N = 75) made meaning at the same order. Percentages of adults making meaning in the other stages and transitions were more similar for individuals in the two samples.

In a 2001 study, Kegan and his colleagues followed 41 adult learners in a community college, a family literacy program, and a workplace literacy program, to explore how the participants experienced learning in their respective programs and to understand how this learning influenced personal change. Most participants were immigrants to the United States and were involved in the process of acculturation to this country. The researchers found that the range of ways of knowing represented by this sample was very similar to the subset of dissertation studies (N = 75) mentioned above. They found that the help learners needed, the ways individuals learned, and the manner in which the process of acculturation was encountered was related to participants' particular subject-object balances. Participants in similar orders of mind described similarities in ways of knowing, needs for learning, and the process of acculturation. Participants in differing orders of mind described differences. For example, a teacher-directed approach to learning was preferred by adult students who made meaning at less complex and other-authored subject-object balances, while a student-driven approach was preferred by students who made meaning in more self-authoring ways. Over the course of this study,

some learners were observed to transition from one subject-object balance to the next, transforming not only *what* they know, but *how* they know.

Baxter Magolda (1998, 2001, 2004) and Lewis and colleagues (2005) have more recently conducted research related to constructive development. Baxter Magolda, building on Kegan's (1982, 1994) work, argued that the central constructive-developmental challenge for college students is the movement toward self-authorship. Baxter Magolda (1998, 2001, 2004) reported findings on constructive development of 17 men and 22 women who were in their twenties when beginning research participation. She followed these 39 participants longitudinally over a 16-year period, interviewing the participants yearly and employing grounded theory methodology to examine the development of self-authorship. It should be noted that Baxter Magolda did not measure meaning-making complexity with the Subject-Object Interview (SOI; Leahy et al., 1988) in these studies. The SOI is the instrument used to measure constructive-developmental level according to Kegan's theory. Instead, she qualitatively explored meaning making through semi-structured interviews, which she then examined according to Kegan's (1982, 1994) and Perry's (1970) theories of development. Baxter Magolda found that the students in her sample entered college struggling to make meaning through self-authorship, which developed post-college for the participants. In other words, these participants made meaning according to Kegan's Interpersonal Balance when initially participating in the research. Baxter Magolda contended that the role of educators is to offer a holding environment that paces development to Institutional knowing, and she qualitatively explored that process of development in her longitudinal research. She

encouraged educators to develop “learning partnerships” with their students which would encourage student self-authorship.

Lewis and colleagues (2005) did employ the SOI in their study of identity development with college-aged military cadets. They interviewed 31 randomly-selected students (13% female) in the Fall of their first year of study at a military academy and conducted a second interview in the Spring of the participants’ second year. A second random sample of 24 students (again 13% female) was selected and interviewed in the Spring of their second year. A total of 32 of these earlier interviewed students were reinterviewed during December of their final year in school, though all participants remaining in the study at this point were male. Lewis and colleagues’ findings were consistent with those of Baxter Magolda, in that Interpersonal knowing was the primary meaning-making stage for their participants and the move to self-authorship or Institutional meaning making generally occurred after the college years for the majority of participants. Specifically, none of the participants made meaning in the Institutional Balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994), even partially, during their first year of college. Approximately 6% made meaning in the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition during their Sophomore year, while approximately 19% made meaning in that same transition during their Senior year. No participants were reported to have made meaning fully at the Institutional Balance during college. The findings of both Baxter Magolda and Lewis and colleagues align with Kegan’s (1994, Kegan et al., 2001) findings about the expected constructive-developmental stage levels of college-age students.

In summation, dissertation studies thus far have demonstrated that qualitatively different ways of knowing exist across a cross-section of adults (Kegan, 1994; Kegan et

al., 2001). In a later longitudinal study (Kegan et al., 2001), further support for Kegan's conceptualization was provided, and individuals demonstrated movement from one subject-object balance to the next. More recent dissertation studies (e.g., Hammerman, 2002; Meehan, 1999; Osgood, 1991; Pratt, 1998) have employed constructive-developmental theory as a way of exploring and understanding other human processes, such as the activities of teaching and learning, readiness for parenting, and the process of developing as a psychotherapist. Recent published studies (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1998, 2001, 2004; Lewis et al., 2005) have focused on the process of constructive development in college students and the findings of these studies have provided further support for Kegan's conceptualizations. Overall, the data suggest a gradual unfolding of order of consciousness as theorized by Kegan and as measured by the SOI (Lahey et al., 1988). The multiple studies conducted with the SOI (e.g. Bar-Yam, 1991; Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2005; Meehan, 1999; Osgood, 1991; Pratt, 1998) have found a generally consistent number of participants making meaning in each subject-object balance, suggesting that the SOI is a valid measure of the meaning-making complexity of individuals. Specific details of SOI reliability and validity will be discussed further in Chapter 3. I will next review literature on conceptualizations of gay identity development, before considering how the two constructs of constructive development and gay identity development may be influenced by one another in the experiences of gay men.

### Gay Identity Development

According to Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, and D'Andrea (2003), structural theories of development are based on several propositions. Individuals develop in an effort to

construct meaning from life experiences (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Psychological development occurs through stages that are sequential, hierarchical, and definable (Kohlberg, 1984; Sprinthall, Peace, & Kennington, 2001). Finally, movement from one stage to the next is represented by movement from lesser to greater complexity in feeling, thinking, and acting (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey & Simek-Morgan, 2002; Loevinger, 1976). Structural theories also offer conceptualizations of what prompts development (Lewis et al., 2003). The experience of disequilibrium or discontinuity may function as an impetus for transition or growth. As this transition occurs, each developmental stage is characterized by a qualitatively different way of looking at the world and at oneself (Kegan, 1994). In each stage or phase, individuals interpret life experiences in more differentiated, integrated and comprehensive ways as they psychologically develop (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1994). Growth occurs as developmental stages emerge in a predictable pattern, and the individual reorganizes and attempts to integrate the learnings and experiences of the earlier stages in new ways (Loevinger, 1976). I will next review structural theories of gay identity development, first noting early contributions to the literature on sexual minority identity development and then centering on the model used to frame the current study.

### *Conceptualizations of Gay Identity*

Structural theorists describe psychological development through hierarchical models that characterize human growth, and these models have been applied to aspects of human experience such as sexuality or sexual identity (Lewis et al., 2003). Theorists (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; and Troiden, 1989) have argued that when an individual defines his or her sexual identity,



this self-definition includes an individual perception and experience of sexual stimulation, desire, and arousal, and a sociosexual role in which the individual follows or rejects cultural or societal sexual expectations (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). However, early theoretical literature on development and sexuality reflects the presence of a prevalent heterosexist bias at the time. For example, Freud attempted to describe what he considered normal sexual development and suggested that individuals who were healthy sublimated feelings of attraction toward others of the same sex (Fancher, 1973; Rothblum, 2000). Erikson (1950) did not directly address attraction between members of the same sex in his writing, but he did discuss healthy genitality in relation to sexual expression with a loved one of the opposite sex. Most more recent developmental theorists (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1989; Troiden, 1989) have conceptualized the task facing gay or lesbian individuals as one of growth and adjustment in a largely hostile environment. Though this perspective has been helpful in redefining the early definitions of minority sexual identity that were pathologizing of that identity, the focus was largely limited to individual factors in the developmental process. The effects of a wider social context including the interactions between the individual and social groups have only recently been considered in psychological literature (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002).

#### *Models of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development*

Most stage models of lesbian and gay identity formation (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) follow a general sequence of stages that trace awareness of sexual identity through exploration and acceptance, to disclosure and integration or synthesis of a gay or lesbian identity. Some have argued, however, that these stage

models do not examine the diversity of human sexual experience (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). These models focus primarily on gay men and lesbians, without consideration of those who would identify as bisexual, transgender, or questioning. Generally, these models consider sexual identity development in an essentialist perspective. Essentialist theories of social science characterize some aspects of individuals as stable and unchanging (Broido, 2000; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). Essentialist theories that examine gay or lesbian experience posit questions about the genetic or environmental sources of these individuals' attractions. Sexual orientation is seen as being established early in life and sexual identity formation involves the individual learning and accepting who the person really is (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). In these theories, a distinction between gay or lesbian behavior and gay or lesbian identity, or between doing and being, was yet to be made. I will briefly describe the model theorized by Cass (1979) that represents a more essentialist orientation to sexual minority identity and is representative of much psychological literature on this topic. Because most early models describe a sequence of development similar to that proposed by Cass, I will describe only her model as an example of early work in this area. Following this review of Cass's work, I will next focus on a more current model, which directly includes the influence of social context on development and is the model employed in the current study.

#### *The Cass Model*

During her clinical work with lesbian and gay clients in Australia, psychologist Vivienne Cass (1979, 1983, 1984) developed the first widely known theoretical model of lesbian and gay identity development (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002; Worthington et al., 2002). Based on interpersonal congruency theory, Cass (1979) developed this model

from empirical and clinical data (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). In this model, identity is seen as a cognitive construct that involves understandings and feelings about the self in relation to sexuality as a social category (Eliason, 1996). Sexual minority identity is eventually seen as becoming congruent in the self in relation to direct communication with others about that identity, and by consistency between that identity and the individual's behavior (Cox & Gallois, 1996). Walters and Simoni (1993, p.94) have summarized this model to include the following stages: "(a) Identity confusion (Who am I?), (b) Identity comparison (I am different), (c) Identity tolerance (I am probably gay), (d) Identity acceptance (I am gay), (e) Identity pride (I am gay!), (f) Identity synthesis (My gayness is one part of me.)" An individual's encounters with crisis are theorized as leading to movement within this model, in an attempt to establish congruence between the person's self-perceptions, other persons' attitudes, and self-identity (Eliason, 1996). Cass (1979) theorized that individuals may choose to foreclose, or not continue in the process of identity development.

Cass (1984) validated her six-stage model with questionnaire data from 109 male and 69 female participants. She asked participants to respond to questions about personal satisfaction, disclosure of sexual orientation to others, group identification, and commitment to sexual identity. Cass believed that a consideration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors related to these issues would illuminate the process of identity development in gay and lesbian persons. Cass found that her results distinguished six groups of people (related to her theorized six stages), however, the first two stages and the last two stages were very similar to one another. Because the stages of Identity Confusion and Identity Comparison and the stages of Identity Pride and Identity

Synthesis were indistinct, a four-stage model may be more appropriate. However, no formal revisions to the Cass model were noted in literature.

### *Recent Conceptualizations of Gay Identity*

Cass (1979) viewed identity as changing over time in response to individual behavior and in relation to feedback from others. She suggested that assigning context to sexuality within the larger self-identity is the end goal. In other words, sexual identity is only one aspect of the entire identity. In this light, it would seem that Cass could view a committed gay or lesbian activist as someone whose identity is not complete, if gay or lesbian identity must be only a small part of the overall identity for one to be considered mature. Could considerable political action be undertaken without the identity becoming relevant to the political statement? Does such participation in political or social activism equal lack of development, according to the Cass model?

Social constructionists assert that historical and social contexts shape the ways in which people understand and define themselves, others, and the world (Broido, 2000). This view challenges the essentialist notion that there are universal experiences of sexual identity. Social constructionist theorists, “reject the idea that there exists a fundamental, consistent meaning to or organization of sexuality across cultures and historical eras; they believe, therefore, that labels such as *heterosexual*, *bisexual*, and *homosexual* also have no consistent meaning across cultures and historical eras” (Broido, 2000, p.17).

Therefore, some persons will label being lesbian or gay as central to their self-definition, and others will describe a more fluid sexual identity. Individuals are believed to be active constructors of their perceptions and identities and they use the social context to do this (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). The individual meanings that a person gives to factors

such as sexual identity are believed to influence that person's life experiences and his or her interactions. Therefore, because each individual has different meanings and experiences, the experience of any sexual identity will be specific to that person. Also, in this view, a person may identify or redefine themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or heterosexual at any stage of the life cycle. The social constructionist position argues that the meanings that individuals and societies attach to same- and other-sex attractions and relationships are the issues worthy of study, along with how these meanings affect the way individuals understand and define themselves (Broido, 2000).

In recent years, theorists and researchers have begun to consider growth and development in more complex and nonlinear fashions. Questions around the issues of how persons of diverse races, cultures, and genders experience the earlier sexual identity formation models have begun to emerge (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000), along with questions about less uniform developmental trajectories for lesbian and gay identity development (Cox & Gallois, 1996). Eliason (1996) contended that though all people will certainly have identities, the meanings of those identities vary across persons and cultures and change over time. Behaviors or meanings that were previously seen as regressions in individual developmental arcs began to be viewed as valuable attempts to solve problems. In the social constructivist view, growth and development are conceptualized as more flexible and varied than in the essentialist view (Ballou & West, 2000). Individuals are not examined as detached from ever-developing life contexts.

“The central weakness of the existing literature is the primary focus on sexual orientation as the sole component of sexual identity” (Worthington et al., 2002, p.501).

In the earlier models of gay or lesbian identity development, biopsychosocial aspects and

the effects of these contexts on individuals have often been ignored (Worthington et al., 2002). The McCarn and Fassinger model (1996) of lesbian and gay identity development allows for the effects of societal homophobia and heterosexism on development, and therefore examines a more complex conceptualization of sexual minority identity. Further, the model addresses both individual and group membership in identity formation, incorporating social constructionist perspectives into the conceptualization. Finally, the McCarn and Fassinger model also attempts to address diversity that exists within the gay and lesbian communities and that influences the identity development process (e.g., race, class, age, geographic location, occupation, and community support). Preceding models have centralized this process with early stages that characterize a deterministic realization of the “truth” of identity, and then a transition to disclosed group membership without detailed discussion of what that may mean to the individual in an oppressive society (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

#### *The McCarn and Fassinger Model*

According to McCarn and Fassinger (1996), when authors have attempted to validate their models of sexual minority identity development, they have found that the existing models could not encapsulate the complex experiences of their participants. Those earlier models may be too simplistic for diverse individuals experiencing sexual minority identity development (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001, p.5). McCarn and Fassinger (1996) originally proposed a model of lesbian identity formation that was later validated (e.g., Fassinger & Miller, 1996) for work with both lesbians and gay men. As such, this model will be discussed in relation to both of these populations. In this model, an individual sexual identity process coincides with a group membership identity process.

According to Horowitz and Newcomb (2001), this model captures a social constructionist viewpoint in that it, in essence, “recognizes that identity formation does not occur in a vacuum, and social context and relationships do in fact influence development” (p.6). The model is grouped in phases rather than stages to denote that development is “continuous and circular; every new relationship raises new issues about individual sexuality, and every new context requires renewed awareness of group oppression” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p.522).

The McCarn and Fassinger (1996) model includes four phases, in which the final outcome is an integration of both group and individual identity into a total self-concept. Earlier authors saw disclosure of sexual identity or political activism as signs of maturity (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001). Fassinger (1991) posits that activism and coming out to others are associated positively with an integrated lesbian or gay identity, but the idea that lesser degrees of these qualities equaling to less complex development ignores diversity within the sexual minority community. “Such factors as occupational environment, geographical location, racial/ethnic group membership, family situation, legal and economic realities, and support systems determine the extent to which disclosure and politicization are even possible for many lesbians and gay men” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 520).

In the earlier models, individual identity development tends to fall in the first two to three stages and group membership identity becomes relevant only later (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Therefore, it seems that as movement to minority group membership is considered, the changing individual meaning of same-sex intimacy is not reexamined. The McCarn and Fassinger (1996) model allows for the wider influence of context in

individual decisions about sexual identity disclosure and group participation by focusing on both individual identity and group identity as two different developmental trajectories. This dual sexual identity pathway allows individuals to examine and construct meaning about their membership in a minority group and also identify changes made in their attitudes toward membership in that group. In this model, gay men or lesbian women may be in several developmental phases simultaneously, not every person will travel through every phase, and the total process of identity development can be lengthy. At almost any point in development, revelations related to one branch of the model can trigger new meanings or considerations on the other branch.

The proposed model contains four phases with two “parallel branches that are reciprocally catalytic but not simultaneous: individual sexual identity and group membership identity” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p. 521). A state of nonawareness of sexual minority identity is theorized to precede both branches, and the four phases of development follow an identical sequence in each branch. I will next describe the McCarn and Fassinger model in narrative form, but also see Table 2.2 at the end of this chapter for an example of the model in table format. Though individuals are conceptualized to travel through the dual processes of individual sexual identity and group membership identity simultaneously in the model, I have described these processes separately for the purpose of clarity.

#### *Individual Sexual Identity Development in the McCarn and Fassinger Model*

*Phase one: Awareness.* A general feeling of being different or awareness of non-heterosexual attractions is noted (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Unconscious feelings become conscious and questions about previously held assumptions arise. Thoughts



about the same sex, however, do not imply a gay or lesbian label or identity. This phase is similar to stage one of the Cass (1974) model, as the individual has new awareness about gay or lesbian persons and may begin to apply that to the self. As the person begins to identify information regarding personal attraction to persons of the same sex, the current understanding of the self-identity may begin to be disrupted.

*Phase two: Exploration.* In the second phase, individuals begin to explore the questions from phase one (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). These questions may relate to sexual behaviors or to a consideration of the experiences of sexual minority individuals in a heterosexist society. Though this will perhaps necessarily involve an examination of same-sex relational attraction or sexual feelings, this time may not involve an experiential exploration for all persons.

*Phase three: Deepening/Commitment.* According to McCarn and Fassinger (1996), “Exploration leads to a deepening of self-knowledge and to the crystallization of some choices about sexuality” (p.522). Some may see same-sex relationships as the only possibility, while others consider bisexuality or decide on heterosexuality. It is in this phase that individuals identify an internal desire for others of the same-sex, and a commitment to this desire emerges. Issues of intimacy and identity can begin to integrate. Fulfillment and a growing commitment to the self can begin to counter the effects of heterosexist socialization. As this commitment deepens, the group identity process in the other branch of the model will probably be affected. Therefore, movement through this phase generally includes a consideration of some group membership branch tasks.

*Phase four: Internalization/Synthesis.* In this phase, desire and love for others of the same sex and a new level of self-acceptance relating to these concerns are more fully integrated (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). After resolving what have been difficult and lengthy issues and decisions, a sense of consistency within the self may develop. Satisfaction with a lesbian or gay identity and an unwillingness to change grows. It should be pointed out, however, that within this process of continuing transformation, group membership and public identity can continue to change. Unlike earlier models, McCarn and Fassinger suggested that an individual may choose to be “closeted” in certain contexts (such as in an unsupportive work environment), but as long as this is a thoughtful individual consideration, developmental integration is possible. Once again, it is unlikely that individuals will reach this phase of development without beginning the process of addressing group membership identity on the parallel branch of this model. This is theorized to be due to the experience of conducting personal examinations such as these in a largely heterosexist and homophobic society.

*Group Membership Identity Development in the McCarn and Fassinger Model*

According to McCarn & Fassinger (1996), this reciprocal branch of the model explores the tasks individuals undertake that relate to the context in which the internal process described in the individual branch of the model occurs. In the group membership branch, individuals consider social attitudes focused on their gay or lesbian identities and toward gays and lesbians as a group. Throughout this group membership branch, lesbian and gay persons will explore feelings about themselves and others, both gay and nongay. Similar to the individual branch of the model, the phases in this branch begin in a phase of nonawareness of social attitudes about lesbians and gays. The authors note that

individuals develop in a variety of contexts, however, in respect to support or negativity about gayness. Because almost all individuals have received strong societal homophobic or heterosexist messages, the individual's process of group identification tends to involve unlearning of societal norms and dominant discourses related to gay or lesbian sexuality and identity. Further, though individuals may process through the same phases of group identity development, the difficulty of this progression for each person may be related to the degree and type of negative messages about lesbians and gays that have been experienced by the individual.

*Phase one: Awareness.* The first phase of group identity is related to a growing realization that heterosexuality is not universal (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Individuals at this phase may begin to question heterosexist assumptions. This awareness relates to the existence of other groups outside socially expected norms, rather than as a revelation about the meaning of oppression for groups. Therefore, the experience for the individual "may be more like an epiphany than a confrontation" (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p.524).

*Phase two: Exploration.* At this phase, attitudes and membership towards the reference group are further explored (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Individuals actively search for knowledge about gay men and/or lesbian women, and begin to consider what it would mean to belong to this group. Some persons may develop positive views about lesbians and gays but still not identify with a particular group. The authors make note that this process can be an emotional one. Persons who have had limited experience with gay or lesbian concerns or those who held strongly homophobic feelings in the past may experience great difficulty. Individuals may feel anger in reaction to examining their

process of development in a heterosexist society. However, for some, the excitement of finding and exploring the existence of other like-minded individuals can also be exhilarating.

*Phase three: Deepening/Commitment.* This phase is characterized by a “deepening awareness of both the unique value and oppression of the lesbian/gay community” and it “involves a commitment to create a personal relationship to the reference group, with awareness of the possible consequences entailed” (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996, p.525). In reaction to oppression, a rejection of heterosexual society and an identification with all things lesbian or gay may occur for some individuals at this phase (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). As gay men or lesbian women experience a sense of community, they may also feel pride and excitement, along with internal incongruence and anger related to heterosexism and oppression.

*Phase four: Internalization/Synthesis.* At this final phase, lesbian and gay persons define an individual meaning of and identity in sexual minority group membership (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The new identity is internalized and synthesized into an overall self-concept. After a reevaluation of earlier feelings and choices, this more integrated self can be maintained across life contexts with a sense of self-acceptance and contentment. Persons at this phase will be aware of individual oppression as a gay or lesbian person, and some may become social or political activists. Resolution of homosexual versus heterosexual attitudes should occur, and both gays and nongays are considered individually. Persons at phase four will generally have disclosed their sexual minority identity status in some way. Anxiety, insecurity, and rage can lessen and transition to more directed anger, dedication, and self-love.

*Empirical Support for the McCarn and Fassinger Model*

The McCarn and Fassinger model (1996) has been validated with both lesbian women (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) and gay men (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). The Q-sort methodology recommended for early model development (Hall, Cross, & Freedle, 1972; Weller & Romney, 1988) was employed in this respect. To establish validity, 38 lesbian and 34 gay participants (Fassinger & Miller, 1996) sorted items into separate piles that corresponded to group and individual phases of identity development. Results indicated strong support of the two-branch, four-phase model. The overall mean proportion of agreement among participants for sorting items into the two branches of the model was 80% for lesbian women and 84.2% for gay men. In regard to the four phases, lesbian participants placed the items in the expected branch and phase with 81.3% accuracy, while gay participants placed 90% of items in the expected piles. Further, results suggest that the model is applicable to diverse individuals in regard to race, age, disclosure of sexual orientation, or duration of identity development. The small sample size of these validation studies should be noted however, as this could result in inadequate power to detect statistically significant differences in participants in regard to demographics.

Future research should further examine the sensitivity of the model to diverse lesbian and gay experience and to explore other validation concerns, as little subsequent validation work on the model has occurred (J. J. Mohr, personal communication, November 16, 2006). Further model validation was established, however, in a study conducted by Mohr and Fassinger (2000) to explore specific dimensions of the experience of lesbian and gay individuals. Only the deepening/commitment and

internalization/synthesis phases were examined with the sample of 590 lesbian and 414 gay participants in this study. Alpha coefficients for gay men ranged from .62 to .64 and from .68 to .69 for lesbian women (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Mohr and Fassinger (2000) have suggested that these internal consistency estimates are likely low because the constructs they measure are multidimensional. Further, Mohr and Fassinger found that the noted phases of the McCarn and Fassinger (1996) identity development model were correlated in expected directions with need for privacy, need for acceptance, homonegativity, difficult identity process, identity confusion, and homosuperiority.

Further empirical support was provided by Tozer and Hayes (2004), in a study that explored the role of religiosity, internalized homonegativity, and identity development in the decision of gay men and lesbian women to seek conversion therapy. Alpha coefficients for the eight phases of the identity development model ranged from .62 to .94 for lesbian participants and from .66 to .90 for gay participants. In this sample of 76 women and 130 men who identified themselves as lesbian, gay, same-sex attracted, and questioning, phase of gay or lesbian identity development was correlated in expected directions with homonegativity and propensity to seek conversion therapy. Specifically, individual identity development was significantly negatively correlated with homonegativity ( $r = -.77, p \leq .001$  for lesbians;  $r = -.60, p \leq .001$  for gay men). Group identity development was also significantly negatively correlated with homonegativity ( $r = -.56, p \leq .001$  for lesbians;  $r = -.63, p \leq .001$  for gay men). Propensity to seek conversion therapy was significantly negatively correlated with individual identity development ( $r = -.81, p \leq .001$  for lesbians;  $r = -.59, p \leq .001$  for gay men) and with group identity development ( $r = -.52, p \leq .001$  for lesbians;  $r = -.61, p \leq .001$  for gay men).

In summary, the reviewed studies provide initial empirical support for the McCarn and Fassinger model (1996), though there is limited research on this or any proposed model of gay and lesbian identity development (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). Much of the existing research has focused on the experiences of White middle-class, middle-aged gay men, and has fallen short of a thorough consideration of how other dimensions of experience (e.g., race/ethnicity, ability status, socioeconomic status, age, religiosity, etc.) influence the process of development. The McCarn and Fassinger dual process model allows an individual to integrate such demands or experiences as multiple identity status, work environment, and community mores in the process of identity development (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). Such an integration of multiple dimensions of lesbian and gay experience extended the identity development literature so that the experiences of diverse lesbian and gay individuals were honored rather than pathologized. For this reason, along with the initial empirical support noted for the model, the McCarn and Fassinger model was the most appropriate for use in the current study.

#### Does Constructive Development Influence Gay Identity Development?

I have reviewed bodies of literature on gay identity development and constructive development. However, little existing research has explored the intersection of these constructs. Still, both Kegan (1982) and Fassinger (1998) have proposed that struggles in development may lead to increased cognitive complexity. Kegan suggested that when individuals feel that valued others are not accepting or when an individual experiences him or herself as different from those in significant relationships, the real or imagined possibility of disapproval may lead to development. Fassinger argued that development

from awareness to acceptance of an oppressed identity may also increase cognitive complexity, specifically to increased self-authorship and self-reliance. I will next review existing studies that directly or indirectly imply that a constructive-developmental examination may be useful in more fully understanding the process of gay identity development. I will then review literature that suggests a specific subpopulation of gay men may be a useful sample for exploring these concerns.

*Studies that Examine the Influence of Constructive Development on Identity Development*

I begin with a study that explored the relationships between cognitive development and gay identity development. Though not specifically a study of constructive development, this study employed a neo-Piagetian model as the cognitive development construct, and is therefore relevant to the current study. Marszalek, Cashwell, Dunn, and Jones (2004) explored the relationship between gay identity development, as conceptualized by Cass (1979), and cognitive development, as conceptualized in Ivey's (1990) Developmental Counseling Therapy (DCT) Model. The DCT model draws from Piaget's (1950, 1952) developmental theory and Ivey applies Piaget's conceptualization of cognitive development in childhood to adolescents and adults. Seventy-eight gay men were administered instruments that measured gay identity development and cognitive development, according to the Cass and DCT models. The majority of participants scored in more advanced stages of both the identity development (93.6% in Cass stages four through six) and cognitive development (69.3% in DCT stages three and four, which are formal operations and dialectics) models. Marszalek and colleagues found that participants in these more advanced gay identity development



stages were also likely to have scored in more advanced stages of cognitive development, as defined by the DCT model ( $X^2(1) = 9.99, p < 0.01$ ).

Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) have argued that identity development is facilitated by greater complexity in meaning making, or in other words by increased constructive development. They provided support for this argument by demonstrating, in a grounded theory study, that meaning-making capacity played a role in the ethnic identity development of 28 Latina/o students, selected from a national sample. Torres and Baxter Magolda did not measure meaning-making complexity with the Subject-Object Interview (SOI; Leahy et al., 1988). As noted earlier, the SOI is the instrument used to measure constructive-developmental level according to Kegan's theory. They instead compared the emergent themes from their study to Baxter Magolda's (1999) conceptualizations of meaning-making development. Findings suggested that the experience of cognitive dissonance and the resulting construction of more complex meaning making in participants was the key element in the way respondents both created more positive ethnic identities and decreased their own sense of vulnerability in reactions to stereotyping of self and others. In other words, meaning-making capacity facilitated more complex identity development for these participants. I point out that the ages of the participants in this study were not noted, though the authors stated they were college students and that the meaning-making struggle for their participants was related to the transition to self-authorship. According to Kegan's theory (1982, 1994), this transition would be associated with the development from the Interpersonal Balance to the Institutional Balance as described earlier.

Abes and Jones (2004) explored how meaning-making capacity influenced self-perceptions of sexual identity development in 10 lesbian college students. Participants were women at a large Midwestern university, with ages ranging from 18 to 23 years. Abes and Jones employed Kegan's (1982, 1994) conceptual framework to guide their narrative inquiry qualitative exploration. Again, these authors did not use the SOI (Lehay et al., 1988). Instead, they compared the emergent themes from their study to Kegan's and Baxter Magolda's (1999) conceptualizations of meaning-making development. Abes and Jones reported that as the participants' meaning-making became more complex and developmentally advanced, they became more able to integrate their sexual identity with other elements or dimensions of identity. In other words, meaning-making capacity played a role in the participants' ability to integrate sexual identity more complexly and "peacefully" (Abes & Jones, 2004, p. 619), in accordance with other identity dimensions. Abes and Jones also noted that their participants made meaning in more complex ways than is generally expected for many college students, with some respondents making meaning as conceptualized by Kegan's Institutional Balance or by the transition into that primary stage. The researchers wondered if identifying as lesbian and addressing heterosexist expectations was an impetus for advanced development in these participants. In other words, Abes and Jones suggested that addressing the issues of sexual identity development may also be an impetus for constructive development.

#### *Summary of Recent Studies and Implications for the Current Study*

Studies and personal accounts (as described in Beckstead & Israel, 2007 and Hershberger & D'Augelli, 2000) have demonstrated that gay and lesbian persons tend to struggle when coming to term with their sexual identities, though this struggle may be

longer and more challenging for some than others. Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) asserted that increased complexity in meaning making allowed ethnic minority participants to create more positive self-identities and address individual reactions to discrimination. Marszalek, Cashwell, Dunn, and Jones (2004), though not specifically researching constructive development, provided preliminary support for the thesis that increased cognitive complexity may be related to increased gay identity development. Abes and Jones (2004) found that more complex constructive development allowed lesbian college students to integrate sexual identity development concerns in more multifaceted ways, which their respondents linked to a less difficult process of acceptance of their own lesbian identities. Taken together, these three recent studies suggest that an individual's constructive development may indeed facilitate gay identity development. However, more research needs to be done in this respect. First, the aforementioned studies did not employ instruments validated to measure constructive development. Secondly, the two studies that specifically explored constructive development only explored these issues with college students. Missing from the literature is an exploration of these concerns that includes a wider sample of participants in regard to constructive-developmental stage and using existing instruments that have been validated to measure constructive-developmental level. I will next review literature that suggests a sample of once or currently religiously- or spiritually-affiliated gay men would be helpful in exploring how constructive development may influence gay identity development.

### A Case for Sampling Religiously- or Spiritually-Affiliated Gay Men

Cass (1979) and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) have contended that some gay or lesbian persons may conceal their feelings or behaviors for fear of negative reactions from valued others, religious groups, or society. According to Beckstead and Israel (2007), most religions communicate negative messages about same-sex attraction. Haldeman (1996) argued that such negative messages may not only isolate and confuse gay, lesbian, and bisexual (LGB) persons, but may also be experienced as damaging by LGB individuals. Tozer and Hayes (2004) later found that homonegativity and motivation to seek therapy that attempts to change same-sex sexual orientation was positively correlated with conservative religiosity. I first review several recent studies related to how lesbian and gay persons address issues of religion or spirituality, including those who seek to change their sexual orientation because of related conflict with these concerns. I then argue that a sample of currently or previously religiously- or spiritually-affiliated gay men would be useful in exploring how constructive development may influence sexual minority identity development.

Little existing empirical psychological literature has addressed the intersection of sexual orientation and spirituality or religiosity. Existing research (e.g., Balka & Rose, 1989; Davidson, 2000; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Shallenberger, 1998; Rosser, 1991; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994) has indicated that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons have struggled to resolve spiritual conflicts, with many persons choosing to leave their faith traditions in that process. More recently, Schuck and Liddle (2001) employed both qualitative and quantitative methods in a survey study that examined religious conflicts experienced by 66 lesbian, gay, and

bisexual (LGB) study participants. Sixty-four percent of this national sample perceived conflicts between their sexual orientation and religion. The researchers analyzed these participants' responses to open-ended questions about perceived conflicts using the grounded theory approach. Respondents described denominational teachings, passages of scripture, and bias of congregation members as sources of conflict. The participants described both cognitive and affective reactions to this conflict, which included depression, shame, and suicidal ideation. This conflict was linked to more difficulty in coming out and with greater variation in age of coming out.

Schuck and Liddle (2001) also employed quantitative methods in the study just reviewed above, to examine the relationship between religion and conflict. In a chi-square analysis that examined participant religion before coming out and whether the participant perceived a conflict between sexual orientation and religion, there was a significant relationship,  $X^2 (7, N = 63) = 14.52, p < .005$ . With a one-way ANOVA, researchers tested the relationship between religious conflict (independent variable) and struggle to accept LGB identity (dependent variable). Those participants who experienced religious conflict reported a mean difficulty rating of 4.4 in accepting LGB identity, while those participants without religious conflict reported a difficulty rating of 3.3. This was a significant difference,  $F (1,64) = 4.50, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$ . In other words, researchers found in the quantitative portion of the study that there was a conflict between sexuality and religion for participants, which led to a difficulty in accepting LGB identity. To address this conflict, participants endorsed survey items related to changing religious membership, identifying as spiritual instead of religious, reconceptualizing religious teachings, ending religious attendance but remaining

personally religious, or abandoning religious beliefs and attendance. Relevant to the current study, these findings suggest that religious conflicts affect identity development in LGB persons, which has also been argued by Wagner and colleagues in their aforementioned study (1994).

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) also employed qualitative and some quantitative methods to explore how 40 gay and lesbian Christians integrated their religious and sexual identities. All participants were members of the Metropolitan Community Church of New York City (MCC/NY). In-depth, semi-structured interviews centered on how participants struggled with being gay or lesbian and Christian were conducted with participants. The researchers employed “qualitative thematic and content analyses” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 339) to analyze the data. They found that integration of sexuality was revealed by participants to be a complex and long-term process. The participants described the difficulty of integrating sexuality and spirituality when many religious messages and family messages about religion had been experienced as judgmental or nonaccepting of LGB persons. The majority of participants (72.5%,  $N = 29$ ) reported that they considered their spirituality and sexuality to be integrated at the time of the study, though many described it as an ongoing process. They noted that participation in church activities was helpful in achieving this integration. The researchers then compared findings in the qualitative analysis to survey information that participants provided on sexual orientation, religious history, church role involvement, and openness to others about sexuality. Those who reported more integration also described themselves as significantly more open about their sexual orientations in general ( $F(1, 37) = 4.12, p < .05$ ) and in the workplace ( $F(1, 36) = 5.66, p < .02$ ). Gay men were

significantly less likely than were lesbians to report a full integration of sexuality and spirituality (63.6% versus 88.2%;  $c^2(1) = 3.04, p < .02$ ) and were significantly more likely to report past conflict between these identities (90.9% versus 44.4%;  $c^2(1) = 10.18, p < .001$ ). Though external validity is limited with this particular sample (all were members of one particular church), findings suggest that gay men struggle to integrate sexuality and spirituality, and this struggle is related to the amount of comfort they feel in being open about sexuality in general and in the workplace.

*Religious Affiliation and Those Who Seek Conversion Therapy*

As noted earlier, Tozer and Hayes (2004) found that in same-sex attracted individuals, conservative religiosity was positively correlated with homonegativity and the motivation to seek therapy that attempts to change same-sex sexual orientation. Conversion therapy, also referred to as “reparative therapy” and “reorientation therapy,” has been defined by Shidlo and Schroeder (2002) and Bieschke, Paul, and Blasko (2007) as any professional, paraprofessional, or peer-group therapeutic attempt to change LGB orientation to heterosexual orientation. Conversion therapy attempts to change not only sexual behaviors with members of the same sex, but also attempts to convert emotional attractions to same-sex others. Across studies (e.g., Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Nicolosi, Byrd, & Potts, 2000; Ponticelli, 1996, 1999; Schaeffer, Hyde, Kroencke, McCormick, & Nottebaum, 2000; Schaeffer, Nottebaum, Smith, Dech, & Krawczyk, 1999; Spitzer, 2003; Tozer & Hayes, 2004), the majority of participants (primarily White male individuals) who sought conversion treatment were religious.

Tozer and Hayes (2004), in a study with 130 men and 76 women who were gay, lesbian, same-sex attracted, and questioning, found that participants whose religious

identities were primary identities ( $r = .30, p < .001$ ) and those who held homonegative beliefs ( $r = .87, p < .001$ ) were significantly more likely to see conversion therapy as an option. Tozer and Hayes also found that those in early phases of gay and lesbian identity development were significantly more likely to consider conversion therapy. Specifically, participant scores on a scale of propensity to seek conversion therapy were inversely associated with lesbian individual identity development ( $r = -.81, p < .001$ ), lesbian group identity development ( $r = -.52, p < .001$ ), gay individual identity development ( $r = -.59, p < .001$ ), and gay group identity development ( $r = -.56, p < .001$ ), as conceptualized by the McCarn and Fassinger model (1996). Overall, Tozer and Hayes (2004) found that the relationship between intrinsic religiosity and propensity to seek conversion therapy was mediated by internalized homonegativity. The overall model was significant,  $F(2, 198) = 301.90, p < .001$ , and religiosity and homonegativity scores explained 75% of the variance in propensity to seek conversion therapy.

Bieschke, Paul, and Blasko (2007) summarized empirical evidence relating to the effectiveness of conversion therapy (e.g., Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Nicolosi, Byrd, & Potts, 2000; Ponticelli, 1996, 1999; Schaeffer, Hyde, Kroencke, McCormick, & Nottebaum, 2000; Schaeffer, Nottebaum, Smith, Dech, & Krawczyk, 1999; Spitzer, 2003; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). These authors suggested that across the noted studies, the majority of participants appear to have been at least partially motivated by their religious beliefs to attempt sexual orientation change. When qualitative data were provided in these studies, individuals were described as both greatly desiring to change and greatly struggling to do so. Though some type of sexual orientation change appears to have been experienced by a small subset of the participants, the change itself is described differently



across studies. Bieschke and colleagues (2007) contended that conversion therapy may actually be more useful in managing behavior change in these individuals, but have little enduring effect on change in sexual orientation. Finally, the majority of participants in the above-noted studies experienced conversion therapy as harmful, though they may have determined this at some later time than during the therapy itself.

#### *Implications for the Current Study*

Many LGB persons appear to struggle with conflicts in integrating their sexual orientations and their Christian religious beliefs (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). Tozer and Hayes (2004) found a correlation between gay and lesbian individuals whose religious identities were primary identities and less complex gay or lesbian identity development. Together these studies suggest that religious conflict affects the process of identity development. Therefore, a sample that includes both currently and formerly religious individuals may also represent a range of identity development stages. Earlier reviewed studies also suggest that males are more likely to struggle with integrating their religious identities with their spirituality, leading some to foreclose on gay identity development tasks or to seek conversion therapy in an attempt to change sexual orientation (Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). These findings lead me to believe that a sample of gay male participants who are currently or have formerly been religiously- or spiritually-affiliated will be likely to provide data about a range of stages of identity development. Further, several initial studies have linked more complex constructive development to more complex identity development (e.g., Abes & Jones, 2004; Marszalek et al., 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Because I hope to recruit a

sample that includes a wide range of identity development stages, participants will also likely provide data about a wider range of constructive-developmental levels than has been explored in recent studies.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed literature on constructive development and gay identity development. However, as valuable as this literature may be to our understanding of these two constructs, what is missing is an empirical investigation of how these constructs may interact with or influence one another. For example, though existing gay identity development models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989) describe struggles in gay identity development, they fall short of addressing what may help individuals in navigating these struggles or what actually may encourage individuals to transition to more complex or adaptive stages of gay identity. Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of constructive development suggests that individuals whose meaning making becomes more complex also have more options for dealing with personal, relational, work, and societal concerns. Therefore, in this chapter, I reviewed the small amount of recent literature that has led me to wonder about how constructive development and gay identity development may influence one another. I have also described literature that supports my choice of a sample to explore this concern. It was my hope when beginning this research that the eventual theory that was generated by this grounded theory study would elucidate if the constructs of constructive development and gay identity development do indeed influence one another in the lives of individuals. Further, through the discovery-focused approach of qualitative inquiry and by gaining insight from the lived experiences of the

participants in this study, it was my hope that the current study would have the potential to affect how psychotherapists work with clients around gay identity concerns.

Table 2.1

*Percentages of Adults Making Meaning at Each Subject-Object Balance*

Subject-object balance	Full dissertation sample, (well-educated/professional) N = 282	Subset sample, (wider SES) N = 75
2nd Order	5%	13%
2-3 Transition	8%	23%
3rd Order	14%	12%
3-4 Transition	32%	30%
4th Order	35%	19%
4-5 Transition	6%	3%
5th Order	0%	0%

*Note: Results from Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1994; Lahey et al., 1988.*

Table 2.2

*Inclusive Model of Homosexual Identity Formation*

	Individual Sexual Identity	Group Membership Identity
Phase 1 – Awareness	Of feeling or being different. (“I wonder if there is something strange about me.”)	Of existence of different sexual orientations in people. (“I had no idea how many gay people are out there.”)
Phase 2 – Exploration	Of strong/erotic feelings for same-sex people or a particular same-sex person. (“I want to be closer to men or a certain man.”)	Of one’s position re: gay people as a group (both attitudes and membership). “I think a lot about fitting in as a gay man and developing my own gay style.”)
Phase 3 – Deepening/ Commitment	To self-knowledge, self-fulfillment, and crystallization of choices about sexuality. (“I might be willing to live with a male lover.”)	To personal involvement with the reference group, with awareness of oppression and consequences of choices. (“I get angry at the way heterosexuals talk about and treat lesbians and gays.”)
Phase 4 – Internalization/ Synthesis	Of love for same-sex people and sexual choices into overall identity. (“I feel a deep contentment about my love of other men.”)	Of identity across contexts and as a member of a minority group. (“I rely on my gay/lesbian friends for support, but I have some good heterosexual friends as well.”)

*Note: Examples of statements that could be made by gay men at each of the phases of identity development are provided in parentheses following descriptions of each phase (Modified from Fassinger & Miller, 1996, p.57).*

## Chapter Three

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Though research studies in existing literature have explored constructive-developmental concerns (e.g., Kegan, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001; Baxter Magolda, 2004) and gay identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Fassinger & Miller, 1996), the way these two constructs may influence one another in the experiences of gay men has not been explored. The research methodology I employed in the current study is grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1989), which I will describe in detail in this chapter. Why should this methodology have been employed in the current study? Kegan (1982) has described his theory of constructive development as the result of wondering how the evolution of meaning shapes personality. Creswell (1998) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) have suggested that a qualitative study is conducted because the researcher wonders about the meaning of particular events or experiences, as is the case in the current study. Further, according to Fassinger (2005), the grounded theory approach is well-suited to investigations which focus on individuals who have experienced marginalization or oppression for several reasons. The method gives voice to participants through extensive personal interviews, in guiding researchers toward relevant sources for further collection of data, and in subsequent involvement in ways researchers articulate the theory itself. Finally, because Kegan's constructive-developmental theory has not been specifically explored in regard to gay identity development, this study is necessarily exploratory and theory generating. Because of these reasons, grounded theory is the most appropriate approach to the current study and to address the initial research questions described in Chapter 1.

The grounded theory approach is aptly named, because its goal is to discover how groups of individuals construct reality and then to construct a theory that is “grounded” in the data of the participants’ lived experiences (Fassinger, 2005). Theory is developed through several activities that are both ongoing and concurrent throughout an entire grounded theory study. The researcher collects data, codes themes, conceptualizes, and theorizes, while comparing new data to emergent conceptions. A grounded theory study concludes at the point in which no new relationships among data, themes, or categories are discerned. Finally, details of and relationships among constructs are described in a substantive theory about the phenomenon under study. The feminist approach to qualitative inquiry underpins the current study (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, I attempted to establish relationships with research participants that were collaborative and nonexploitative. In this approach, the researcher does not remain distant or unconnected from the data or the participants, so as not to imply that participants are somehow objects to be studied. To this end, I intended to conduct interviews that are interactive and dialogic, I planned to include participants in stages of data collection and analysis, and I made every effort to remain reflexive throughout the study in regard to my own role or position in the research.

In this chapter, I detail how the steps of the grounded theory approach were addressed in the research design and methodology of the current study. I begin by discussing the sampling concerns and the participants whose narratives contributed to the eventual emergent theory. I then describe study procedures. In the feminist paradigm, the voice of the researcher is identified and described so as to share power with participants and as a way of naming concerns that researchers should remain reflexive

about (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, I begin the section on procedures by situating myself in relation to the current study and naming ways I will attempt to use this self-identification so as to not bias the emergent data. I then describe recruitment activities and interview procedures. I next review the instruments used and the data analysis procedures in grounded theory. Finally, I explain considerations and actions that were undertaken to clarify the trustworthiness or rigor of the current study.

### Identifying Study Participants

#### *Selection Procedures*

In a qualitative study, the focus is on the illumination of human experience, rather than on the way specific elements of experience are distributed in a population (Polkinghorne, 2005). The aim is to identify and interview individuals who could richly describe their experiences of sexual identity development. Because I wanted to explore how an individual's constructive development may be the lens through which he understands and experiences sexual identity development, I attempted to interview participants who make meaning at a variety of constructive-developmental levels. Several authors have suggested the number of participants needed for a well-developed grounded theory study. Stern (1985) suggested that approximately 20 interviews would be appropriate for a doctoral dissertation. Morse and Field (1995) concluded that 30-50 interviews should be conducted. Creswell (1998) recommended that the researcher meet with 20-30 participants. Polkinghorne (2005) has suggested that in qualitative inquiry, the primary concern is the richness of the data and the way this brings clarity to the phenomenon under investigation, rather than specifically how much data are gathered from how many sources. Therefore, my goal was to interview approximately 30



participants in the current study, though I realized that this number could change, depending on if I was able to gather diverse participants in terms of gay identity development stages, constructive-developmental levels, religious/spiritual experience, and race/ethnicity. I will next detail more specifically how participants were recruited and selected for the present study.

### *Sampling and Selection Criteria*

In a qualitative study, selection of participants is purposeful and based on whether the individuals recruited can enrich understanding of the experience under study (Polkinghorne, 2005). In other words, those who can provide the best description of a phenomenon are those who have had or are having the experience in question. Polkinghorne (2005) has suggested that researchers can first generate a list of possible participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study. Each participant can provide an individual perspective on the phenomenon, and then researchers note core aspects of the phenomenon that appear across participant narratives. Participants will have had individual experiences of the phenomenon, and researchers attempt to locate essential elements of the phenomenon through triangulating participants' multiple views of the experience under study. In my attempt to "list" possible participants for the current study, I will next describe the three criteria employed in sampling and the theoretical sampling procedures of grounded theory.

*Criterion sampling.* Criterion sampling, in which participants are selected to meet a specific criterion, was employed in this study (Polkinghorne, 2005). First, all participants self-identified as gay men. Though a small minority of participants wondered if they could be bisexual during certain moments in their interviews, they each

identified as gay at other times. The decision to interview only gay men was made for several reasons. One reason was the relatively small sample size in qualitative studies and therefore the need to minimize differences in the sample. Though theories of sexual minority identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989) are the same for both men and women, it cannot be assumed that the experience of gay identity is qualitatively the same as that of lesbian identity (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Haldeman, 2007; Liddle, 2007). In making the decision to interview only gay men, I note that I believe it is important to consider the impact of multiple aspects of socialization on human development, and gender is certainly one such socializing factor (Crawford & Unger, 2004; Pratt, 1998). However, I did not assume that different developmental pathways would be demonstrated for women and men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tartule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Miller, 1991). Further, Bar-Yam (1991), in a study based on Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory, has argued that age, amount of education, and other sociocultural factors have a greater impact on development than does gender.

Also informing my decision to sample only gay men were studies that suggest that women's sexual identity may be more fluid (Diamond, 2004; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). Because of this, the experience of sexual minority identity development as described by gay men may be different than a grounded theory of the process of gay identity development that has emerged from data provided by a combined sample of women and men. Men have been considered to experience different oppression bias than women related to sexual minority identity as well, perhaps further leading to a more

consistent life experience when conducting a study with a smaller sample of only gay men or lesbian women. For example, while men may experience more direct and violent anti-gay bias (Dworkin, 2000; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999), lesbian women often experience increased discrimination and disadvantage in work and educational experiences as related to gender (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007).

Finally, I am a gay man myself and I will make this known to participants when they are invited to participate in the study. My intent in this decision was to ensure that the participants would feel comfortable discussing their struggles. Hodkinson (2005) has argued that researchers who occupy positions of proximity with the group under study may not only benefit by gaining access and rapport with the population, but by remaining reflexive may be allowed access to individual understandings and reflections that participants may not provide to outsiders to their culture. Also, because this is a sample of current or former religiously- or spiritually-affiliated gay men, there is the possibility that these men have considered or participated in conversion therapy (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko, 2007; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). My self-disclosure as a gay man may be relevant in this regard as well. One study (Schroeder & Shidlo, 2001) found that some conversion therapists have, without full informed consent for clients, encouraged clients who did not come to therapy seeking conversion to consider attempting sexual orientation change. These conversion therapists also presented misinformation about efficacy of conversion treatments and other gay-affirmative treatment options. Therefore, it seemed important that I identify myself so that the participants would not wonder about the possibility of my being misleading in regard to the topic of conversion therapy that could arise in interviews.

The second criterion for sampling in the current study is related to interviewing participants from a range of constructive-developmental levels. This is necessary to address the primary question of this study, how constructive-development interacts with the experience of sexual minority identity development. To do so, I planned to recruit gay men for this study from a variety of ages and education levels. In Kegan's (1994; Kegan et al., 2001) studies of constructive development, a range of constructive developmental levels in participants was generally found in a sample that also ranged in participant age from the twenties to the fifties. Though this is not meant to imply that constructive-developmental level is tied to age in individual cases, it appears that a wide age range will help to find a sample with a wide constructive-developmental range. It should also be noted that in past studies (e.g. Bar-Yam, 1991; Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2005; Meehan, 1999; Osgood, 1991; Pratt, 1998), few adult participants were found to make meaning in the Imperial or Interindividual Balances. Therefore, those Subject-Object Balances were expected to be underrepresented in the current research as well. As will be described below, I attempted to contact gay men from a variety of organizations and electronic listservs that would be more likely to provide such a sample. I also attempted to recruit diverse participants in regard to race and ethnicity. However, Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004), in a study of ethnic/racial differences in the coming out process for 145 New York City LGB youths (mean age 18.3 years), found no significant differences in milestones related to sexual development, sexual behavior, sexual orientation, or sexual identity. Unlike many studies with LGB participants in which the majority of respondents are White men, this study included 37% Latino, 35% Black, 22% White, and 7% Asian or other ethnic

background participants (more demographic information on the current participants is forthcoming).

The third criterion for inclusion in the present study's sample is for participants to have experienced a current or past religious or spiritual affiliation. As detailed earlier, participants with such an affiliation may be more likely to have struggled or be struggling with issues of sexual identity development (Bieschke, Paul & Blasko, 2007; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Tozer & Hayes, 2004), and therefore the sample may also represent a wider range of identity development levels. No studies have examined how constructive-developmental issues may influence the experiences of gay men who struggle with sexual identity development concerns, and I was hopeful that the current study would be able to offer initial findings in this regard.

#### *Theoretical Sampling*

After initial data were gathered and analyzed to construct a preliminary theory of the phenomenon under study, I planned to select additional participants if it would be helpful at that point to fill in missing elements of the experience, challenge initial findings, or expand results thus far (Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Polkinghorne, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of research in grounded theory is iterative, shifting from data collection to analysis and returning to generating theory, until the depiction of the phenomenon is comprehensive and new data sources repeat what has been learned thus far rather than expand or trouble the current findings. Selection of confirmatory and disconfirmatory participants can therefore be important to provide elaboration or challenge to the emerging description of the phenomenon. Many grounded theory researchers interview supplementary participants or contact previous respondents in an

attempt to further elucidate or clarify the findings, and in fact current thinking on the grounded theory approach seems to indicate that researchers sample purposefully in initial stages of the research and then sample theoretically as is necessitated during data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). For example, if initial study participants did not represent diversity in terms of gay identity development, constructive development, race/ethnicity, or religious spiritual experience, I planned to intentionally recruit from sources that may provide more diversity in these respects. I planned to use my research memos and research supervision to consider decisions about and document details of this theoretical sampling process. Details of the actual process of theoretical sampling in the current study are provided below.

### *Participants*

A total of 154 potential participants responded to requests for participation, completed the informed consent documents and demographics questionnaire, and expressed interest in being interviewed for the present study. Thirty-four men completed the interview, though one of these participants was eventually excluded from the study. My research advisor and I reviewed the transcript of the interview with the excluded participant and we decided that his data could not be included as he described how an untreated psychotic process informed his meaning making and life decisions. Therefore, the total number of participants included in the current study is 33. The participants ranged from 18 to 66 years of age, with a mean age of 40, a median age of 38, and a modal age of 28 years. Fifty-eight percent of these men identified “white” or “Caucasian” as their only self-defined racial or ethnic identity (see Table 3.2 at the end of this chapter for the race/ethnicity of all participants). Thirty-one of the participants

identified as gay, while two of these individuals alternated between identifying as gay and bisexual in the interview. The sample was geographically diverse, though 33% of the participants were from one mid-Atlantic state (see Table 3.2). Sixty-seven percent reported that they reside in urban areas, while 33% noted that they live in rural communities. Diversity in regard to socioeconomic status was not represented. Participants were asked to describe their sources of income, as detailed in Table 3.3 at the end of the current chapter. Seventy-nine percent of participants reported that they were gainfully employed, while the remaining participants were students or were retired. These men were highly educated, with all participants completing at least some college coursework (see Table 3.3). In regard to religious experience, the majority (88%) stated that their early or childhood religious affiliation was with some Christian denomination (see Table 3.4 at the end of this chapter for more details). Forty-eight percent of participants identified a current Christian religious affiliation at the time of the interview. Fourteen men were interviewed in person, and 20 interviews were conducted by telephone. As noted, Tables 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 provide more detailed demographic information on the participants. See Table 3.5, which is also at the end of the current chapter, for the constructive-developmental stage of participants.

## Procedures

### *Situating the Researcher in Relation to the Study and the Participants*

I intentionally begin this section on study procedures with a focus on myself as a particular qualitative researcher involved in this particular project. I begin with this focus because it has become standard in qualitative research (and particularly in feminist qualitative research) to consider the voice of the researcher, along with researcher biases

and assumptions, so that they will not unduly color the emergent data (Creswell, 1998; Morrow, 2005). Also, because I was asking participants about gay identity, religion or spirituality, and their thoughts about conversion therapy, I believed it would be important for them to know that they were talking to a gay-affirmative researcher who was not attempting to be deceptive or damaging with these lines of questioning. In a current United States political and religious climate that is often far from supportive of gay men (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Haldeman, 2007; Stevenson, 2007), participants could have felt that their experience would not be heard and respected if they did not know the identity of the researcher in this respect. My intent was to allow an authentic relationship to develop with the participants, which hopefully would allow for their comfort in expressing personal thoughts and feelings (Morrow, 2005).

Informed by the preceding, I believed that it was important to situate my personal and subjective experiences, identities, and lenses in relation to the current study, so that I could remain reflexive about my own assumptions and remain faithful to the participants' voices so that the theory generated would be grounded in the data. I am a Caucasian, gay male who was in my late thirties at the beginning of the research. I grew up as an only child in a large and close extended family that lived in central Louisiana. In my youth, I was a faithful member of the Southern Baptist church in my small hometown. Rural Louisiana is filled with churches, and most noticeable were Southern Baptist, Catholic, and Pentecostal congregations. There were few people of the Jewish faith or other faiths in the region. Though I grew up in a small community, which to my knowledge at the time only represented Christian religious views, I am interested in the diversity of religious experience and how this could influence gay identity and constructive



development. There were very few people of color in my community. Other lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals were not noticeable or discussed, other than in infrequent negative jokes or remarks. I would guess that less than half of the people in my community attended college at the time I graduated from high school. However, in my extended family, it was expected that my similar aged cousins and I would attend college. My family would likely have been considered middle class to upper middle class in socioeconomic status. Many people in the community worked in farming or in blue-collar positions. Though several of my family members maintained careers such as these, the majority of my nuclear and extended family members held positions in education, business, or ministry.

Relative to the current study, it seems important to name how sexuality and religion overlapped in my life. Over time, as I began to accept and even celebrate my own gay identity, I began to question my church's stance on gayness. Currently, I am unsure of my particular beliefs related to Christianity. I find that it was such a central part of my history that I cannot quite say that I do not believe, even though I cannot say that I do believe. Even though a religious identity was a central identity for me for some time and I struggled to accept my gayness when I initially realized it, I never considered pursuing conversion therapy. I am not sure I can explain why I did not consider this as an option, other than to say that what felt right to me in those years was to try to spend whatever time it would take to reconcile my religious beliefs with my gay identity. This may have been a bit easier position for me to hold at the time than it may be for others, because I was a student of liberal Christian theology when I realized I was gay and I did not particularly struggle with maintaining faith while also having inconsistencies or

uncertainties in my beliefs. I did mightily struggle with reconciling my gay identity for some time however.

Currently, I do not struggle with accepting myself as gay. I see the model of gay identity development presented by Fassinger and her colleagues (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) as resonant with my own experience. I expect that this model represents the experiences of individuals who are same-sex attracted in this society fairly well, especially since the model recognizes that an individual's context and personal experience are relevant in development of a gay identity. I do not think that all same-sex attracted persons move through each of the theorized phases of gay identity development. Instead, I think that for some people, the oppression related to being identified as gay will be seen as too costly and the person will therefore attempt to foreclose on some earlier stage of development.

In regard to my current thoughts about conversion therapy, I do not believe that such treatment is efficacious in that I do not believe that same-sex attraction actually can (or should) be changed. I think that individuals can attempt to change their behavior with same-sex others, but I do not believe that same-sex attraction itself actually goes away or shifts to opposite-sex attraction. Instead, I believe that for some people, being gay is perceived as so opposite of what they want or believe that they will try mightily to change themselves, which seems to lead to attempts at conversion therapy for a minority of individuals.

I undoubtedly hold biases and assumptions relative to the lived experiences and beliefs noted above. Qualitative researchers use particular strategies to uncover their own expectations, so that findings may be fair and grounded in the data (Morrow, 2005).

These strategies include making assumptions and biases explicit to self and others and remaining reflexive about how they may inform data collection and analysis. Throughout the current study, I attempted to remain reflexive about how my own experience could inform study findings. I made research notes when a participants' narrative touched me in some way related to the above identities and experiences, so as to record my perspectives and reactions in an audit trail. I asked myself to carefully consider how I could unknowingly confound the data by making results somehow fit into categories of my own meaning making or experience.

Moustakas (1994) describes naming and then intentional suspension of personal assumptions of the data by stating, "The challenge is to silence the directing voices and sounds, internally and externally, to remove from myself manipulating or predisposing influences and to become completely and solely attuned to just what appears, to encounter the phenomenon, as such, with a pure state of mind" (p.88). Though I contend that it may never be possible to be completely rid of one's own biases or preconceptions, I still engaged in this process. Prior to and throughout the qualitative interviews, I met with my research advisor, Dr. Kathleen J. Bieschke, approximately once per week. I realized that as a constructive-developmental, I have a preference for that theoretical viewpoint and I tend to consider many issues raised by my psychotherapy clients through that lens. Therefore, I expected that constructive-developmental level would shape how individuals understood and took on the tasks of gay identity development. Specifically, I expected that Interpersonal meaning makers would struggle to come out to valued others and to accept themselves fully as gay men. I expected that it is in the transition to Institutional meaning making that participants would begin to more fully accept

themselves and begin to transition to higher stages of gay identity development. I had similar expectations for the religious or spiritual experiences of participants. I expected that as they transitioned into more complex or adaptive meaning-making stages, they would be able to challenge their own assumptions about their beliefs. I did not have an expectation that individuals would then necessarily alter their religious beliefs or retain them as they were. I expected instead that they would have more ability to take perspective on these beliefs and challenge their current meaning-making systems in relation to religion/spirituality. Finally, I did expect that many participants who had been religious at some time and many whose constructive-development is less complex to have considered conversion therapy at some point. As noted above, my goal with naming these assumptions and stating my personal beliefs above was so that I would remain reflexive and open to the emergence of the data. My fear was that if I did not name these concerns and continually challenge myself in regard to my own biases, I would unknowingly try to fit the data to my assumptions rather than let it emerge from the ground of the data.

### *Recruitment*

As noted, in the current study, my goal was to interview approximately 30 gay men. To reach these men, I disseminated initial contact information through websites and/or listservs that provide services and information primarily to or about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LBGT) persons (See Appendix A for recruitment documents). Because I was seeking gay male participants with current or former religious or spiritual affiliations and participants from a variety of ages and education levels, I focused on sites that would represent an LGBT and a religious/spiritual subscription base and those that

may have members with a variety of generational/educational experiences. I attempted to contact websites and listservs that represented diversity in terms of religious/spiritual and racial/ethnic experience. Examples of websites and listservs for LGBT religious persons that I contacted included: The Metropolitan Community Church; The Universalist Unitarian Church; Affirm United; DignityUSA; Affirmation; The Cathedral of Hope; The Society of Friends; The Quakers; The Gay and Lesbian Vaishava Association; The GULLY (Gay and Lesbian Muslim Community); The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Jewish Organizations; and Soulforce. I also included listservs/sites that were focused on LGBT issues but not necessarily religious or spiritual concerns, such as: LGBT research groups on Yahoo.com and Google.com; professional organizations such as APA Division 17 (Counseling Psychology), APA Division 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues), and AGLBICT (Association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling); Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays; several university listservs for LGBT students, faculty, and staff; gay business associations in several cities; LGBT film festival lists; and LGBT couples groups. I placed advertisements in several gay-related newspapers or newsmagazines (see Appendix A). I also contacted several colleagues who do clinical work with gay men, and I asked that they pass along the study information to any persons interested in participating. I communicated to these contacts that I was looking for participants who could discuss the lived experience of gay identity development and how their religious or spiritual experience may have affected this development. I clarified that I was seeking a non-clinical sample overall, rather than participants with more severe psychopathological concerns. In each of my contacts with potential participants, I asked

that responders pass along study information to others who they thought might be interested in participating.

By contacting participants as noted above, I hoped to work with a sample based on the criteria I described as relevant to the current study, namely gay men of varying ages who had experienced a current or past religious or spiritual affiliation. My hope was that this sample would be similar enough to one another to describe the central phenomenon of the lived experience of gay identity. However, I also hoped to attain some maximum variation in sampling (Polkinghorne, 2005), by recruiting participants whose experiences differed from one another in significant ways as well. By sampling men of varying ages, I hoped to represent multiple levels of constructive development (Kegan, 1982, 1994), so as to generate theory about how constructive development may affect the process of gay identity development. By contacting participants through multiple venue or group listservs, I hoped to be able to interview diverse participants in regard to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and level of education.

When I was contacted by a potential participant, I communicated with each individual by e-mail or telephone. I provided more detail about the study and noted my interest in understanding the process of gay identity development and its interaction with constructive development. Though I revealed that I too am a gay man in contact information, I reiterated this information to encourage participants that my intent throughout the study was gay-affirmative. I explained the steps of the study, including a discussion of informed consent, the completion of several short questionnaires, and an approximately two-hour interview (See Appendix B for informed consent information). We discussed that our conversation would be audio-taped and we set up potential times to

complete the interview. I directed interested participants to a website to gather informed consent and demographics information. Though it was offered, no participants asked that these forms be available by postal mail. I confirmed a meeting time with participants when I received their completed informed consent and demographics information.

Potential participants were excluded from the study when more than enough participants had signed up and agreed to complete the interview. Participants were not required to have any specific type of experience in identity development, only to be gay men who have at one time had a religious and/or spiritual affiliation. This was to be the lived experience of each of the men who participated. However, because my goal was to attain as much maximum variation in the final sample as was possible, I attended to the demographic information provided by participants in the process of theoretical sampling. After approximately the first third of the interviews were scheduled, I began to selectively schedule only with participants who had some type of different experience to discuss than men who had participated thus far.

Related to the theoretical sampling procedures discussed earlier in this chapter, I created a matrix that included information on potential participants and that would guide decisions about which potential participants would be invited to interview. I noted earlier that it would be important to schedule with participants from a variety of ages and individuals who were diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and religious/spiritual experience. I was committed to talking with participants of color when possible, as much existing research has primarily focused on the experiences of white, gay men. I therefore invited non-white volunteers to interview. I also attempted to schedule with participants who described religious or spiritual experience in the demographic questionnaire that was

somehow different than what had been described by other volunteers. Finally, because many initial volunteers ranged from approximately 30 to 45 years of age, I invited individuals who represented a wider age range to participate. I found that as potential participants volunteered for the study, there were often individuals who represented diversity across these categories. Therefore, whenever possible I invited individuals to participate who represented an age range that was not sufficiently represented in the sample and who were also diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, religious/spiritual affiliation, or both. The specifics of the sample in relation to age, race/ethnicity, religious/spiritual affiliation, and other demographic information can be seen in the tables at the end of the current chapter.

### *Interview Procedures*

#### *The Interview*

As potential participants contacted me about the study, I noted the date and directed them to the website that allowed them to complete the informed consent form and the demographics sheet. I asked each potential participant to keep one copy of the informed consent form for his records. I then confirmed an interview time with each potential participant and reminded participants that interviews would take approximately two hours to complete. I also noted that for any interviews that occur over the phone, the participants would need to have several sheets of blank paper and a writing utensil to complete the protocol for the interview.

At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the participants that we would be discussing the lived experience of gay identity and how this had been influenced by constructive development. I informed these men that I hoped they would share their



stories in as much detail as they wished. I noted that I would ask follow-up questions as they spoke, and that they could choose to not answer any question they wished or could choose to end the interview at any time. I communicated my desire for this study to be grounded in their lived experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and that in my approach this research study was something that we would do together, rather than a process or undertaking that I as the researcher would do to the participants (Haverkamp, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

When starting the interview, I reviewed informed consent information. I then reminded participants that they were being audio-taped if we were speaking by telephone and I received verbal consent to continue taping. We next began the Subject-Object Interview (SOI: Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988), as described below. Both during and at the conclusion of the SOI, I followed up on information provided and if necessary I transitioned to a continuing semi-structured interview format. This allowed participants to fill in any missing information that would explicate how they developed a gay identity, how their current or former religious or spiritual affiliation may inform that identity, and their thought process related to issues of conversion therapy, including if they had considered attempting to change their own sexual identity or orientation.

At the conclusion of the interview, I noted that when writing results of the study I would attempt to quote participants often so that their voices would be heard throughout the findings. I explained that to protect confidentiality, I would refer to participants by a pseudonym instead of by name. I asked participants for permission to contact them later by email or telephone to clarify any issues raised or to explore in greater depth (Creswell, 1998). After the completion of each interview, I sent a thank-you email to the participant

and voiced my appreciation for his sharing, naming the value that I placed on hearing his lived experience. I also completed a research memo detailing any reactions or thoughts I had about the interview (Charmaz, 2006), which I included in this study's audit trail.

In grounded theory, initial research memos based on just received interview data are used to explore initial codes or categories for data, offer concerns or conjectures to check out in the data or in comparison to future interviews, discover disparities or discrepancies in the data thus far, and to challenge one's current conceptualizations of categories or codes by asking questions of the data and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). There are no specific steps or formats required for memo writing. Instead, the researcher looks for patterns and elucidates evidence from the data to support initial analytic questions and considerations. Thus, when larger portions of the data are later analyzed and theory is being generated, the steps of data analysis process have been explained and explored. Memo writing helps the researcher to not only stop and consider the data, but also to consider new ideas or conceptualizations that will help avoid forcing emerging data into existing categories or theories.

#### *Transcription and Initial Reactions to Interviews*

Each audio-tape was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. I initially read over transcripts several times and began initial coding of interviews. The process of data analysis is reviewed below. Throughout the data collection process, I met regularly with my doctoral advisor, Kathleen J. Bieschke, Ph.D. We initially met weekly, though our meetings were scheduled as needed later in the analysis process. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss the process, raise any concerns, and consider how to continue ways to make explicit and remain reflexive about my own assumptions so that the

eventually generated theory would be grounded in the data (Morrow, 2005). Ongoing discussions included a continuing focus on making my own biases, reactions, and assumptions explicit, so that they would be named and would therefore not overly influence research findings. Theoretical sampling concerns were also be discussed, so that I would recruit participants who would fill in gaps in the data and who could challenge or confirm initial findings.

## Instruments

### *Demographic Questionnaire*

Demographic information (see Appendix C) was collected regarding participants' age, race/ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic location, years of education, and self-described socioeconomic status. Participants were asked to describe their current relationship status, including if they consider themselves partnered, dating, in a civil or religious union, or were married. They were asked about past significant relationships as well, including the sex of the partner. I also inquired if participants were parents currently or if they planned to become parents. Current or past religious or spiritual affiliation was self-defined in the interviews conducted with participants. Gay identity concerns were discussed in the interviews, rather than assessed using a particular instrument.

### *The Subject-Object Interview*

An individual's constructive-developmental level can be assessed formally through the Subject-Object Interview (SOI; Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988). This approximately 90-minute interview (see Appendix D) is analyzed according to a standard procedure described in *A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Its*

*Administration and Interpretation* (Lahey et al., 1988). During the interview, participants are asked to consider ten different words or phrases, each of which has been printed on an index card. The ten words or phrases are: 1) Angry, 2) Anxious, Nervous, 3) Success, 4) Strong Stand, Conviction, 5) Sad, 6) Torn, 7) Moved, Touched, 8) Lost Something, 9) Change and 10) Important To Me. The interviewee is led through each card and asked to write down several reactions to each word or phrase. For example, with the first card, the interviewer states:

If you were to think back over the last several weeks, even the last couple of months, and you had to think about times you felt really angry about something or times you got really mad or felt a sense of outrage or violation – are there two or three things that come to mind? Take a minute and just jot down on the card whatever you need to remind you of what they were. (If nothing comes to mind for a particular card, skip it and go on to the next card.) (Lahey et. al, 1988, p. 123).

The reader is encouraged to see Appendix D for a review of the instructions for each card, which will explain the type of information the interviewer hopes to gather from each of the ten SOI cards or prompts. The interviewee is instructed that it will take a total of approximately 15 minutes to review and make brief notes for all of these cards, before the formal interview begins.

After the cards are completed, the interviewer asks the participant if there is one card that stands out more than the others and the participant is asked to describe his or her reactions in relation to the words or phrases on that card (Lahey et al., 1988). There is no goal to talk through all ten of the cards, and in fact most interviews focus on only one or

two of the participant's responses. The interviewer's goal is to explore how the interviewee makes meaning in relation to the topic of the card. Through this exploration, the interviewer attempts to determine the structural-developmental level of the participant, in relation to the stages described in Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory. The interview is open-ended, in the sense that it focuses on real-life experiences, including both cognitive and affective reactions and content. Because the goal of the SOI is to determine the constructive-developmental level of the participant, the content of the interview is less important than gathering rich data that will allow the interviewer to probe the meaning-making stage of the participant.

Training in the administration of scoring of the SOI is extensive. SOI training currently includes attendance at a training seminar and a time commitment both before and after training to practice scoring and interpreting interviews. Personally, I found this training to be most beneficial in not only developing my skill in SOI assessment, but also in deepening my understanding of Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory. I further note that though the materials needed to administer the SOI are inexpensive, it generally takes one to two hours to administer the instrument and multiple hours to transcribe and score the interview.

#### *Reliability and Validity of the SOI*

Inter-rater agreement by trained scorers of the SOI has been explored by the original SOI research group (Helper, 1994; Lahey et al., 1988; Osgood, 1991). In four studies, trained scorers agreed with one another within one substage (considered a reliable score) ranging from 80% to 100%, with a mean of 91%. In Lahey's (1986) unpublished doctoral dissertation, as cited by Halpern (1994) and as suggested by the

original SOI research team (Lahey et al., 1988), a provisional consideration of test-retest reliability has been explored. Lahey (1986) conducted an SOI with participants relating to the domain of “love” and then two weeks later conducted an SOI with the same participant related to the domain of “work.” Instead of exploring issues with all ten index cards, Lahey (1986) used the “torn” card with participants to explore conflict in the domains of love and work. Correlations between the first and second interview ranged from .82 to .83. Lahey (1986) reported no evidence of differences in test-retest stability when comparing scores of men and women. Agreement within one-fifth substage among co-scorers in that study was 81%.

Construct validity has been established for the SOI (Lahey et al., 1988) by correlations in expected directions with measures of: Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development; Piagetian (1950, 1952) stage; and Loevinger’s (1976) theory of ego development. Empirical studies (Bar-Yam, 1991; Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001) thus far have demonstrated that qualitatively different ways of knowing exist across adults in relation to Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theoretical conceptualizations, and in the studies that were longitudinal, individuals have been observed to transition from one subject-object balance to the next.

### *Scoring the SOI*

Kegan and his colleagues (Lahey et al., 1988) described the scoring procedures for the SOI in some detail and with numerous examples. The SOI interview is audio-taped and is transcribed for scoring constructive-developmental stage. The scorer reviews each transcript and searches for ways each participant balances subject and object in meaning making. Though Kegan (1994) has described five primary subject-

object balances, there are four transitional stages between each of the primary subject-object balances. The numbers representing these stages are not used in data analysis. Instead, the experience of making meaning at a particular stage is explored qualitatively. The general criteria for determining subject-object balance or transition are: a) what the participant has the ability to take perspective on, because Kegan (1982, 1994) contends that the person can only take perspective on what is object and because she or he cannot take perspective on what they are subject to or embedded in; b) psychological boundaries, or how the individual delineates boundaries between self and others; and c) a consideration of what the person takes responsibility for, because Kegan has theorized that the person cannot take responsibility for something he or she is subject to. The scorer must be thoroughly familiar with Kegan's theory and with SOI scoring, so that he or she will be able to match a participant's subject-object balance to a particular stage of the theory. This is generally accomplished through specific training in scoring the SOI, as described above.

I have established myself as a reliable administrator and scorer of the SOI. I attended the training workshop for scoring the SOI in March, 2004. A total of 11 protocols were scored using the SOI manual as a guide (Lahey et al., 1988). Several protocols were scored before and during the training and discussed in some detail. After the training, the remaining protocols were scored and scoring discussions were held in phone conferences with other participants in the training. Each scorer was required to score the protocols alone and then to discuss his or her results with the other scorers and trainers. A reliable scorer was one who scored at least 8 out of 10 protocols within one-fifth of a stage of the original scoring research group (Lahey et al., 1988). For example,

the transition from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> stages includes the developmental positions of 3, 3(4), 3/4, 4/3, 4(3), and 4. Therefore, if the official score of a transcript is 3(4), then a reliable scorer would score the protocol as 3, 3(4), or 3/4. I scored reliably on 10 of the 11 training transcripts. Since the SOI training, I have administered and scored 15 SOI protocols for another research study, which is under completion. In that study, another person trained to score the SOI provided reliability scores. Our scores were 100% reliable for the seven SOI transcripts we each scored. In other words, we scored each of the seven transcripts as the same SOI score or within one-fifth stage of the same SOI score.

I scored all SOI protocols in the current study. Lahey and colleagues (1988) suggest a reliability check on twenty percent of SOI's in research studies, with reliability still defined as agreement within one substage on the score for a protocol. In the current study, twenty percent of SOI's were scored by a psychologist who has attended the SOI training, has conducted research studies using the SOI, and has been a co-scorer in other studies. Each of these protocols was scored with 100% accuracy by the co-scorer and myself, though I note that this is the same co-scorer described in the other study I am completing that employs the SOI. Percentages of current participants making meaning in each constructive-developmental stage as assessed by the SOI are presented in Table 3.5 at the end of the current chapter.

#### *A Focused SOI*

In the original SOI protocol, which was developed by Kegan and colleagues (Lahey et al., 1988), the primary focus of the words and phrases that participants were to reflect on and react to was to generate developmentally rich data that would elucidate



constructive-developmental stage. Therefore, the specific topics that participants would discuss were of secondary importance, while the meaning making of the participant was the primary focus. However, while completing another ongoing qualitative research project in which the SOI was utilized, I found that there was much interesting data generated by the SOI that could potentially be useful in a qualitative analysis. I wondered if it would be possible to conduct an SOI that would be focused on a specific topic, so that both constructive-developmental and thematic analyses could be performed on the data. In her own unpublished doctoral dissertation study with 22 professional men and women in their thirties, Lahey (1986), as cited in Pratt (1998), explored the ways her participants made meaning in the domains of love and work. Lahey found the underlying subject-object structures of her participants to be remarkably consistent in these separate domains. This finding reflects my own supposition and the thoughts of the original SOI research group (Lahey, et al., 1998) that constructive development is a generally consistent construct across life contexts and domains. Therefore, an SOI that is focused on a particular topic should still reveal the constructive-developmental stage of the participant. I also feel that this will be helpful to participants and perhaps in recruitment, in that the completion of both a separate SOI and a semi-structured interview could be asking quite a lot of participants who are already generously offering their time.

I performed an exhaustive search of existing literature and found no evidence of an adapted SOI in professional journals or texts. However, I found two dissertation studies that adapted the SOI, though not in the specific way in which I propose. Pratt (1998) explored how the constructive development of the therapist may have bearing on the practice of psychotherapy. She interviewed 12 female psychologists who had been

practicing for at least five years. The participants ranged from 40 to 48 years in age. Rather than use the original index cards of the SOI and focus the interview on the process of psychotherapy, Pratt chose to ask her participants specific questions that were intended to illuminate potentially difficult issues in the practice of psychotherapy, namely addressing client manipulation, dealing with multiple relationships, termination of therapy concerns, clinical supervision, what the therapist finds challenging in her work, and finally, how she saw that she had changed in relation to her work as a psychotherapist. Pratt argued that it is in problematic areas, complex issues that individuals sometimes struggle to navigate, and personally meaningful concerns that their constructive-developmental stage should be most apparent. I contended that an SOI focused on the lived experience of gay identity development would allow participants to also describe problematic, complex, and meaningful concerns, therefore providing data on constructive-developmental stage.

I had earlier mentioned the unpublished doctoral dissertation study conducted by Lahey (1986), as cited in Halpern (1994) and Pratt (1998). In this study, Lahey interviewed 22 adults, 11 men and 11 women, in the specific domains of “love” and “work.” Rather than using all 10 SOI index cards, Lahey used only the “torn” card. It was Lahey’s intent to assess the consistency of Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theory by exploring how individuals employ the same epistemology in these different life domains. Pratt (1998) reported that Lahey (1986) found the SOI scores for her participants to be “remarkably consistent” (Lahey, 1986, p. 83, as cited in Pratt, 1998, p. 43). I argue that this study provides further support for the use of a focused SOI, since initial findings demonstrate that constructive-developmental level is consistent across life domains.

It was my intent to adapt the SOI without constructing specific questions for gay men. I planned to use the index cards and the words or phrases they contain as they were originally used. I focused the SOI, however, by asking the participants how they have felt angry, torn, changed and so on, in relation to being a gay man. I had noted earlier that the content of the SOI is of secondary importance to the opportunity to explore participant meaning making (Lahey et al., 1988), which was consistent with the focused SOI in the current study when the participants still revealed structural developmental information. In the interviews, because the participants discussed their journeys as gay men, they also revealed thematic information that could be considered in qualitative analysis. Similar to Pratt's (1998) conjecture, I argue that it is in personally meaningful and challenging areas, such as how individuals have struggled and defined themselves as gay men in a largely heterosexist society (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Haldeman, 2007), that the SOI can be focused and constructive-developmental level can be illuminated.

#### *Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview*

In grounded theory, the approach to interviewing is to ask open-ended questions that offer some structure to the conversation and direct the participant to a topic, but also allow the interviewee to tell his story in his or her own words (Fassinger, 2005). The interviewer adopts a flexible style, establishing rapport and prompting the interviewee for more information when necessary. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have suggested that interviewers move from broad to more specific questions through the course of an interview. To participants, the combination of the SOI and the semi-structured interview seemed to feel like having only one interview. There was a natural funneling of broad to specific information as the participant first discussed his experience as a gay man in

reaction to the SOI index cards and then I asked follow-up questions that were intended to allow the participant to elaborate on information. Because I could not predict what participants would reveal in the SOI, I could not predict what the questions in the semi-structured interview would be. Patton (1990) has argued that it would not be possible to know beforehand how interviewees' narratives will develop during the interview and so the researcher cannot predict what should be asked of participants.

At the beginning of the study, I thought that this semi-structured interview might begin with the prompt, "Tell me what stands out to you in your journey as a gay man." Grounded theory inquiries are intentionally open-ended in this way, because the researcher is attempting to discover, understand, and eventually theorize about a phenomenon from the ground of the data, rather than from the researcher's own presuppositions, biases, or assumptions (Creswell, 1998; Fassinger, 2005; Straus & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, succeeding interview questions emerge spontaneously and are based on the issues raised by the participant. It was my intent to understand how each participant experienced his own gay identity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have contended that existing literature can be explored and may lead the researcher to potential areas of inquiry from which a theory may ultimately be developed. I considered psychological literature on gay men and used this to develop a list of possible interview questions for participants (see Appendix E). For example, because literature has suggested that gay men at times struggle in their career development as a result of societal heterosexism (Lidderdale, Croteau, Anderson, Tovar-Murray, & Davis, 2007), I included the possible question, "How has your experience as a gay man influenced your career development?" Through such questions, I hoped to understand individuals' cognitive, affective, and

behavioral reactions to developing a gay identity in a generally non-supportive environment (Polkinghorne, 2005). In reality, the issues that the men discussed in the focused SOI provided more than enough information to follow up on. I generally did not have to turn to my potential semi-structured interview questions, because the participants addressed information in each of these domains in the issues from the SOI. Therefore, I simply followed up on the issues that participants had already raised, and I attempted to gather as much information with richness and depth as was possible.

There were two questions that I included in all interviews, if participants did not raise the topic themselves. First, I was interested in exploring if these men have considered or pursued conversion therapy, so I asked for this information if it was not raised. I also planned to ask each participant what he would like to share with other gay men. I hoped that this second question would help the men to communicate what they were feeling about their own journeys. I thought that what they wanted to communicate as helpful to others would be illustrative of their own most meaningful experiences in claiming and celebrating their gay identities.

Fassinger (2005) has suggested that when participants discuss difficult or threatening issues, they may unexpectedly self-disclose or feel vulnerable in interviews. She has described a conflict between offering some type of educative or therapeutic response and continuing to gather data in such cases. Fassinger noted that she addresses this issue with participants by stating that though she must move on with the interview, she will return to the issue the interviewee is struggling with at the end of the meeting. She suggested turning off the tape recorder at that point and ensuring that the participant is connected to whatever resources may be helpful. It was my intent throughout this

study to practice Fassinger's approach in this regard. This practice was required for only one of the research participants in the current study, who was the participant eventually excluded from the study because of an untreated psychotic process occurring at the time of the interview. The participant denied that he was particularly concerned about the issues that he raised and though he did not make sense of the world in a necessarily logical way, he denied symptoms of or impulsivity related to harm to self or others. I discussed this interview immediately with my research advisor, and though we were concerned for this participant, we carefully weighed the issues he had discussed and agreed that it was not a legal option or ethical obligation to intervene in the course of this participant's concerns without his consent.

#### Data Analysis

In grounded theory, data are coded through the processes of open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although these three types of coding are discussed separately below, they actually occurred in a simultaneous and ongoing process throughout the study. Each new addition to data was compared to already gathered information in a continuing way, so as to develop categories of meaning. This constant comparative approach includes: comparing data from individuals to their own information at different points in that individual's transcript; comparing data across participants; comparing experiences or events to other incidents, both within and across participants; and comparing researcher organized categories of meaning to other categories (Charmaz, 2006). Because the eventual goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory of the phenomenon under study from the ground of the lived experiences of the participants, the researcher eventually

interprets the overall meaning of the phenomenon for the participants and constructs a theory of the experience under study (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is a reflexive approach, but the researcher attempts to document his or her influences, assumptions, and decisions throughout the process of grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005).

Before beginning the three noted levels of coding in grounded theory, each transcript was checked against the audio-tape for consistency, and assigned a code number and a pseudonym. The transcripts were first scored for constructive-developmental level, according to the SOI manual (Lahey et al., 1988). Twenty percent of narratives were scored by another rater, as noted above, for reliability. The SOI information was considered part of the data for each participant and was compared with all other emergent data, rather than held as certain preconceived categories in which other participant data must fit (Glaser, 1992).

Some qualitative researchers employ computer programs to assist in data analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Creswell (1998) detail strengths and weaknesses of using such programs. After reviewing these comments and talking with other researchers, I decided to analyze the data without the use of computer software. My concern was that the way the programs seek for and tie together data could force categories of meaning rather than those categories emerging from the data itself.

### *Open Coding*

The first step in coding in grounded theory is open coding (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this step, participant narratives are read and reread to discover elements of meaning, these concepts are labeled

as initial categories, and these initial categories are troubled or questioned for other possible conceptualizations, disparities, or gaps in sequence or meaning. Interview transcripts were examined in detail. Lines of text were underlined and I made notes on the margins of the paper to begin initial coding. As I compared these initial codes to one another, concepts were gradually arranged together in what seem to be related groups or units of meaning. As new data were gathered, these coded elements of meaning were constantly compared and categories were considered, challenged, and altered so that codes continued to explain the phenomenon in a coherent way. As each category was considered, adjusted, and perhaps broadened and renamed in the incorporation of new data, the category eventually encompassed all the statements and units of meaning to account for the concepts it organized. Strauss and Corbin (1998) encourage researchers to theoretically question emerging categories. To further develop the concepts and consider what I should ask in subsequent interviews, I attempted to explore emerging categories by asking such simple questions as “Who? When? Where? How often? Why?” and so on. Each question then lead to related or more specific questions, so that categories, their properties, and their subdimensions were further developed. Readers are directed to Appendix F for an example of themes and subthemes that emerged as the categories described below in axial and selective coding.

### *Axial Coding*

The second step in coding grounded theory is axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At this level of coding, the relationships among already established categories are considered and further organized. These categories are grouped into more abstracted codings that include several



subcategories, linked by interrelationships among themes. In the ongoing constant comparative approach, new data are compared to categories and subcategories are compared and linked to larger categories. Also, the researcher describes the qualities and dimensions of each category, more fully elaborating and adding complexity to each in an attempt to further illuminate the participants' experience of the phenomenon under study. Fassinger (2005) suggested reviewing the data from individual participants at this point, which I did to ensure that the patterns for each individual still fit the patterns developing in the overall sample. I also considered variations in the data at this point, such as elements of meaning from certain participants that may disconfirm earlier codings, and then I attempted to reconceptualize the relationships among categories and subcategories as appropriate (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data collection and this ongoing comparison were ended when no new information was being discovered about the categories or their dimensions and properties. At this point of saturation, the categories were considered to be rich and dense enough to elucidate the multiple variations in experience voiced by participants, but with the relationships among categories remaining clearly elucidated. Through each of the above steps of axial coding, the research memo process continued to track researcher decisions, provide clarity for later auditing, and offer opportunity to be critical about one's decisions (Charmaz, 2006).

There has been some difference of opinion in the literature about how the specific steps of axial coding should be employed (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) have argued for a specific paradigm model in which data are fit into categories of conditions, context, actions/interactions, and consequences. Glaser (1992) has criticized this approach

theoretically, contending that the imposition of such a structure on the lived experience of participants forces specific findings rather than allowing theory to emerge from the data. Glaser considered the Strauss and Corbin approach to be too much of a departure from the original inductive intent of grounded theory that would lead to a manufactured product rather than to an emergent theory. Rennie (2000) and Cutcliffe (2000) have argued for a middle ground approach, which I pursued in the current study. Fassinger (2005) has suggested that a consideration of the Strauss and Corbin (1998) categories will challenge researchers to consider context, conditions, and social interactions that affect participants' lived experience. Therefore, she argued that there is value in the inclusion of the Strauss and Corbin approach, even if it is not followed to the letter. That said, I considered and thought critically about the categories suggested by Strauss and Corbin, but remaining open to Glaser's (1992) suggestion that categories will emerge from the data allowed me to let the participant's narratives suggest what became the final categories of the grounded theory.

### *Selective Coding*

The final step in grounded theory analysis is selective coding (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this stage, a central category is selected through which all the other coded categories can be integrated into a theory that explains the phenomenon under study. A narrative is used to demonstrate how the core aspects of the data are explained in the phenomenon. In this narrative, categories are incorporated and described in relation to the core narrative. The constant comparative method is still employed, so that the now emerging theory is compared to the data of the participants' lived experiences. The emerging theory is also compared to existing

literature, in an attempt to consider if the theory enhances or challenges current understandings of the phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that researchers employ a matrix, or a diagram of how subcategories are linked to the central category and theory has been generated. Fassinger (2005) noted that some researchers may not include such a matrix because the procedures that Strauss and Corbin suggest may be considered too proscriptive. Glaser (1992) again argues that forcing the data in selective coding rather than allowing it to emerge violates the original inductive nature of the approach. I again planned a middle-ground approach, in which I considered and questioned the Strauss and Corbin steps in creating a matrix and balanced these steps with Glaser's concern that data emerge rather than being forced. The results of the process of selective coding are discussed in the following results chapters and a matrix, or what I call a concept map of the model, is provided. Readers are directed to Appendix F to see the final themes that emerged in the current study and quotations from participants that support each of these themes.

#### Evaluation Criteria for Grounded Theory

Though in quantitative research objectivity is the goal, qualitative researchers acknowledge that their analytic processes are developed in subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). That said, all research may be confounded by researcher bias, and both qualitative and quantitative approaches have particular ways to address this. Creswell (1998) has described eight procedures for examining the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. These include: a clarification of researcher assumptions or bias from the outset and throughout the study; prolonged engagement and determined observation in the field; triangulation of data sources, so that different sources, methods, and theories are

incorporated into data to explain results; peer review or debriefing, in which the researcher meets with a peer to discuss ongoing concerns, decisions, and interpretations; a consideration of disconfirming evidence; member checks, in which participants are asked to judge the accurateness of the analysis; rich and thick description, which allow readers to see how the data informed the findings; and external audits, in which a consultant examines the process of analysis and how this resulted in the findings. Creswell noted that it may not be possible to include each of these eight procedures in all studies, but recommends that researchers include a minimum of two of these in any study. I will next describe how elements of the above trustworthiness procedures were employed throughout the current study.

#### *Researcher Presuppositions or Bias*

I have earlier described the process by which I attempted to make my own biases and assumptions overt, to myself, my research advisor, my dissertation committee, to auditors, and to readers (Morrow, 2005). Research notes on my interactions with the participants and my thoughts throughout the course of the data analysis were included in an audit trail. Also, Appendix F includes a discussion of the process of core category development and quotations that support the subthemes of those categories. At the end of this manuscript, I again situate myself in relation to the current study, so that my experience and reactions are offered throughout the process and are clear to readers.

#### *Participant Checks and Triangulation of Data Sources*

I completed several steps in regard to participant checks during the current study (Creswell, 1998; Morrow, 2005). First, I am an “insider” in respect to the cultural experience of gay men in this country. Therefore, in the interview process I attempted to

keep a naiveté as an interviewer, not assuming that my experience as a gay man would be the experience of my participants. I tried to understand the participants' meanings and realities throughout the interview process. Rather than focusing on a specific time limit for each interview, I wanted to stay engaged with each person until he had elucidated the phenomenon of study as clearly as possible.

I did engage in participant checks in the current study. When I completed the analysis of each participant's transcript, I wrote a summary narrative for that participant which described how his gay identity developed, how religion or spirituality played a role in this, and how this may or may not have led to a consideration of conversion therapy. I asked participants to review my summary of the phenomenon as they have described it, to learn if my interpretations reflected the meanings that the participant intended to communicate. This is also a way to continue to check for disconfirming evidence, as was done throughout the study through theoretical sampling procedures. All but one of the participants returned their summaries. The single participant who did not return his summary was contacted four times, and each time he spoke of how he was planning to reply when he had time. Eventually I set a cut-off date for this participant's response and data analysis proceeded. When the participants returned their summaries, they had few comments. No major corrections were made by participants, with almost all of these men simply saying that they thought the summary narratives summed up their experiences well. Around one-third of the participants made minor comments that clarified their wording. In the end, the comments made by participants were included in the final summaries to honor the voices of the participants, but these comments did not change the meanings communicated in the summaries.

I had initially planned to contact the participants again at the end of the data analysis process and ask for their feedback and thoughts on the theory that emerged from the data. However, because the final theory was centered on constructive-developmental conceptualization, I discussed this issue with my research advisor and I chose not to have participants comment on the final theory. I believe that training in this particular theory is necessary before this information would be helpful to participants. Further triangulation of data sources was therefore offered by professionals in the field of psychology. I asked two psychologists with expertise in constructive-developmental and gay identity concerns to read an earlier draft of this research and provide suggestions or comment on any concerns. It was my intent that this feedback about the model would be a way to consider and incorporate information from other data sources into the final analysis. Each of these psychologists provided helpful and clarifying comments, which influenced the final model but did not require a change in the categories of meaning generated by the grounded theory.

Rich and thick description and further triangulation of data sources will be discussed in forthcoming chapters. Also, the multiple sources of data collection, such as interviews, research memos, participant observation notes, and journals related to peer debriefing were discussed in the study's audit trail (Morrow, 2005). I consider the process of theoretical sampling itself, which is detailed throughout this chapter, to be a triangulation activity. Also, because I integrated the SOI (Lahey et al., 1988) and the semi-structured interview into one meeting with each participant, qualitative data from the SOI could be analyzed and considered for content and constructive-developmental score, and data from the semi-structured portion of the interview could be used to

confirm or disconfirm suspicions and decisions about constructive-developmental level. Finally, as is intended in grounded theory research (Fassinger, 2005), existing literature was explored in the discussion chapter (Chapter 13) to consider how the emergent theory was similar or dissimilar to current knowledge.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have described how the grounded theory approach was employed in the research design of the current study. In my mind, there have been two essential elements to this description. One element was logistical, such as describing sampling concerns, participants, instruments, data collection and analysis, and techniques that may help to address the trustworthiness of the study. The other element related to my own reflexivity, which I consider to be a central factor in conducting sound qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Fassinger, 2005; Morrow, 2005). I believe that my own experience of growing up as a gay man in a religious community not only allows me access and sensitivity to the concerns of participants, but it could also cloud my objectivity. Further, because the qualitative endeavor involves personal and often meaningful connection with participants, my own biases or assumptions could cause readers to question study findings. Therefore, as noted throughout, I have focused on the importance of naming my suspicions and reactions in an ongoing way, in this chapter, in my research memos, and through my research supervision. Through each of these elements, I hope to have addressed my commitment to immersion in the data, thoroughness and thoughtfulness in data collection and analysis, trustworthiness of this grounded theory study, and ongoing attention to both subjectivity and reflexivity throughout the process (Morrow, 2005).

Table 3.1

*Participant Demographic Information: Pseudonyms and Ages*

---

Pseudonym	Age
Jake	18
James	19
Jason	20
Brad	22
Ryan	23
Bryce	23
Kade	24
Theo	25
Miles	25
Jack	28
David	28
Ronald	28
Tom	30
Randy	31
Cameron	37
Aaron	37
Dean	38
Ken	42
Mark	43
Sean	45
Justin	48
Steve	49
Ben	49
Rodney	51
Taylor	51
Zach	56
Jerry	58
Bob	60
Daniel	60
Perry	61
Scott	63
Rick	65
Mason	66



Table 3.2

*Participant Demographic Information:  
Race/Ethnicity; Geographic Data; Sexual Orientation*

	n	% of Total
<i>Race/Ethnicity (Self-Defined)</i>		
Caucasian	19	58
Caucasian/Native-American	1	3
Caucasian/Polish	1	3
Caucasian/Middle Eastern	1	3
Caucasian/South African	1	3
Latino	1	3
Native American	1	3
African American	2	6
Bengali	1	3
Lithuanian/Irish/Native American	1	3
Taiwanese	1	3
Hmong	2	6
Filipino	1	3
<i>Geographic Location</i>		
California	3	9
Connecticut	1	3
District of Columbia	1	3
Florida	1	3
Georgia	1	3
Kentucky	1	3
Maryland	1	3
Massachusetts	1	3
New Jersey	1	3
New York	2	6
North Carolina	1	3
Oklahoma	1	3
Pennsylvania	11	33
South Carolina	1	3
Texas	1	3
Utah	4	12
Virginia	1	3
<i>Type of Living Area</i>		
Rural	11	33
Urban	22	67
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>		
Gay	31	94
Gay or Bisexual	2	6

Table 3.3

*Participant Demographic Information:  
Education; Source of Income; Relationship/Parent Status*

	n	% of Total
<i>Education</i>		
Some College or Technical School	7	21
College Graduate	7	21
Some Graduate School	7	21
Master's Degree	8	24
Doctoral Degree	4	12
<i>Source of Income</i>		
Employed	26	79
Scholarships/Grants	2	6
Retired/Pension/Investments	3	9
Disability	1	3
Other/Unexplained	1	3
<i>Relationship Status</i>		
Single	15	45
Dating	6	18
Partnered	9	27
Civil Union	1	3
State Recognized Same-Sex Marriage	2	6
<i>Length of Relationship</i>		
Not Applicable	15	45
Less Than One Year	7	21
One to Two Years	5	16
Five to Ten Years	1	3
Greater Than Ten Years	5	16
<i>Have Children Currently?</i>		
Yes	3	9
No	30	91
<i>Want Children in the Future?</i>		
Yes	8	24
Possibly	6	18
No	19	58

Table 3.4

*Participant Demographic Information: Religion/Spirituality*

<u>Earlier Self-Defined Religion/Spirituality</u>	<u>Current Self-Defined Religion/Spirituality</u>
Baptist	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Episcopal	Episcopal/Catholic
Catholic	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Catholic	Catholic
Catholic	Catholic
Catholic	Jewish
Presbyterian	Christian
Catholic	Catholic
Catholic	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Christian	Christian
Roman Catholic	Quaker/Universalist/Eastern Spirituality
Not Religious	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Catholic	Chooses Not to Define
Catholic	Spiritual/Non-Religious
Catholic	Catholic
Christian	Christian
Christian - Pentecostal	Christian - Episcopal
Christian	Questioning Religion/Spiritual
Catholic	Catholic
Catholic	Catholic
Christian	Wiccan
Latter Day Saints (Mormon)	More Spiritual than Religious
Christian - Church of Christ/Baptist	Spiritual
Muslim	Buddhist
Presbyterian/Episcopal	Christian/Spiritual
Atheist	Latter Day Saints (Mormon)
Christian	Unitarian/Spiritual
Catholic	Agnostic
Baptist	Non-Denominational Christian/spiritual
Buddhist/Taoist	Buddhist/New Age Spirituality
Latter Day Saints (Mormon)	Disfellowshipped/Inactive Latter Day Saints
Christian	Christian
Methodist	Charismatic Christian

Table 3.5

*Percentages of Participants Making Meaning at Each Subject-Object Balance*

Subject-object balance	N = 33	Percentage
2nd Order	1	3%
2-3 Transition	0	0%
3rd Order	7	21%
3-4 Transition	11	33%
4th Order	12	36%
4-5 Transition	2	6%
5th Order	0	0%

*Note: Percentage results do not total to 100% because of rounding of decimal points.*

## Chapter 4

### FINDINGS

This research investigated the experiences of 33 same-sex attracted men and explored how their individual constructive development affected their understanding of and journey through gay identity development. In this chapter, I will provide a broad overview of the experience of gay identity development as informed by constructive development, grounded in the viewpoint of the participants. The primary focus of this research was to develop a grounded theory of how an individual's constructive development influences how that person navigates the tasks and struggles of gay identity development. The theory that will be articulated from this research describes, in the voices of the participants, the meaning individuals have made related to their experience of being attracted to other men, the ways they have attempted to address the struggles they encountered, and the changes they have made in their lives as a result of this process.

I will provide a brief overview of the theoretical model in the current chapter, which will be followed in Chapters 5 through 10 with a detailed description of the components of the grounded theory. The following chapters include substantive quotes from participants. The results section of this manuscript will conclude in Chapter 11, with a summary of the findings chapters that attempts to enliven the data by tracing the cyclical interaction of constructive development and gay identity development in the lives of participants. This final results chapter is also intended to illustrate links between the emergent categories of the articulated theory.

## Overview

The theoretical model elucidating how an individual's constructive development influences that person's gay identity development, which emerged through grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), is presented in Figure 4.1 at the end of this chapter. Figure 4.1 is a concept map model in which each box and circle represents a primary feature of the experiences described by participants. The arrows that connect the boxes are intended to demonstrate links between the experiences described and display the cyclical manner through which participants navigated the categories of the theory. The dotted lines that encircle the elements of the theory and connect them to the distinct box on the concept map are an attempt to demonstrate that each of the categories of meaning that emerged from the grounded theory lead to or are influenced by what I have called the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*.

It was found that when participants realized they were attracted to other men while living in a homonegative cultural context (*Realization of Being Gay*), they experienced ongoing *Distress and Struggle* that affected their processes of meaning making related to being attracted to other men. The distress and struggle individuals experienced varied in amount and type, depending on the contexts and personal experiences of the participants. As will be discussed in more detail, however, all participants described some distress and struggle as related to their experiences with family members. All participants also described difficulties related to their religious or spiritual experiences, though it is noted that the participants in the current study were required to have identified as religious or spiritual at some point in their lives to be

included in the study. The *Distress and Struggle* experienced by participants was the primary source or causal condition for the core category of the theory, identified as the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development* in the lives of the participants. In other words, when these participants realized that they were attracted to other men, they experienced cognitive dissonance related to this realization that led to not only an exploration of the tasks of gay identity development, as described in existing psychological literature. Also, the *Distress and Struggle* the participants endured led to an eventual change in the way they understood themselves, others, and the world in a more global sense, as conceptualized by Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) in his theory of constructive development.

*Distress and Struggle* did not lead directly or easily to later stages of gay identity development or necessarily to more complex constructive development. Instead, participants made initial *Attempts to Avoid, Hide, or Change Being Gay*. The type or kind of these attempts varied widely by participants, but even several persons who grew up with gay or lesbian parents made some attempt to hide their attraction to other men. A number of participants considered trying to become heterosexual in some way, discussing this issue with physicians, mental health professionals, friends, or family members. For a minority of participants, a substantive attempt to change their same-sex attractions was made through some type of conversion therapy experience, which will be described in more detail in Chapter 6.

All participants eventually attempted to *Find Support* from others, as they continued to struggle with accepting their same-sex attractions. Some individuals felt validated and cared for by family members in relation to their gay identities over time,

while other men had not experienced significant family support at the time of this research. Many participants sought support from members of their religious or spiritual groups. While some men found encouragement and acceptance in these contexts, others changed religious affiliation or ended their ties with religious groups during their journeys toward self-acceptance. For non-white participants, it seemed especially important to find sources of support from their own racial/ethnic group who also identified as gay and were self-accepting.

In their attempts to find support, the participants chose to *Disclose to Others* about their attractions to other men. The choices the participants made about who to disclose to and about how, what, and when to disclose were related to each individual's overall meaning making, or constructive development. Specifically, participants' disclosure choices were best explained by their constructive-developmental understanding of themselves in relationship to valued others, as will be discussed in Chapter 8. Though all participants voiced a desire to be accepted by others and at times feared the potential costs of disclosure to certain people, the choices the participants made about actually disclosing their same-sex attractions were related to their constructive-developmental levels.

All of the participants voiced that they were able to *Accept Self as Gay* or same-sex attracted at the time of their interviews. However, as the participants described their self-acceptance, there was a continuum of responses in terms of feeling fully at ease with being a sexual minority in a homonegative society. Participants whose constructive development was more complex were able to describe more full self-acceptance than other participants. To be clear, all participants felt self-accepting in certain ways, but



those whose constructive development was more complex described less ongoing struggle in this respect than other participants.

All participants, even those who appeared most fully accepting of themselves, described a *Continued Struggle in an Oppressive Context*. Each man described how he dealt with a society that was less than accepting at best, if not clearly homonegative or heterocentric at times. The participants talked about how they struggled with the negative messages sent by politicians, religious leaders, family members, and others, even if they no longer struggled with accepting themselves. Again, the participants with more complex constructive development internalized this struggle less than other participants. In other words, men in more advanced stages of constructive development were saddened, outraged, or wounded at times, as were all participants, but these more complex meaning-makers were more able to differentiate the negative messages sent by others from their own internal experience.

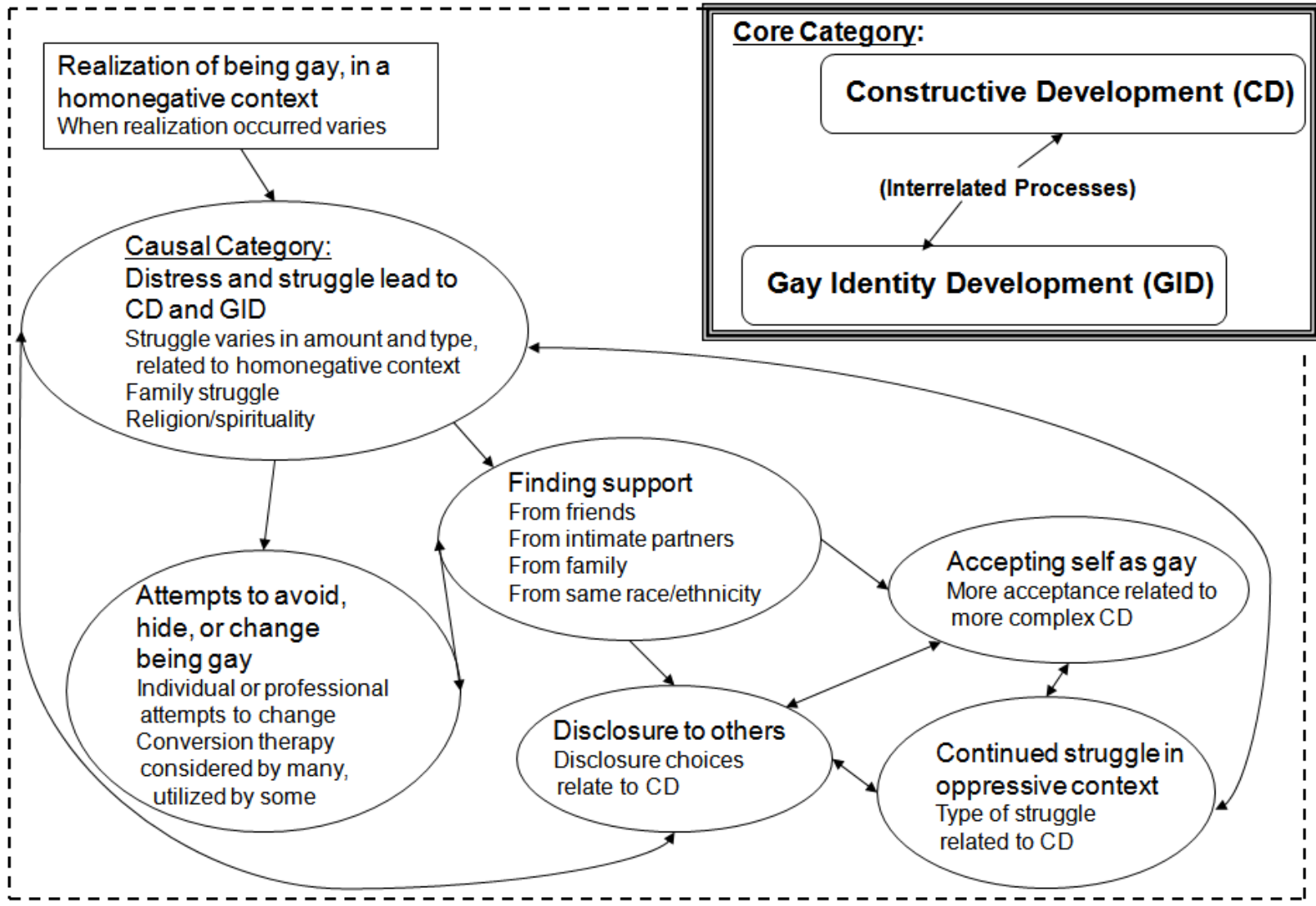
As noted earlier, the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development* were discovered to be a core category through which the other major categories (delineated in italics above) were related in the emergent theory. These interrelated processes of development were entered into when the participants realized they were gay in a homonegative context and subsequently began to struggle with this realization and feel distress because of their situations. As these men struggled and experienced cognitive dissonance related to the homonegative context, both gay identity and their meaning making developed. Also, as their constructive-developmental level advanced, the ways the participants understood and therefore dealt with the tasks of gay identity development changed. Specifically, as their meaning making became more

complex, the men became more self-accepting. Also, though they still struggled to live in a homonegative context, their struggle became less internally focused in that they did not blame themselves or their gay identities for difficulty as many had done earlier in their lives.

Throughout these *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*, each of the participants chose how to deal with his distress and struggle, and as a group, the men employed the strategies conceptualized in the circles represented in Figure 4.1 as a way to do this. As the arrows on Figure 4.1 suggest, there was not a proscribed order by which the participants' distress and struggle led to the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development. Also, individual participants' reactions varied greatly in terms of the categories presented in Figure 4.1, though each of the participants journeyed through all of the presented categories.

The above overview of the theoretical model and its implications will be followed by in-depth discussion of the six major categories noted above. I will describe the properties and dimensions of these categories and their sub-categories in the following chapters. Multiple participant quotations will be employed to elucidate the theoretical model, as illustrated in Table 4.1 at the end of the current chapter. Though most results chapters are organized thematically according to the constructive-developmental stage of participants, the first several of these chapters are organized only thematically. This is because the participants described the concerns in those chapters retrospectively, and therefore they were describing the concerns they experienced when they made meaning at an earlier constructive-developmental stage instead of in their current ways of

understanding self, others, and the world. As participants began describing the categories in terms of constructive-developmental level, this will be reflected in the results. The results section will conclude with a summary chapter that traces the links between the categories of the emergent theory and the interaction of constructive development and gay identity development that results from the experience of being same-sex attracted in a homonegative culture. Chapter 11, the summary of results, will further demonstrate the links between concepts and the cyclical pattern through which participants experienced these concerns.



*Figure 4.1. Concept Map of The Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*  
*Note: The Core Category as depicted above is the primary category of the theory. The other major categories (depicted in circles) were related to one another within the context of this core category.*

Table 4.1

*Number of Quotations Presented Per Participant*

	Ch. 5	Ch. 6	Ch. 7	Ch. 8	Ch. 9	Ch. 10	Ch. 11	Appendix G	Total
Aaron	2		1	1		1		1	6
Ben	1			1		1	1	1	5
Bob		2			1	1		1	5
Brad	1			1	1	1		1	5
Bryce	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	7
Cameron		1	1	1	2			1	6
Daniel	2	1	1					1	5
David	1	1	1	1	1			1	6
Dean			1	3	1	1		2	8
Jack	1	1		1	1	1			5
Jake	1	1		1	1	1		1	6
James	1	1	1	1				1	5
Jason	2	1	1	1	1	1		1	8
Jerry	1	1		2	1	1		1	7
Justin		1		1	1	1		1	5
Kade		1		2		1		1	5
Ken	1	1		1	1	1		1	6
Mark	1	1		1		1		1	5
Mason	1		2	2	1	1		1	8
Miles	1	1		1		1		1	5
Perry	1			1		1		1	4
Randy	1		1	1	1	1		1	6
Rick	1		1	1				1	4
Rodney	1	2	1	1				1	6
Ronald	1			1		1		1	4
Ryan		1	1	1	1	1		1	6
Scott		1	1	1	1	1		1	6
Sean	1	1		1	1				4
Steve	1	1		1	1	1		1	6
Taylor	1		1			1		1	4
Theo			1	1	1	1			4
Tom	1			1	1	1		1	5
Zach	1	1			1	1		1	5

*Note.* Each participant was quoted between four and eight times. When certain participants were quoted more often than others, it was for several specific reasons. First, results are presented in terms of constructive-developmental level in certain chapters. Several levels had fewer participants than did others, so the participants who made meaning in those Subject-Object Balances were necessarily quoted more often (which was also noted in the chapters themselves). Several participants were quoted more often because they had some specific experience that was different than that of many other persons, which is also explained in the chapters. Finally, there are several men who were quoted more than once in a chapter because a brief, one-sentence statement that was included as illustrative in clarifying a specific point. The reasons for extra quotations per chapter were as follows (and are also explained in the relevant chapters):

*In Chapter 5, three participants are quoted twice, but each extra quote is a one-sentence explanation of a specific point.*

*In Chapter 6, two men are quoted twice to give specific examples of a category.*

*In Chapter 7, one participant is quoted twice because he represented a different experience than other participants.*

*In Chapter 8, multiple quotes were used for single participants in a distinct category or employed to make specific points.*

*In Chapter 9, one participant was quoted twice to make a certain point.*

*In Appendix G, one person is quoted twice as the only person in a specific category.*

## Chapter 5

### CAUSAL CONDITIONS: DISTRESS AND STRUGGLE RELATED TO REALIZATION OF SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

For the participants in the current study, the realization that they were attracted to other men was discovered to cause great distress and struggle, eventually leading to the movement through the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development. In the current chapter, I will employ quotations from the participants to describe how they realized they were attracted to other men and how they struggled as a result of this realization. The distress and struggle experienced by participants was of course idiosyncratic and ranged in severity in many ways. However, several common themes were found, in that all participants described specific difficulty related to their families of origin and to the views of their childhood religious or spiritual affiliations. Though the struggle they experienced served as an impetus for constructive development and gay identity development, in the current chapter I will focus on describing the specific experience of struggle and distress. In forthcoming chapters I will explore how the distress the participants experienced led to the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development.

#### Realization of Same-Sex Attraction

The participants described their realization of attraction to other men in generally similar ways. The primary difference in the way they talked about this realization was if they felt they had always known of their attraction in some way or if they were somehow surprised by it after childhood. Several of the participants who relayed that they had a later realization about same-sex attraction still knew or experienced some feeling of being

different than other boys at an early age (Aaron said, “I felt like I had these feelings of sexuality that weren’t normal and that were very different and feeling like I was alone.”).

As will be later discussed, the participants tended to describe many issues in the current research in terms of their constructive-developmental level. However, when these men described first realizing they were same-sex attracted, this was not necessarily the case because they were speaking of the distant past and therefore were not describing current constructive-developmental differences in their understanding of experience.

Approximately one-third of the participants said they had always known they were attracted to other men. Another third of the participants described being surprised when they realized this attraction. The final third did not describe exactly how they realized their same-sex attraction, choosing to focus on other parts of their stories in our interviews.

*“I always knew”*

Most participants described a feeling of being different from early in their lives, though some participants tied this feeling to a same-sex attraction much earlier than others did. James remembered this feeling of difference early on and recalled also knowing that he should try to hide what he felt:

I first started having the feelings and that feeling of differentness, attraction to other guys, when I was around six, very young. And then when I think I was about 11 or so I came to a self-realization about what [being gay] was watching TV, through friends, through education and learning. I did a lot of internet research and a lot of research through the scriptures, which I was very into at that point. So I spent the next five years very depressed and suppressing it.

Jason also talked about his attraction to men as something he knew from early on:

I always found myself like attracted to guys. I didn’t know why... All of my friends were having girlfriends and stuff, and so I would date girls and stuff, too.

I was like okay, they're all over their girlfriends, but I don't want to be all over my girlfriend.

Perry said that though he knew very early that he was gay, he tried to deny it for much of his life. He described becoming friends with other boys and knowing he was attracted to them, but feeling unsure what to do with his emotions:

I fell in love with a boy in my first grade class... I spent the next... [large number of] years in denial... I had crushes on many guys and, you know, all through high school, all through college. I made efforts to befriend guys I was attracted to. So, um, so, you know, I would go out of my way to befriend guys that I liked. And then once I had, I didn't know what to do. You know, okay, well, now what's the next move because I can't even think about having sex with them. So what do I do now? So I had a lot of very frustrating friendships where I just, you know, hung out with guys that I wanted to be with but always wanted more, but knew I was never going to get more. So it led to a lot of very frustrating times.

Rodney reported that he knew about his attraction to men for as long as he could remember. Unlike the majority of participants, he said he did not struggle with this realization itself, though he later described struggle with the reactions of others:

I've always had an attraction to men. From the time that I even started thinking sexually. So there's always been that attraction there. So it's like this can't be not, not normal for me because it's just, it's there. It's just natural. It was natural to me but, and no attraction to women other than friends, you know.

*"I realized later"*

Though the majority participants felt they were different in some way than other boys, for some of these men, it was some time after childhood when they tied these feelings to their same-sex attractions. Steve said that when he realized what he was feeling, he wished this would change and he behaved like his heterosexual friends in hopes that his feelings would not last:

At first I thought, does everybody feel this way? Are all the guys in gym class feeling this? And when is this going to stop? You know, I tried to do the things I was expected to do, as far as like dating and guy stuff. And I wished and wished and wished and wished, and gradually... The last girl I went out with... we would



make out and it was like nothing. There was no feeling on my end whatsoever. She finally said, “Do you have another girlfriend?” And I said, “No. It’s just me. It’s not you. It’s me”... After that, I stopped trying... I had thought well, you know, I can resist this, but that’s not how it works. I was late coming to that realization.

Miles described a realization of same-sex attraction during his senior year of high school.

He said that he first identified as bisexual to his friends and family, before later stating that he is gay:

I was figuring out my sexuality my senior year of high school because I had had girlfriends forever... one of my closest friends came to live with me over the summer... this is like one of my best guy friends, I told him that I was, you know, bi-curious or I used some other term and he was like oh you know, that’s cool, it’s no big deal, and I’ll support you and this and that, and then I brought someone home and that was fine and then like two days later I got into a huge argument with my best friend and effectively I started to realize that it was not okay at all... Eventually the summer ended and he moved out and we kind of stopped talking...

Sean talked about receiving clear messages that it was not okay to be gay, so he said that he suppressed any related thoughts to the extent that he eventually married a woman:

Having grown up in a tiny little town... an insular, isolated community... the doctrine of the church was very much woven in the culture of the society... there was a certain sense of obligation of being upstanding citizens... it was just very Christian, very Protestant, very sort of waspy in some respects... although it wasn’t fundamentalist, there were certain things you would do that you would go to hell for... Any thought in my mind that I was homosexual I suppressed as much as I could because there wasn’t anything in the reinforcement or declaration of homosexuality that was appealing to me in any way. It was certainly shunned, queer, very sissy, pansy, florist, hairdresser, whatever; nothing that was positive certainly in any way... and success was not a part of being gay either. And I was very much the best little boy in the world kind of thing.

Zach talked about a very long journey to realizing that he was a gay man, explaining in great detail how he struggled with the negative messages he had received from his church and how this made it harder for him to accept being gay. Zach’s story is presented in lengthier form, because he explained his process of realization in more detail than many participants:

When I was trying to figure out what was going on with me in terms of my sexuality as a kid... I thought sometimes, well, it's because I am different. I'm somewhat artistic... I'm just not into sports as much, so I think that's why people react to me the way that they do... I used to think well, maybe this longing is coming from the fact that I don't have enough same sex friends... So ultimately, when I started noticing I was attracted to boys I thought oh, well, it's coming from the fact that there's this deep sense of inadequacy that I can't compete with other boys and don't have enough male friends, or group of friends, the way I'd like... I began to notice my attraction to other young men at about 13... I started to notice that I was looking at guys when my friends were looking at girls. I started to notice in the locker room that I was having a real challenge... I wanted to look at other boys, and I felt aroused by that. I was always trying to figure out ways of protecting myself so I wouldn't embarrass myself or reveal who I was or what was going on... I felt that probably I was experiencing those feelings because I was just terribly shy and had no confidence... [and] being a religious person I thought, oh well, it's Satan tempting me -- and I was told that those kind of feelings come from the devil. So Satan's tempting me away from what is normal and away from what my life is supposed to be because in life we're all supposed to court young women and date them and eventually marry them because that's the normal thing to do... there was a sense in myself that it was the most important thing in the world for me to be a good father one day and to be a wonderful husband. So I had this dream in my head that I'm going to be a great father, I'm going to be the most loving husband."

So here I was in my mid-teens experiencing all these feelings and I would tell myself constantly: they're not normal, I have to resist these things, I have to overcome them, these are impure and dirty thoughts; this is Satan trying to pull me away from a path which would lead me to what I'm supposed to accomplish in life, which is to eventually find a beautiful young woman that I love and marry her and have children... I started attending the church again and experienced the same thing that I had when I went back to church for the first time -- a tremendously loving community of people who made me feel like it was valued. So this answered a lot of things within me. Then of course I was now a little more confident in myself and so started to date women. And I fell in love. I dated a girl for two years whom I was actually crazy about, but the interesting thing is that all the way through that I kind of knew I was still attracted to my own sex.

[I realize now] that part of me wanted to explore my sexuality with a woman because I felt so much insecurity over my attraction to men. As much as I was dating this young woman and felt that I was in love with her, my attraction towards other men hadn't gone away. I mean there was no thought in my head that I was bisexual. I'd never heard of the word. All I knew was that I was attracted to men. And even though I thought I was attracted to a woman and had begun enjoying dating and romancing her, my feelings of attraction to my own sex were just as strong, and probably more compelling -- they were always more compelling.

By the time I got off my mission [with the Mormon church] I thought that I was so good at handling my attraction to men that maybe I had been able to overcome my homosexual feelings. But then one day as I was going through some old art books... and saw a picture of a naked man... I was immediately aroused by the drawing, and I thought oh, my gosh, it hasn't gone away! I still have these feelings! What am I going to do?... Later, while attending university in the United States, I was dating girls, but part of me felt at that point, well, I'm [from another country] and I'm just not relating to these women because they're American. I don't want to marry an American girl because I want to go back to my own country. That just created problems for me. So there was a little bit of that going on at the time. But I think I was beginning to realize I was attracted to guys.

### The Homonegative Context

As participants described realizing they were gay, they also described the negative messages they somehow automatically knew or quickly received with their realization. Though the participants had a broad range of individual experiences in this regard, there was still a consistent and immediate understanding that their attraction to other men would not be accepted. Brad described a struggle to disclose to others, fearing that he would be judged or that he would lose valued relationships:

I was so worried about fitting in I never really came out. It took me a long time to come out to everybody cause I already knew what they thought and what, you know, like in church what people were being taught, and the mainstream. I already knew that they would think it was bad. So I was hiding it.

Daniel described the difficulty in navigating relationships when people knew he was gay and they were not accepting. He talked about how some people would be direct with their disapproval, while others would send subtle negative messages that it could be hard to understand:

Some of the negative things were so veiled that when they happened, I didn't see it, because I didn't know I was gay myself, but I can certainly equate it to being gay now... I can remember sometimes as a very young person, people finding out I'm gay and not wanting to be around me anymore, and some of them wouldn't say anything, just start avoiding me silently. Others would say, you know I can't get along with that, or that's uncomfortable. You make me uncomfortable. Every

time you look at me I'll be thinking that you want something that I can't give to you.

Jerry talked about realizing he was gay at a time when people in society did not talk about this issue. He said that he struggled with feeling sinful for much of his life, until beginning to come to terms with his gayness after his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday:

There was very little spoken about [gay issues] at that time, and nobody that you could talk to... I grew up a very devout Roman Catholic and I believed at the time that this was sinful, that anything related to sex was sinful... I lived with enormous shame and guilt easily from the age of 15, up until I was 29. And it wasn't until... almost up to my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday that I was invariably trying to come to terms with my sexual identity. And then when I finally did and said well, this is who I am, I don't particularly like this, and I was still feeling guilty and shameful about it.

Rick said that he felt he had to date a woman and get married, because that was what was expected of him by society and his family. He said that it was when he met his partner that he realized he could not go through with getting married to a woman:

I think I was trying to do what everybody wanted you to do, get married and all that sort of thing... I started dating a girl... We became very close... the perfect couple... I became engaged to this girl to get married, thinking that well, maybe this is what I should do because it was at the time that I think a lot of... people did at the time. They got married because they were supposed to... So then when I met [my partner], we developed a relationship while I was still engaged... and then [I was] going to get married the next year. I thought, "I just can't do this."

Jason described difficulty in dealing with his fear that his family would not accept him, which led to clinical depression and psychotherapeutic treatment. He said that he did not reveal his struggle with sexual identity to his psychologist at the time:

You have family members that are saying okay, are you dating anybody right now? Am I going to get a daughter-in-law? Even in high school I started hearing about that. So I went through just like three years of trying to change my sexuality and trying to fit in with the norm and mainstream society with being straight and stuff. That was pretty emotional. Depression set in, and I didn't know who to talk to. My parents took me see like doctors, like a psychologist. I didn't tell him about my sexuality because I wasn't sure if I was able to trust him.

I started talking about like financial situation and just being the firstborn and having a lot on my shoulders.

### Distress and Struggle Related to Same-Sex Attraction

When the men interviewed described their realization of same-sex attraction in a homonegative cultural context, they experienced distress and described ongoing struggle related to their feelings and the cultural context. Though the participants described a wide range of negative feelings and experiences related to their same-sex attraction, they all recounted at least some difficulty with family relationships and with their childhood religious/spiritual beliefs. It is noted that all participants in the current study identified as religious or spiritual at some point in their lives, so it may therefore be unsurprising that they each described struggle in that particular area. One participant, Daniel, succinctly described his distress related to what other people would think if they knew he was gay. He said, “At the age of 18, I really came to the full consciousness of this is who I am and this is what it is and this is what people think of it. You want to run. It’s just not pretty.” Randy added a sentiment that was common across all participants in at least some respect, “I have known I was gay since late childhood and had always grappled with the idea of what would happen when people would find out.” Mason talked about a “constant confusion” related to being gay and a long period of “trying to make sense of it all.” He described hearing stereotypical views of what it meant to be gay and struggling with knowing that he did not fit those stereotypes:

I think I first began realizing that I had a strong emotional and physical desire for other men when I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Then I think there was just constant confusion around my sexual orientation, and the struggle was trying to make sense of all of it and trying to understand, because I knew in my own heart that pretty much everything I had heard about sexual orientation and how that reflected who I was, was a load of crap.

Mark said it was hard to receive negative messages about being gay, especially when he was only aware of gay people who did not seem to be very much like him. He said that he felt at the time that if other people knew of his real feelings, his relationships would end:

I didn't know there were normal gay people out there to connect with... the only person who I knew was gay was the hairdresser down the street... and that was what was queer to me.... People in my family and in the neighborhood mocked this guy, and I knew that wasn't me. I knew I liked to play football... and I knew I didn't want to dress that way... I heard the horrible things that people whispered [about gay people being pedophiles]... and I thought that I must be that horrible a person... [I thought] I'm a degenerate and all of these other horrible things people whispered... and it sounds really stupid now, but it took me years to realize there's a world of difference between an 8-year-old boy wanting to touch another 8-year-old boy, and a 50-year-old priest wanting to touch an 8-year-old boy... I couldn't imagine the ramifications of coming out and having anybody, you know, that I knew and loved not just, automatically disown me.

Jake said that he feared that being gay would mean that he never would get to have a "normal" life:

At the beginning, [realizing I was gay] wasn't a shock because I wasn't really understanding what was to come. Then I definitely started questioning. I realized that my sexuality didn't just magically appear, but it was there all along because looking back I could think of other times when I was also attracted to other men.... Later, I would wonder if I was homosexual it's like what happens with that, and can I still have a normal marriage life, and can I still be happy for the rest of my life once I get married, or if I get married?

#### *Specific Struggle with Family Relationships*

Though the men who participated in this research described idiosyncratic types and amounts of distress, a theme across participants was the struggle their realization of same-sex attraction caused in their family relationships. Of course the participants were afraid of specific reactions from their individual families, but they all talked about some distress related to fear that their families would not accept them. For example, David

said that he knew he was gay even in early childhood, but he struggled because he also knew this was not acceptable in his family:

I really was like the good little boy. I never did anything I wasn't supposed to do...I was afraid in the whole initial coming out process of losing my family for sure... I always said I would never tell my parents unless they asked...

Tom talked about how he continues to feel he must hide his sexuality from his family:

Because of the fact that it was going against religion and against everything that they believed and so I was never open with my family because I was afraid of saying something or doing something that would give myself away. And that's still how it is now... they are still not ready to hear that, you know?

Ronald felt particular pressure from his family to carry on the family name, so he too hid his sexual orientation from his family:

I'm the first born son and the only natural born son, so I have to carry on the name of the family and carry that on into the future with my family and that's why I have a lot of pressure on me to do well in school and become educated and get married to another [particular ethnic group] person, and then have a family with kids so that we can carry on the family name.

Aaron talked about how his feelings of difference led to a need to disconnect from family and friends. He talked about moving to another country because of how much he could not imagine other people knowing he was gay:

I experienced a lot of pain. I used to pray to die as a child because I was very connected to my family... I always had this little outsider spirit and maybe that was derived from always feeling like an outsider because of my sexuality... And so when people would say they wanted to go to college or they wanted to go into the military, which was what the majority of the people that I went to high school with said, I knew that I wanted to say something different than both of them... I just wanted to go outside the country and see what it was like. So I moved, literally, to [another country] when I was 17 with the knowledge that I could always come home as I stayed close with my mom... I think that was an unnatural situation for me to be so far away from home where it wasn't like my mom was going to find out what I was doing on a day-to-day basis.

Ben said that his father was not a big part of his life until in recent years, but his mother's disapproval was very difficult. He talked about her as negative in his life, but said that he did not want to leave the relationship with her, which led to ongoing struggle:

I realize how much power my family had over me, how much power they sometimes still have over me with their lack of acceptance or with their acceptance... Now the situation is that I visit my dad quite often, he and my stepmother are extremely supportive, they are good friends... and I just have a very troubled relationship with my mother... I know a number of gay men who have divorced their families and I am not sure that that is ever a successful venture because we are our families. Now to do that takes away a root, a taproot almost. It would for me anyway and I know as much negative power as my mother had over me until my dad came back into my life, I could not separate myself from her. I just didn't have the ability to do it in spite of these extraordinarily negative experiences with her where she was painfully judgmental in deed and in word; I still continued to put up with it.

*Specific Distress Related to Religious and/or Spiritual Beliefs*

The participants discussed their struggles related to integrating their sexuality with their religious or spiritual beliefs in great detail. Though I again note that this struggle may be overrepresented in the present religiously/spiritually-identified sample, for these 33 men, this issue was a core issue in their experience as same-sex attracted men. For example, Jack talked about receiving clear negative messages about being gay from his church, which he struggled with for years:

Homosexuality was a very negative interpretation [in the conservative Christian denomination he was raised in]... I was oh early teens I guess, or maybe even before I think I sort of knew internally that I was gay, but I think there was a point where I had admitted that to myself but it was very terrifying. And I certainly went through a period where I prayed that that would change or you know that God would forgive me or God would change me or what have you... [My church condemned] if you don't believe all of these things and they all sort of fit together... The interesting problem with that is that if you let even just one of those pieces slip, then the whole thing just sort of collapses. So I think that there was kind of a moment for me where I was just like all right, all of this is bullshit.



Ken described how his religious faith was very important to him, which made him struggle to accept himself as a gay man. He described a process of trying to stop “acting on” the “gay part” of his life because of his religious beliefs, and he talked about struggling with this for many years:

I remember early messages from church about gay people being an abomination before God. Because of the way I was brought up and my faith – all of it was ingrained in me. I was in church Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night. It was my whole life. So I was doing the gay thing on Saturday... but I had this warped sense about it... I had my first boyfriend at age 14, but I was conflicted because of my religious beliefs. I just couldn't reconcile my sexuality and my spirituality, and by the time I was 21, I began drinking heavily because I was so confused... [Later] I started to feel it was wrong to go out and be with other gay men, so I would stay home and look at pornography, which I became addicted to... A few years later, I had a born again experience, and it really did, my life completely changed, and I was able to walk away from the pornography and just really did. But then I knew that I couldn't be gay anymore. You know, I had to kind of walk away from all that and all my friends and just leave it behind because there was no way I could be gay and be a Christian... I totally engulfed myself with Christian people, you know, to kind of just get away from the whole culture that I was in... I eventually began to work in church ministry positions, hoping that the gay part of my life was over. But, I knew that I was still completely gay, but I just couldn't act on it. In fact, when I would find myself attracted to a particular man, I would find a way to get out of the situation, sometimes even moving to some other state to get away.

Bryce described receiving messages in his church that gay people were sinful. He talked about how difficult it was when people in power “defined me for who I was:”

They preach it at our church like gays are wrong and they're going to go to hell and it's horrible and terrible. So they definitely believe that. I definitely grew up with that, you know... What was really harmful was things from religious figures who denied me for who I was. I think because you grow up and you're searching for this sexual, spiritual, racial identity, and so when you come across people who are in power in religion they have a lot of power, they have a lot of faith, they have a lot of weight in your life. Of course the ones I encountered were the ones who said that it was wrong and so I grew up most of my life hating that and thinking I should be ashamed of it.

Taylor described a current struggle with integrating his religious beliefs and his sexuality, which he initially described in the words of his inner narrative or ongoing conversation with God:

It's like God, what do you want me to be? Am I supposed to just be alone the rest of my life?... Just me and God, personally, just one-on-one, I don't think I really feel any guilt. You know, God, I feel the way I feel. I'm sorry if it's wrong. If it's wrong please change me... I have met some guys who were so convicted by the Bible that they just totally, totally ignored all of their own feelings and forced themselves to get married, even though they were miserable. But they went totally, totally by the Bible. I'm not doing that. I mean, I recognize my own feeling, and I pray to God if they're wrong please do something about them...

Though the current chapter could be considerably lengthened with other supporting quotes from participants, overall the men who participated in this study described distress and struggle in reaction to their realization of same-sex attraction in a homonegative context. Though they had individual experiences, they all talked about family struggle and concerns with religious or spiritual beliefs they had at the time. For some of the men, the struggle related to these particular two contexts was ongoing at the time of this research. The experience of distress and struggle led all participants to move through the categories of the grounded theory, as will be described in the following chapters. However, because these men were beginning a process of coming to terms with a sexual minority identity in a homonegative context, they continued to feel distress and struggle at times. As I will attempt to elucidate throughout the upcoming chapters, the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development were not achieved through a linear pathway. Instead, the participants traveled through the experiences detailed in the future chapters in a cyclical pattern, returning to feelings of distress and struggle multiples times on their journeys toward self-acceptance.

## Chapter 6

## ATTEMPTS TO AVOID, HIDE, OR CHANGE BEING GAY

All participants made attempts to avoid or hide being gay at some time in their lives. The struggle and distress the participants described in Chapter 5 led to attempts to ignore their attractions to other men or efforts to hide what they felt because of concern at how valued individuals or groups could react negatively. All of these men tended to talk about this category of results in similar terms in regard to constructive development, as the attempts to avoid, hide, or change were actually distant memories for many participants at the time they were interviewed. Though this information was therefore retrospective for some men and current for others, the participants' described generally Interpersonal meaning making (Kegan, 1982, 1994) as they talked about how they could not imagine accepting a gay identity while experiencing an externally-authored meaning making that was influenced by the negative messages they received about their sexuality from valued others, important reference groups, or the larger societal discourse.

While only three of the participants made formal attempts to change their same-sex attraction through some type of conversion treatment, a majority said that they had desired to change their attraction to men at some point and talked about personal attempts to do so, such as through prayer or religious belief. As the participants discussed attempts to avoid, hide, or change their attraction to men, a central theme was their struggle with integrating religious faith and sexuality. As was noted earlier, this theme may be unsurprising, given that all participants in the current research identified as religious or spiritual at some point in their lives. However, for these 33 men, the attempt to integrate religion and spirituality was difficult and often painful. This particular

struggle again was linked to difficulty in self-authoring and was described in Interpersonal Balance terms by the participants.

In this chapter, I will employ participant quotations to allow the men themselves to describe their attempts to avoid or hide being gay. Participants will also discuss how they tried to change themselves, with some men relaying individual attempts at change and others describing discussions with professionals that they hoped at the time would help in becoming heterosexual. This chapter will conclude with the stories of the three men who attempted conversion therapy, which will be presented in some detail.

#### Attempts to Avoid or Hide Being Gay

Most participants described attempts to ignore or avoid their same-sex attraction, whether they later considered conversion therapy treatment or not. As noted above, for many participants, this was related to a struggle in integrating their religious beliefs with their sexuality. For example, Justin described a kind of internal knowledge that he was gay, even though he attempted to avoid this knowing for some time:

I think that for a number of years, I attempted to just ignore the situation. I actually went to an evangelical Christian school thinking that I could just sort of run away from it... [During college] I became very close ... with a girl... and it was really obvious to me, even if I wasn't completely willing to accept yet at that point, it was very clear to me that this wasn't right for me. I mean it actually felt wrong. You know? It was like I couldn't be physical with her... I couldn't even kiss her. It just felt wrong. And even though emotionally we were like kindred spirits, it just wasn't, you know, I don't think I was ready at that point to say that I'm gay... It wasn't ever anything that I felt that I chose. It was just who I was.

Bob talked about his membership in the Church of Ladder Day Saints (the Mormons) as personally important, so he tried to ignore that he was gay:

I'd been having sex with guys from the time I was 13 probably, and I never equated that to a lifestyle or that I could choose a partner and be with them or anything like that... when I got baptized I kind of decided that I really needed to try to believe most of the things that they were teaching because I really

personally kind of never had a belief in God. It all seemed like a nice story to me. So I tried really hard, I went on a mission...

Rodney said he was “fed” a viewpoint from his church that said something was wrong if he was gay. He said that he lost his religious beliefs over time because of this, though he tried to stay connected to his church from some time and tried to somehow “overcome” being gay, so he could be accepted by other people:

As far as going to church I was very involved... I think at one point I was trying to overcome that being gay and thinking well, this I can get help, you know, by my religious aspect of my life which, you know, didn't take too long to figure that out that that wasn't going to happen... But doing that to be accepted... So there was a religious aspect of things that... it was fed in to me was this isn't normal, this isn't right, this, you know, there's something wrong with you. Growing up with all that. Which most gay men do. I mean, you're lucky if you're that young and you're, you're able to be accepted and everything. But pretty much that being ingrained is like, I know that there's something wrong here...

Some men were not actively aware they were avoiding their sexuality early on, like Scott who recounted realizing over time that he was more attracted to men. He said that he did not think about his sexuality too deeply until he met his partner:

I've always known from childhood that I was different... I was kind of a sissy. I'm a peacemaker type of person. I was not athletic. I was quiet... I was such a placid child. I had the security of family... It was just a wonderful, playful time... I just felt during the high school years that I was not really attracted to women, and that I was really noticing men more. I was a very naïve person.

Similarly, Cameron described realizing he was gay fairly recently. He said that he had put his career first, perhaps partly as a way to avoid fully thinking through what it would mean to be gay:

Until about three years ago, I really didn't worry that much about sexuality. I was focusing on my career and I had lots of friends. I felt accepted and cared for. However, I would always tend to put up a barrier so that people would not know that I was gay. I think a couple of things led me to thinking about being gay more. First, I stopped preparing for my career and really began my work. Suddenly I had time to really think about all of this. Also, I found out that someone I had been attracted to was gay, and we began to date. I think I hadn't

really paid enough attention before that point, just focusing on everything else in my life. Suddenly [being gay] was real and important, and I wondered why I had not focused on it earlier. It's not a regret, it's like, why didn't I know sooner?... and I feel a bit of a coward in the sense of not doing it sooner... Probably it was fear... that kept me from thinking about these things when I was younger.

It is important to note that two participants had a qualitatively different experience than the other men in this study, in that they grew up with gay or lesbian parents and issues of sexual orientation or identity were spoken about and supported freely in the home. However, both of these men still felt that they needed to hide some parts of their experience of being gay from their families. Ryan said that the discussion of being gay or straight seemed like it was part of his experience for as long as he can remember. He did not think of coming out as a major event, since for Ryan, there was a sense of acceptance around these issues. However, he said that he still worried about being judged by some family members:

I still had to come out on my own terms and take the time I needed, but I didn't have to worry about being judged by [nuclear] family like some people do... I didn't have concerns that my family would disown me. I didn't have any religious qualms whatsoever... [But discussing his extended family, Ryan wondered,] Why do I put myself in that atmosphere? Do they know? If they don't know and I tell them, will they care? Will it open their eyes? Would they [say] you can't come?...

Kade explained that his mother is lesbian and that he does not communicate with his father. He said that he was surprised when it was difficult to come out to his mother and how hurt he felt by her wishing that he was not gay:

Since my mother's a lesbian, you'd think that would be easy [to come out], but there are a lot of complexities... I feel more free now to be who I am [than many people do], but when I came out to my mother, she said that she wished I wasn't gay because she knew the discrimination I would face. That was really hard for me to hear and at the time it hurt me. I now understand that she was being a mother first and didn't want me to have to face the difficulties. I think there are sill things that I hide, even from my mother, related to who I am or what I've done, because she's still my mother.

### Attempts by the Individual Himself to Change Being Gay

For all of the men who attempted to change their same-sex attraction, religious beliefs that were not accepting of gayness were at least some part of their desire to change. Many of the men who tried to change their attractions internally made that attempt through prayer or some type of religious practice. For example, Steve described hoping and praying that he could be straight, relaying, "I didn't really attempt to change. I wished I would change... I really tried hard to be heterosexual... through my own efforts." James said that though he did not attempt any formal type of conversion therapy, he prayed often in his middle teenage years, trying to change his sexual orientation so that it would be consistent with his religious beliefs. He described a slow process of self-acceptance that eventually led away from his attempts to change:

About the time I was 15, 17, I was trying to change [my sexual orientation]. It got to a point where I was just like well I can just suppress it, that if I can [be more religious], get a wife, have some kids, that God will help me to the point where I won't have those desires anymore to be with a guy. And they even got so bad that I tried to kill myself based upon, you know what if I'm not going to change, then I'm going to hell anyway, why not just, you know, get rid of it now and get through the process. It would be a lot easier than anything else... But, over time, the more I started to accept myself for being who I am it seemed like the happier I got. And so those times when I was extremely down I would just talk with other people and I would find out that you know, they were happy... it did take a while, but once I hit those low, low, low points it seemed like I was turning back up.

Sean said that his earlier marriage to a woman had been an attempt to change himself so he could fit in with what he felt was expected of him by society. He said that he probably would have tried conversion therapy if he had been aware of it at that time:

I got married to a woman. So in some respects I thought I was trying to do [conversion therapy] myself. In those years I probably would have changed myself if I could have... I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be my mom and dad, in some respects. Yeah, I probably would have.

Jack said that he realized he was attracted to men very early, and he initially hoped that God would reward his prayers by making him straight:

Growing up, I was sort of the good boy, the like, very obedient, like, always got good grades, always sort of like terrified of my mother in a way, I never questioned her authority... Originally I thought that maybe I could sort of live a normal life or what have you... but it was pretty early that I realized that I just had no sexual attraction to women at all... But I thought that if I sort of prayed hard enough, this was this sort of weird burden that God had placed on me or something in that if I was sort of sincere enough in my prayer about this that God would you know, sort of reward that with changing my sexual orientation. But right, I think after sort of struggling with that and being very sort of anguished about that it was just too, it was just too emotionally difficult to continue to have, to attempt to do that and not have it change. So I think I just realized kind of fuck that, whatever. I'm tired of doing that.

Bryce said that he had tried to find some conversion therapy audiotapes he had heard of when he was younger, in an attempt to change his sexual orientation at that time. He said that his views on this issue had greatly changed over time, however:

I think I probably didn't [actually consider conversion therapy]. The only thing I remember is at one point I did get some cassette tapes from people who said that they used to be gay and they were like changed and now they're married to women. But I'm younger and so I don't think I ever listened to them, but I did seek them out... [More recently] I've been chatting online with some people, mainly this one guy who is a part of Exodus International... So they said you can be gay and you can be a Christian, but if you're a gay man you can never be in a relationship with another man, or with another person of the same sex because that is sinful... [This man] told me the opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality; it's holiness. And I was like well if you're setting up that dichotomy that means that homosexuality is evil, you just said that. And he was like well, not really. [He thinks] homosexuality is brokenness because in order to become whole you have to get right with God. And I was like well what does that even mean, that you have to marry a woman? He was just so confused. I think all of those people are so, so lost because they're caught up in the doctrine of it and they can't see past that and see God for who he is. I think the hardest for me in talking to him was because he is a gay person and this whole group of gay people are like you can be gay but you can never love another person of the same sex and you don't deserve to go to heaven if you do.



### Attempts to Change Being Gay by Talking with a Professional

Though only three men interviewed actually participated in some type of conversion treatment, several participants briefly talked to a physician or mental health provider in hopes of becoming heterosexual. I will first present data from men who talked to a professional but did not pursue further treatment, including any information provided on why these men did not seek therapeutic conversion. I will then present the stories of the men who did participate in conversion therapy, along with their thoughts about what they learned in the conversion process. It should be noted that seven of the 33 participants did not consider conversion treatment or trying to change themselves to heterosexual. To clarify, the participants who did not attempt change still struggled with being same-sex attracted, as did all the participants, but for some men, it was simply clear that their attraction would not change. Further, the participants who did not attempt to change their orientations still attempted to hide or avoid being gay at times.

#### *Talking Briefly with a Professional*

As noted, several men talked with a professional about becoming straight, but ended these conversations fairly quickly. Jerry said that his earlier religious convictions led him to speak to a psychologist about being gay many years ago. He said that he may have pursued conversion therapy at that time, if that psychologist had suggested it. Jerry talked about having “dodged a bullet” when he referred to the stories he has heard from people who have gone through conversion treatment and been harmed by it in some way:

When I was younger I would go to the priest in confession and confess any sexual thoughts and behaviors that I had had, and in the hope that by confessing it would go away. And of course they would tell you to pray about it and so I would pray about it... I remember speaking to a psychologist back in the late 60's about it. His only reaction to me was well, you don't look like a woman, talk like a woman, or act like a woman, so I don't think you're genuinely homosexual...

which was fine at the time, That's probably what I wanted to hear... As the years went on, that no longer seemed to be satisfying and I could no longer hide behind that... Over the years, I have talked with people who were so damaged by psychotherapists and psychotherapy that tried to change them, and I dodged that bullet. [The] psychologist that I worked with had a completely different take on it. I think he assumed that if he didn't reinforce the idea, it would go away. And so he didn't do anything overtly to me in the therapy that tried to do any type of aversion therapy or anything. He basically dismissed it as nonsense. And so it was fine. I wasn't terribly scarred by that.

Bob was quoted earlier in this chapter as trying to avoid being gay, but he also said that he talked to church leaders and several mental health professionals, so he is quoted a second time in this chapter. Bob clarified that he never struggled with his attraction to men as much as he struggled with the disapproval he perceived from others and his desire for approval. He said that he never actually thought he could change his sexual orientation:

I tried talking to Bishops and that kind of stuff. I went to a psychiatrist... He told me I wasn't really gay. I just wanted to emulate some of the men that I believed in and stuff. And I thought he's crazy... Well then I went to a psychologist, not a psychiatrist. I went to a psychologist and I talked to him at least for months before I finally divorced my wife, or she divorced me... He was trying to get me to give more credence to the need of... to keep the commandments of the church. And he saw my church membership and my gayness in conflict and thought the solution to that was to get me to be more involved with church... To me it was never, I never thought God was mad at me for wanting to have sex with men. I didn't think God would care so it really wasn't something that was good advice to me.

Mark said that he did not seek a professional himself, though his mother took him to a therapist when he was young because he and his brother were "sweet little boys:"

My mom took [my brother and I] to therapy at probably ages 12 and 11 with some of that agenda in mind, or some of that assessment in mind, because it wasn't like it was obvious or we had said anything, but people had said things about us as young sweet little boys. You know what I mean? So that got back to my mom. And specifically, I know now that one of my mom's closest friends said to my mom that something's just not right with those boys, like they're a little sweeter than the average boys, or something like that... And so then we were part of the Boy Scouts, and we were part of the Big Brothers program, and her doing those

type of things maybe wasn't a direct "I'm going to make my sons not be gay," but I think there was some influence on what had been said to her in how she might be able to show us the way so that maybe that wouldn't be our future... at the time I didn't really know that that's what she was doing anyway, and I didn't have any anger about it. Like I was so over it and had so released it. Yeah, like the only time that I think I had a consciousness around wanting to change was being very young, six or seven, like literally praying to God, "God, I don't want this so please take it away from me." Other than that, I never made any steps toward any programs or therapy. I've never been to therapy for this, like I don't want to be gay anymore, please help me. No.

Rodney, also quoted earlier in a different section of this chapter, said he met with a psychiatrist for one session to talk about trying to become straight. He said he knew in that one meeting that his orientation was not going to change:

I went to a psychiatrist once as well. I didn't go back to see him because I knew no change was going to happen – I knew there was nothing wrong with me. I was really just wanting acceptance still, wanting someone else to say I was okay... Shortly after high school I think it was... And just what he, and he had very little feedback of course. And, um, after the hour was up he wanted to schedule another appointment. I said no because I, I know right now that number one, there's no changing here. And what you're going to do is talk me through what I've already talked myself through and I think I'm just trying to get acceptance maybe from you even. That this is okay. So, it was again maybe that acceptance thing and wanting to make sure maybe by a professional that I wasn't, there wasn't anything wrong.

Not all participants sought a professional to talk about trying to become heterosexual. For one participant, it was a mental health professional that he was already seeing that brought up this issue. Jake said that he never actually participated in conversion therapy, though a psychologist brought up the possibility with him. Jake said he did not ask for this referral and he was "offended" by it. Jake also noted that he did not stay with that particular psychologist for very long:

Actually, for awhile my parents wanted me to see a psychologist because I was depressed in high school, but that was before I started going to church. It was about sophomore or junior year. A psychologist asked me if I wanted to go into a conversion program to become straight. I was actually really offended, even though I was really depressed and I had low self-esteem and I didn't have a good

self-identity at that point. So it's never really come across my mind... I think it's because since I started research on it since I found out that I was homosexual, that it just was really clear to me that conversion doesn't necessarily work... I was really angry [with this psychologist]. I expressed my anger about that verbally, and he just never brought that up again. But I didn't stay with this particular psychologist for too long because more often not when I went into the office I was less depressed than when I left. I told my dad that we needed to find someone else if he wanted me to see a doctor. So I changed to someone else...and whatever [the new psychologist] did, did help me.

Not everyone who thought of talking to a professional followed through with it.

Daniel said he never tried conversion therapy, though he admitted he may have tried it if he had known about it at a certain point in his life. He said that he did set up an appointment with a psychiatrist early on, though he cancelled the appointment because he somehow knew it would not help him:

I didn't even know a name for [my sexuality], to tell you the truth, but then I knew it just wasn't what other people could deal with. I would have liked to have changed because it would have made my life so much easier... I never got that far [to conversion therapy]... back then I could have probably been sucked into one of those things if I had run across it. The closest I ever came was I set up an appointment with a psychiatrist, and in my mind I kept thinking I'm not crazy. And why would he know about this? And see I didn't know as well as I know now that he probably wouldn't have known anything about this that would have helped me to feel better. So I called and canceled the appointment and never went. That was what I would now call a divine order, the universe helping me. I would have been damaged by that experience more than helped.

Further, Miles said he had thought carefully about conversion therapy, because he had considered trying to find some way to change when he first realized he was gay. He said that over time, he has come to realize that conversion therapy is not only unhelpful, but he feels it is wrong:

I first told my parents that I was bi-curious, they had talked about therapy just to see if it was that I had unresolved issues somewhere else in my life... But that changed very quickly... I had very strong negative views about trying to change a part of who you are just to fit in a religious box. That seemed kind of insane, and completely counter to this whole idea of tolerance and acceptance of loving people for who they are. So and it doesn't work... You can try through cognitive

behavioral therapy to change the behavior, but you're not changing the person and I don't think you should... Like the idea itself is so counter to what they're trying to accomplish. I don't get how putting a number of gay people together and telling them not to be gay is going to work. I think it's just going to make it worse... It's not this theoretical construct that someone talks about, like wouldn't this be awful. It's like there are kids right now, right now sitting in a chair with electrodes being told not to be gay because it's wrong.

Similarly, David described an awareness of such treatment and briefly wondering if it would work, but he realized over time that for him, it was religion that was wrong on this issue instead of him being wrong for being gay:

When I was like 14, I was thinking to myself how come I just can't be normal like everyone else? I remember even watching like these TV specials like a 20/20 special or something about conversion therapy and thinking to myself I wonder if that really works. I wonder if I'll be able to have a normal family where I will be able to be heterosexual. Then I started to realize that, you know, I just don't even think that that would be possible, that these types of therapies would actually result. So instead of moving towards that, I just moved away from religion. I found the more I moved away from religion, the easier it was to accept being gay.

### *Conversion Therapy*

Three of the 33 participants in the current research attempted conversion treatment, though one of these men described his participation as somewhat limited. Each of these three men attempted conversion through a religious, paraprofessional conversion group, though several of the men talked to other mental health professionals after they had stopped attempting to become heterosexual. Their conversion attempts are presented in greater detail, as the lived experience of conversion therapy has not been presented often in depth in the psychological literature. Also, because these more lengthy quotations span many years in the participants' lives, these three men demonstrate a transition in constructive-developmental stage as they talk about their experiences with conversion treatment. As these men described what led them to consider conversion therapy, they demonstrated externally-authored or Interpersonal Balance meaning making

(Kegan, 1982, 1994), like the other men in this chapter. They spoke of their fear about what others would think of their attractions to men and their difficulty in believing that it would be possible to be both religious and gay. However, as these men talked about how they eventually realized that conversion therapy would not be helpful for them, they began to describe a constructive-developmental transition into Institutional knowing. As will be detailed in later chapters, when the participants began to internally author their experience, they became more able to accept themselves as gay and therefore conversion therapy no longer seemed like a viable or useful option for them.

Jason described several efforts to change his sexual orientation, including trying to change himself, talking with his pastor, and briefly attending a paraprofessional conversion therapy group. Jason said that he knew fairly quickly that something did not feel right about his attempt to change. He said he did not participate in conversion therapy with a psychologist or counselor:

From 6<sup>th</sup> grade to junior year in high school I was trying to be straight because everybody's saying oh, you can be straight. Then especially with religion saying oh, homosexuality is a choice then. I believed that at the time. I was like maybe if I talk to myself enough, maybe if I try hard enough I can be straight, I can be like mainstream society, like the norm...I was never able to bring myself to have a sexual experience with a girl. Something about me just said no. When I tried, it was like, you know, you're that far and then you're just like no, let's not. It was amazing how quickly the excuses come up and stuff like that... I did meet with a pastor, though, to talk about trying to change. I went to like a two-week thing with people, and we'd meet once a week. After that two weeks I said you know what, I just don't feel comfortable...It was just a one-on-one with like a pastor at one of the churches in town...then I thought about it with myself. I was just like no, it doesn't feel comfortable. It feels like I'm trying to manipulate something and I was trying to like brainwash myself. So I guess I started the process of it, but I never really followed through.

Zach said that towards the end of his marriage to a woman, he was desperate to change himself so he could save his marriage and live in a way that seemed consistent

with his faith. Zach conveyed that he did not find conversion therapy with religious paraprofessional groups to be helpful in his attempt to change his orientation, so he went to a series of counselors or psychologists to continue talking about his struggles. He talked about how over time he learned to accept himself as a gay man, partly through his contact with mental health professionals. As noted earlier, his narrative is presented in a lengthier form than other quotations thus far:

[I attended] Evergreen International, the Mormon kind of version of Exodus... I started reading all these ex-gay things ... read through Nicolosi's book, read from Charles Socarides' work... I kind of bought into, for a little while, the thought that it had to do with my relationship with my father, that that relationship had in some way been defective. And then I definitely started to realize that many young men, even those who are heterosexual, have issues in their relationships with their fathers. So I was like, "his is bullshit!"... [The group meetings] were an opportunity to express yourself openly without any fear of anything, and most of the people there were dealing with the same issues. So of course what happened was at that time I started to find out that it was a great relief to be able to talk about those things. I started looking at my church a little critically because here we had a group who were faithful Mormons... I also realized that what had happened at some of these group meetings...that occasionally some men would use these as hookup times...I began going to this group, and what also happened, because I was an older man coming for the first time, I was finding a reverse discrimination. I was finding that some of these young men were leery of me... it was very strange being in this group and then suddenly finding okay, here's a situation where we can talk openly, but some of these people are being over-protective as if I want to prey on them. I mean, of course I was attracted to some of them, and since I'm a very friendly person it is in my nature to talk and be friendly. I think they were unnerved by that because they were so fearful. I had the benefit of experience and maturity and wanted to talk openly and freely, and these guys were coming into these groups being very nervous about talking openly. And I just wanted to get it over with. I just wanted to talk honestly and openly and not hide a thing. But I genuinely wanted to try and save my marriage, and I thought well, here's a chance for me to do this. So I went to this group, and I eventually just abandoned it. I thought this is useless, a waste of my time.

Then I thought well, I'm off to my own resources again. Should I go to my church leaders? All they do is pull out the scriptures that I've read myself for years and years and quote things at me. They act as though I'm an imbecile who has no college education and who doesn't know the Mormon scripture or the Biblical scriptures. It was as if I had given no thought to these things. So they were no help. So I can't go to my church leaders; they're no help; because of my being

Mormon I was also nervous of going to a non-Mormon counselor because I knew that often they would counsel you like well, basically what's the matter with you? You've been doing these things all these years. Can't you see you're a raving homosexual? Go home and divorce your wife and be a homosexual and accept yourself. So I was in this very torn position inside because I really wanted to find a way to keep the marriage intact and not lose my family. But what was I supposed to do? I just felt cut off and isolated on both ends of the spectrum... I gave [my wife] some of the literature I was getting from the reparative therapy groups and she would try to look at it, but it was emotionally very hard for her. So she would only go as far as she could and then she would stop... of course now I look back and think how unfair to expect that of someone. I mean, she was dealing with her own issues as a woman, especially when I betrayed her. How on earth could I have expected her to go beyond that.

For a while I felt angry with my church. As I looked back I thought of how they had emphasized chastity before marriage so much, and how important it was for we young men to be pure and to keep ourselves pure and be pure minded towards girls. I started to think at one point in time, well, maybe what's happened here is they've created kind of an aversion within me towards girls because we have to set them on a pedestal... I felt angry that maybe they hadn't just left me alone to simply arrive at whoever I was, whether that's attracted to males or girls. ... So I think over the years I kind of almost felt betrayed by my own beliefs in some respects, and angry at that set of beliefs, feeling that in some respects they came from men who had no notion of what it means to be bisexual or homosexual, who don't grasp it scientifically and who simply write it off as an evil when it's something that is not freely chosen...

I had huge guilt feelings about [sex outside of my marriage]. I was being dishonest. I knew I was betraying my wife. It's still hard to look back on it now because I'm a really loving, caring person, and the thought of hurting somebody to that extent and betraying them to that extent is a very hard thing for me to know that I've done. So you know, you can't blame people for your decisions. We make the bad decisions, and the good ones on our own a lot of times, but they certainly are influenced by many things... I look back at my married life and the pain I caused my ex-wife and the pain I caused my children in this... we seemed like a very loving couple of parents. So who are these strangers who have had this secret that they've been dealing with their whole lives? Who is this father who has this huge secret, the deception that he's been carrying out by himself all these years?

[My wife and I] did go to a counselor...a counselor/psychologist. When it seemed that he knew less about homosexual issues than me, and I was presenting him with some information about reparative therapy; I said to him here, you might want to know about this reparative therapy because this might be helpful. This might be something that would help me. I started realizing this guy is a psychologist, and he doesn't know what I know. This doesn't make sense. So I quit going... Next we found a second counselor, a graduate counselor at a university who also did not seem to really know what she was doing... Then finally looking around for... someone who would understand issues of



homosexuality... I found ... a grief counselor. I went in to talk to her because she said she dealt with a lot of homosexuals... She was a really wonderful human being. She had counseled and met with a Mormon man before who had himself come out of the closet after a long-term marriage, and was now a professional counselor himself... So I went back to my wife and told her about this woman, and we started going to her together and then separately. Basically, she eventually told my wife that she should divorce me and just move on with her life. And we did that to just let me move on with my life. And that's kind of how we got to the divorce part. There was some anger for me with that.

Ken also participated in conversion therapy with an ex-gay ministry group. He said that he attended this group to "live in the way God would want," even becoming married to a woman at one point, though he never actually doubted that he was gay internally. Ken talked about how even though he now disagreed with the teaching of the group, it felt important to say that he felt truly cared for by the members. His story is again presented in some detail:

After struggling for so long to reconcile my sexuality and my spirituality, I became depressed. I hated my job at the time and I couldn't find a church I liked. I went and picked up this guy in a park and got beat up and robbed, and that's when I got involved in the whole ex-gay thing... I was on my lunch hour. So I went to the office manager [and said] I'm just going home. I'm sick. Don't ask me any questions. You know, my shirt was ripped, my pants were dirty where he threw me down, and my face was all swollen up where he hit me. I was just thanking God that he didn't kill me or steal my car. I was very upset and I told [a friend] what had happened, and [this friend] connected me with an ex-gay group.

My whole life has been about making everyone else happy...as long as every else was happy, then I felt like I could function. So I got involved in that group, and I really met some people who were like me. I mean, to me, it was obvious that they were totally gay still, but they were just learning all the psychobabble, too. You know, they never said it, but it was like really implied that marriage was the ultimate healing... [The group was] such an intense spiritual thing... The program was for 30 weeks, and we would meet for three and a half hours [per week]. We would sing and pray and there would be teaching. We would also meet in small groups so that we could hold each another accountable... It really felt like home to me – this group catered to all of my people-pleasing tendencies. They were Christian just like me. They were also gay and struggling not to be – just like me. It was a perfect fit... [Later] I became their poster child, doing radio interviews, going on speaking engagements sharing my testimony and my music, all in the name of not being gay. The dilemma that I

was experiencing though – I was still gay!... I had to keep the faith. I had to keep trusting that God was doing a work of healing in me – it just took time.

The big joke in the group is you see somebody that you find attractive, and you say, oh, that wouldn't be good for my healing... you're still checking [other men] out, but you know you just put it in that context and then it's okay... I met who would later become my ex-wife through this group. She was there to help the ministry, but when we connected, and all of a sudden everybody from the group was saying, oh, you guys should get married. You'd be perfect together. And I was like, well, I like her. Crap, I even loved her. She was my best friend... That whole thing of, you know, just my mom's face on my wedding day. [My mother] was so happy. But you know the next [several] years [my mom] was so miserable because she saw how miserable I was... so much of my life I lived like that, worried about other people finding out.

I think getting married to my friend is what started me towards beginning to really accept myself as gay. Though I really cared for her, trying to be intimate with her was a nightmare. It was probably seriously the most traumatic thing that's ever happened to me, or that I've ever gone through. I mean, it was the worst thing. Both of my parents are deceased now, but like that wedding night thing was worse than either of them dying for me. You know, that's kind of weird. It was just that traumatic... that was the only time we ever even tried cause I just couldn't put myself through that again emotionally, and I felt like I just couldn't put her through that either, which was a little more difficult for her because she had feelings of rejection on top of all that. I really wasn't rejecting her per se, but just the whole sex with a girl thing was what I was rejecting... After the honeymoon, I talked to the leaders in my ex-gay group. They told me I would just have to get past my fear. God would honor my trying and continue my "healing." I never said it, but I wanted to scream, "What healing? I'm not different in the area of my sexual orientation than I was when you met me!" I believe that some of the leaders who were honestly happy being married were truly bisexual. Because of this program, they came and married a woman and found out they could be happy in that situation. They found out they could perform sexually and be satisfied with a woman. I don't think that was the case a majority of the time.

I do need to say something, though. I don't want to come across as demeaning that [ex-gay] group, or whatever, cause I have a really different opinion than a lot of gay people about the whole ex-gay movement, and I know that not everyone who has gone through that experience is the same as mine, but I did not experience anything but love there. It was not a place where I felt hate or felt hated because of who I was. And I went to them. I mean, it wasn't like they came after me recruiting me. And I guess like when I think about things and get angry about things it's more that wrong teaching. You know, now that I have a different understanding about it, it's just like my time in that group made me a better Christian and made me a better person because it really made me challenge what I believe myself and really study and really find what I believe is true for myself. I mean, yeah there are definitely some things that I wish I would have done differently after my time with them. Like I wish I would have never got

married. That's for sure. You know, so I did want to say that because I don't want to come across as like having really bad feelings towards them because I don't.

The attempts participants made to hide, avoid, or change being gay did not happen in isolation. These attempts led the men to encounter ongoing distress and struggle, which reinforced their desire to hide or change. However, their attempts also led the men to feel dissatisfied with their lives and they began to disclose to others and find support, as described in the following chapters.

## Chapter 7

### FINDING SUPPORT

Each of the participants in the current study talked about how important it was to find support from others in their journey towards accepting their same-sex attractions. The search for support required participants to disclose to others about their sexuality. Therefore, processes of disclosure and support occurred simultaneously, but are discussed in separate chapters for clarity. A common source of support for these men was their friends, though participants described other allies. For example, some men talked about how it was their connection with same-sex intimate partners that was the most helpful. For a minority of participants, it was family that was supportive initially. Finally, for participants of color, it seemed especially important to find supportive others who had similar cultural experiences to themselves. The participants' desire and need for support was not described in relation to constructive-developmental level, as the hope to be supported and cared for is not related to stage of meaning making (Lahey et al., 1988). Therefore, results are again presented thematically in this chapter rather than in relation to a specific stage of constructive development.

#### Support from Friends

Thirty-two of the 33 participants described support from friends as being vitally important in some way, while the other participant talked about support from a psychotherapist in similar ways. For example, Mason said that supportive relationships were incredibly valuable:

There have always been people in my life along the way who have been so loving and so understanding and so supportive and so validating, and that's what made all the difference for me. That's what has helped me in all of these situations and all the various losses to get through it... I think it's also been a willingness on my

part to just grow personally, and to give to other people the kind of understanding and support that I ask for myself... For example, I remember the first person I came out to, and he was very caring and did not treat me any differently, which was so touching. I also remember the first time I was at a large gay gathering, and I remember them jumping up and down and singing and laughing and hugging each other and dancing, and I remember standing back in the corner and just being so moved by it. I mean, I'm absolutely moved now just thinking about it. If you could see all of these gay men celebrating who they were and celebrating their lives and whatever. It was just so moving to me.

Rodney talked about connecting with other gay men to locate support:

Actually it was after high school, my first job and, um, another kid that I worked with, we connected, you know, job-wise and had things in common and we did things and, ah, sort of a, a mentor in a way that he suspected that I was gay and actually he became my first gay friend. And that was the whole, you know, there are other people out there like you and that whole gamut, you know, that everybody pretty much goes through. Or til you find that person because otherwise I didn't think there was anybody else around. So that's when the turning point, well, there are other people out there.

James said that several gay couples who are older than him had been mentors to him:

There are several people who have been really supportive along the way, and this has been really meaningful to me. There are several gay couples, one [couple] that I kind of see as my gay fathers. They have supported me and been willing to listen to me... they give me encouragement when I struggle... It was very moving in showing me exactly what being gay was all about. They weren't involved with partying; they weren't involved with anything like that. They were involved with trying to make the community a better place....They always talked about how being gay is just like being straight. It's about being in a relationship, it's about trying to make yourself better, and that's what they said was the most important things in their lives... They were sort of like my fathers in the sense that they were more family than my own family was.

Jason found the acceptance of heterosexual friends to be helpful:

My friends were really helpful and supportive when I told them though, and they even helped me to begin to accept myself after I said you know, I think I am, I started talking to friends about the possibility of being gay. They said you know what, if that's who you are then that's who you are... We'll still care for you. We'll still be there for you. It was more peer influence and positive caring friends that allowed me to be able to say you know what, I will come.

Randy described similar support after he came out, though not necessarily from everyone in his life:

Relationships have been really important to me in my journey, particularly that there would be authenticity and warmth in those relationships... Most of my friends were really supportive and encouraging. So you know, to think back to the number of years that I didn't really let them know who I was, it was really difficult. I think the relationships could have been strengthened if I have come out earlier. At the same time, I guess it's a little bit of a paradox because I did lose some very important relationships, and I could have spared myself some pain and suffering there... What eventually happened when I came out is shit hit the fan. It was really ugly... Some people I had been really close to struggled, and it was very painful for me. But also, positive events and positive relationships are kind of all over the place.

Dean said that he struggled to fully accept himself as gay because he never had any role models to “nudge” him along. He therefore did not talk about support from friends as being helpful, as many other participants did. Instead, he talked about a psychotherapy experience that was extremely helpful in finding the support he needed to accept himself:

I think it would have been easier for me to come out if other people would have hinted that they knew I was gay or nudged me along the way in earlier times. It would have been helpful to have some kind of gay role model to help me. My first gay role model or gay experience was negative, when a man tried to take advantage of me. He was from my church. I was scared and I thought that was what being gay was like for a time. It was even hard for me to go to church again for a long time, but something I can't explain made me hold on and remember that there was still something valuable in religion... I think that one of the things that really helped me in the coming out process was to begin seeing a therapist. I went to therapy in the first place because I realized that I was in love with a straight man and even though I knew it could not go anywhere, I couldn't seem to get over it... My therapist was also really helpful by questioning me and being kind of an advisor. He helped me to think through things I never would have considered on my own.

#### Support from Same-Sex Intimate Partners

Several participants described how it was their partner relationships that provided the most support. For example, Scott talked about how meaningful it had been to have a partner since he was very young:

My partner and I have always been very close, and it has always been a caring and understanding relationship... One's relationship is first and foremost... I think ultimately that brings you great happiness. I think it gives you, in your life every day - someone to share with and to be supportive of. I think it just is the whole context of family and relationship and one's intrinsic happiness.

Ryan also talked about how it was the connection with his intimate partner that had been most meaningful in some ways:

You know, he knows the whole story... the kinds of stuff I've gone through... So I think as much as it's difficult for me to integrate all of that in our relationship and talking about it... And he knows how I see myself... It's made our relationship stronger, I think, because cognitively we are where we are, that we are able to have meaningful conversations.

Though quoted above in discussing support from friends, Mason also talked about how he lost a partner to AIDS earlier in his life and how meaningful that relationship was. He said that he learned that he could actually be loved in that relationship and that he could see his own ability to love someone else:

My partner of 16 years was infected with HIV and that nine year journey we made together was some of the most painful and difficult and surrounded by the loss of many other friends and people who are part of my family. When I talk about family, by the way, I'm not referring to the biological... When I talk about family, I'm talking about those people in my life who have become family to me through the love that I have for them and their valuing of me... When my partner was ill, the journey over the next nine years was propounded by watching someone that you love just fade away day by day. But in the end I was left with three wonderful gifts and the gifts were that; that first gift that [my partner] gave me was the gift of knowing that someone could love me, that I was loveable, which I certainly have never understood from my family or from anyone else before that. The second gift was that I was capable of loving someone else unconditionally. And the third gift was that when it was all over I could look in the mirror and say you did good of [*sic*] taking care of him and standing by him and being there for him until the very end. It was something that I could feel good about myself and I think throughout most of my life there weren't many, if any other times, that I could look into the mirror and say you did good. I think I really liked myself after that and I think before that I'm not sure then I really did. And there are some days that I don't like myself very much and other days when I can.

Rick described the importance of feeling support from other people, particularly his intimate partner and his church family. Rick said that his work with people with AIDS was also valuable, in that he saw much love and care between gay men while he did that work:

Well, I think it started years ago luckily for us with, with [our church] where all of the sudden that didn't matter at all and not only did it not matter, but we felt almost special and, you know, admired because people would say, you guys have been together longer than anybody here that's married. And so we were kind of put on a little pedestal there and also this was during the AIDS, a crisis, well, not that it's not a crisis but when it first came out... [Our AIDS work] was a real important, a, part of our lives... I think we felt we were doing something for the, in the gay arena and also for humanity and not being afraid even though at the time we didn't know. You know, a, if, if by holding someone's hand we could, a, catch the disease. Because when it first came out it wasn't that firm about it how you contracted this. But a, it was very moving to go there... I feel if we don't number one, nothing is going to change or and we've got to help our own community especially when it's and at that time this gay disease, you know, people were faulting you for being gay, you know, you were gay and then you'd get this because you were gay. It was like a punishment. And I felt that, you know, you've got to, you've got to support the community, you know, and help people. And not make them feel that they're wrong or they're less because they have AIDS or are HIV positive, you know.

#### Support from Family

It was unusual for participants to describe initial support from their families, though several men did so. However, it was not only the two men who had gay or lesbian parents that found family support. For example, Theo said:

My entire family, all of my first cousins, my aunts and uncles, they have all accepted me since I came out when I was 18. Actually, if I were to go straight half of them would have heart attacks and be saying no, this is not normal... My family is my baseline for everything. I don't know what I'd do without them... They've always supported me no matter what I've done, and that's kind of where my spirituality and everything comes from... When you're home, everything is fine and you know it's fine, and you can say or do anything and you know you're fine...



Cameron described a recent coming out experience with his family and friends. Though he was concerned about their reaction, he said he knew he would not be rejected by them:

I have been really fortunate with my family, though there is still work to be done there. I came out to them recently, just in the last couple of years. It was hard to find the right time to tell them. I felt sure of myself, but I worried about how they would take it. I was pretty nervous. Not because I was worried they would turn me away, but because probably they were not going to like it too much and I knew it would be hard for them... They wouldn't reject me. I was pretty confident, 100% sure of that... You can always count on your family... I grew up with a sense that no matter what, my family would stay there for me, so that made this process a little easier... I believe that I have been blessed in my coming out experience, though it has also been hard. In fact, I feel kind of disappointed that I have not done more, both for myself and for other people. I know I have to push myself a little bit more.

David said that any struggles occurring in his family relationships seemed less about his being gay and more about generational differences between himself and his parents:

Family's cool. My [siblings] and I have gotten really close after I came out... My parents and I, I mean, they're fine. Our relationship is pretty much the same. I think they're accepting of me. It's just kind of odd because I always try to think about are they not being accepting of me because I'm gay, or are they just concerned in general? For example, I tell people my parents never ask me if I'm dating anyone. Then again, they don't ask my heterosexual [siblings] if they're dating anyone either. So I don't know like what that's about. But for the most part my parents are very supportive... I just think that our relationship is just not going to become any stronger or become any less strong. I think a lot of it has to do with just the generational differences.

#### Support for Participants of Color

For participants of color, it seemed especially important that they find support from others from the same cultural group. This was not necessarily true for participants who may be perceived as white men by others and instead was something that was discussed by men who were clearly identifiable as being members of racial minority groups in this country. For example, Aaron talked about struggling to understand how he could be both a black man and a gay man. He talked about being in another country and

meeting a black, gay man who was very self-accepting and affirming. Aaron also talked about experiencing a larger community of black, gay men and how helpful it was in his own self-acceptance to see others like him who were comfortable with being gay. He said he felt angry at what he had missed at that time, since he had felt like such an outsider for most of life up until that point:

I met a good friend... he just had an energetic activist spirit... it was this whole energy that he moved with in his life. And just kind of like spending time with him, I just thought that it was possible to be black and gay and still have integrity about yourself as a man and still have a good circle of friends and be connected and be loved and be successful and be okay. And through spending a summer with him I just realized like what am I tripping about?... to be able to see someone that I admired so much live his life and be okay and be successful and still have integrity about himself as a man, it was just like well, what am I doing?... I finally had this opportunity to have a sexual experience with a man that wasn't sneaking, per se, that was – a little bit more relaxed or natural and in a more natural or familiar type setting than I had in the past... I at least had my own space and I was able to actually lay in the bed with a man and hold him and be held. So I kind of make that as one of the benchmarks of like wow, it was something about that experience that I knew I enjoyed that felt natural. And then another marker would probably be going to my first black gay club.. I had seen a few black gay men in my life, most times I was able to identify them because they were what I perceived as to be a little bit more feminine. And so all of that came into play being in this black gay club with who I perceived as very masculine men....So it was like a welcome, just like wow, this is something that I didn't even know existed, and to see it and to know it exists, I mean, literally I stayed up all night because even after I left the club, I just kept reflecting on it. And some of it was joy that it existed... wow, this existed and I thought I was alone and didn't know it existed, and I was mad that this existed and nobody was able to get me to it or to express to me or explain to me that no, you're not alone and that there are other people that think like you. So it was all of that combined. Like that's what I was thinking at the time. I really was just walking through the club in amazement... I felt like the world had tricked me and all of these emotions that I had kept to myself or felt like I was an outsider, felt like I was alone, I realized in one night that I really wasn't. And those two experiences kind of stand out. There's something about going through all of that... an indicator that I wasn't alone, that I wasn't an outsider, that there were other people like me, it was just something in me that just understood that to be very wrong to do. Wrong for the world to do to me as a child growing up so that no one shared these things with me and then two, understanding that there are probably other people that are feeling just the same and just feeling that that would be wrong. I wouldn't want anyone else to go through that. So I think that kind of explains kind of what the synergy, to kind of

like begin to tell the truth. Like it felt so natural to hold this man and be held by him and you know to have sex with him... I realized that it was just normal people, everyday people, fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, you know, lawyers, just normal people, the boy down the street, you know, that were black and gay and okay with it, and could actually make it to a club and socialize like that was preferable. And so the synergy of all of that just said wait a minute, why am I, you know and I had spent so many years being depressed about it or being sad about it or praying to die or what this does to your self-esteem and all of that that? It was just a synergy of wait a minute, enough is enough and I've got to find a way to tell the truth and start moving down that road.

Jason added that his experience as a non-white man has been difficult in finding support, especially from his family. He talked about how he feels torn between the demands of competing cultural identities:

Part of what has been hard for me in this process is that my family is [a particular racial/ethnic group] and the cultural experience and cultural demands have been different... Along with the uniqueness of the culture itself, with it there's no word for gay. There's no word for gay. So it's not even discussed and not even talked about. It's looked down upon because when it comes down to your cultural values and passing on your own family genes, you won't be able to do that...It's supposed to just follow natural processes... You have to be straight, you have to marry a girl and have a family and have at least one son and stuff like that...I respect the culture, but if I'm not getting the respect back for me, I don't know if I should be respecting it. This is who I am and this is not something that I woke up one day and said today I'd like to be shunned by society... I respect that culture, my cultural values for those who can follow it, you know? I can't.

Bryce said that the support of friends was instrumental in his journey. Specifically, as a non-white gay man, he described how finding other gay men from his racial/ethnic group was helpful:

So over time I came to accept it more and my friends accepted it more and just being proud. Being gay was to stand up for who you are and what your rights are. It was also really helpful to find other gay people [from my racial/ethnic group]... That has been very important because like I said I grew up in a rural area, which was very small, we had a [particular racial/ethnic] community, but it was very small. There was like one out person, but he was made fun of, you know, and we liked him, but everyone made fun of him, so of course I didn't want to come out. But as I got older and as I traveled more, I met more people like me. We have the same stories. We come from the same background. I guess the sense of

community as in not feeling alone, that helped so much. It normalizes it too that you're not crazy and you're not alone in the struggle. You can share all of that.

Daniel talked about how it was important in his own journey to be able to integrate his identity as a black man with his identity as a gay man:

Both of them [my identities] are constant. One is more visible than the other, but they're both always present. And when you get me, you get both blackness and gayness. Now, black people in general tend to be more homophobic, but now you take a particular black person, and they might be less homophobic than a particular white one. But in general I think you could say that. The black church is extremely homophobic... it's not spiritual based healthy for me to go there and expose myself to that.

As noted earlier, participants found support as they began to disclose to others about their sexuality, though these simultaneous processes are talked about in separate chapters for clarity. Though participants found support from valued others after attempting to hide or change being gay, they tended to not receive support from all important contexts or relationships. As a result, they would again feel distress and would continue to struggle, even as they began to process of accepting themselves as gay men in some ways. In the next chapter, the process of disclosing to others is focused on specifically, though it occurred simultaneously and cyclically throughout the participants' journeys.

## Chapter 8

### DISCLOSURE TO OTHERS

As noted in the preceding chapters and as will be discussed in the results summary in Chapter 12, it is important to remember that participants discussed receiving support, disclosing to others, accepting themselves (Chapter 9), and some ongoing struggle (Chapter 10) as a kind of simultaneous process. Therefore, the experience of disclosing to others does not happen one time for these men and it continuously affects how they feel about self, others, and the world. In a more distinct way than with the topics of earlier chapters, the participants thought about this chapter's topic, disclosure to others, in relation to their constructive-developmental level. In other words, though they may disclose to others throughout their meaning-making development, these men tended to speak about their choices and concerns related to their disclosure as relative to their current constructive-developmental level. Therefore, in the current chapter, I will present these results organized by participant Subject-Object Balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

#### Disclosure and the Imperial Balance

It is important to remember that only one participant made meaning in the Imperial Balance, so his experience could be overrepresented if readers do not remain aware that he is the only voice represented when discussing this meaning-making stage. Dean talked about disclosure to others relative to his constructive developmental level (Kegan, 1982, 1994). In the Imperial Balance, meaning makers are subject to their own needs and perspectives. They struggle to internalize, and therefore fully understand, the points of view of other persons. Though such individuals understand that others have needs, beliefs, and viewpoints, they have to try to anticipate how others will react since

Imperial meaning makers cannot hold and discriminate the feelings of others inside themselves. Instead, because this meaning maker is embedded in his or her own wants and desires, other persons are understood on how they do or do not meet the meaning maker's needs. Behavior is then often based on knowing how the consequences of one's own actions and the actions of others affect the individual's interests. The Imperial meaning maker needs to know from others what they think and feel, so that he or she can evaluate the consequences of a situation. Dean illustrated this meaning making system when he talked about feeling unsure about the sexual orientations of others around him, noting, "I have always had a hard time telling if other people are gay or straight. I then had a hard time knowing how to approach people or knowing what I should tell them." He also had a difficult time determining if he should disclose to others at all, because he could never be certain if there was an important reason to do so or not:

For the longest time, I never could seem to find a big enough reason to come out. I could not decide if it was important that other people even know about me. At first I thought that maybe I would find a partner one day, and only then I would tell other people I was gay. But later I realized that maybe the reason I was having such a hard time finding someone was because I had never been out.

Dean's disclosure decisions were ruled by his needs, but not by fear about how others would feel. Though he wondered how others may react, his primary concern was related to how disclosure would cause difficulty for him. In his interview, Dean did not appear to struggle with how others would respond emotionally, as much as he was concerned that coming out would not be too much of a financial cost if he were to lose work. He also suggested that if he were to come out, he may be able to be more successful in finding a romantic partner, which was something he very much wanted to do:

Coming out was not a priority in my life for a long time. Initially, it felt more important to be financially set, to have paid for my home, for my business to be

secure... It took time to do this, partly because I have friendships with people in my business and I did not want coming out to affect my income. I feel like there was a cost to waiting to come out, though. I was working on the business and financial sides of me, but I was trying to ignore my emotional side... I came out about three years ago... I had thought about it for a long time, wondering who I should come out to, if at all and who I should tell first. I planned it out specifically, with a certain day and time.

### Disclosure and the Interpersonal Balance

As a reminder, individuals who make meaning in the Interpersonal Balance can now internalize and *have* needs, instead of being *defined by* needs (Kegan, 1982, 1994). It is theorized that such a person can now hold differing viewpoints inside the self, and can integrate his or her own needs with the needs of others and can examine them simultaneously. The other person's feelings can therefore now be considered and felt empathically, so the Interpersonal meaning maker cares what other persons may think. Because of her or his ability to fully empathize with what others feel, this meaning maker tends to make decisions based on the values of the reference group. However, the person is now subject to the context that an interpersonally-shared reality creates. As noted earlier, rather than *having* interpersonal relationships, they *are* their interpersonal relationships. They define and experience the self in the context of relationships and experience an inability to differentiate the self from the interpersonal context. As stated in Chapter 2, there is not an independent self to share with others. Instead, the presence of the other is required to bring the self to life. Also in Chapter 2, I conjectured that this would make the coming out process difficult for gay men, since most valued relationships or reference groups in the current cultural context would likely be disapproving of sexual minority status.

As the Interpersonal meaning makers in the current study perceived support, they tended to disclose information about their sexuality to valued others. This group of participants tended to disclose to people with whom they had some suspicion that they would be accepted, and they tended to feel hesitant about sharing this information with valued reference groups that they feared would not be supporting. The participants described a desire to disclose, so that they could feel more connected to their loved ones. For example, Jason said that he has told all of his friends but not all of his family that he is gay. He said he wanted to connect more authentically, but he was hesitant to reveal this information to unaccepting people because it would feel like more than losing the relationship. In a clearly Interpersonal Balance understanding, Jason felt he would also lose part of *himself* if he lost those valued relationships:

My parents know, and they are still coming to terms with it... [By telling people] I just feel more whole, like I feel more complete, and I feel like if I was to go through the kind of losing of any of [my family or friends] then it's almost like a part of me is kind of gone. They're like my support group.

When the Interpersonal meaning makers in this study described their current struggles related to disclosing their sexual identities to others, they talked about their fears that they would not be accepted and they voiced concern about how hard it would be for others if they knew. Brad explained:

My family still thinks I'm some kind of Christian. They know I'm gay now, but they do not know [that he changed his religious beliefs], and they probably won't know because that would probably make them a little crazy... I think not only would they not like me, it would hurt them, and I don't want to put them through that... When you come out to anybody there's always that fear that they might not accept you. My family is pretty big on family, and so when you suddenly get pinned outside of the family it's kind of traumatic... Also, I struggle with when I should come out to some younger family members because I'm not wanting to get in there and shake it up and be like hey, [I am] gay, you know? I just feel I have the responsibility as kind of a role model for them... When I'm interviewing for jobs and stuff, that usually makes me real anxious... I always get anxious about



stuff like that whenever I'm going into a new situation... I've gotten to where I can read people fairly well, I think. For kind of survival. But that still always makes you anxious. Am I going to slip up? Are they going to find out?... I think it's really almost any situation unless I already know that the people accept gays or that they are other gays.

Bryce struggled similarly, fearing he would be disowned if others knew:

Basically I'm out to everybody except for my parents. All my brothers and sisters, most of my friends back home know, just my parents and my older relatives. They're very conservative... When I go home I'm myself and they love me for who I am, but they don't know that I'm gay and if I were to tell them that I don't think they would know how to handle it... They'd probably disown me for like, not forever because I know they'll eventually get over it... Their expectation is for me to specifically marry [a girl from a particular racial/ethnic] background... that is how strict they are.

James spoke of carefully monitoring the reactions of others before coming out:

[I came out] the summer after I graduated, so I was 18. And I came out to a few friends at work that I knew were very liberal... then it got spread around and then I had some discrimination issues at work with that and so it sort of threw me away from doing that for a while. And then I got to college and I was living with a bunch of [religious] guys... And they were showing from the very beginning signs of prejudice and being very conservative and not willing to open up to things that were different and new.

Not all of the Interpersonal meaning makers had similar coming out stories. For example, Jake said that he did not intend to come out when he did. Other friends found out he was gay by accident, very soon after he realized this himself. Jake said that his friends, on the whole, have not struggled with knowing this, which has not been true with his parents:

I found somebody attractive in gym class, and I told him towards the end of the year, and it was really, really foolish because I wrote him a note, which was really dumb. And that wasn't prudent. It was during second to last period. My last period, I think half of the school knew, and I'm not even sure how because everybody was in classroom. That is a mystery to me. I have no idea how that happened. But I was just walking through the hall and everybody was just like [his name], I heard you're gay, is that true? And then I wouldn't even know who the person is, and I'd say that I don't want to talk about it, and then they just walk away and move on. And I dealt with that like 30 times before I left. Then that

weekend with Monday coming I was actually afraid to go to school because I wasn't sure what people would think, and I felt like if I walked down the hallway to go to my locker everybody would be staring at me... I wasn't sure what was going to happen, and I didn't really have anything to reference to figure that out. So I had to go to school and figure out myself what was going to happen. And it ended up that no one cared. I remember it being either 2 or 3 days of me just getting nervous before I was actually fine with it... I didn't really choose to tell my family. My dad just asked if I was gay at some point. Though my dad was confused at first, he ended up totally cool with it. My mom was upset. She actually avoids the word boyfriend, and she says, oh, you're having one of your friends over?

Two of the Interpersonal meaning makers did not struggle as much as the other men did in relation to disclosure to valued others. However, these two men, unlike most other participants, reported family support around being gay and they said that they never had questioned this support while growing up. Theo said that he focused on his career plans before college, where he began to "experiment" with being gay. He talked about how he had experienced several life threatening accidents in the past and they had led to him being more focused on living his life to the fullest, rather than feeling overly concerned with what others thought:

I didn't do my experimentation until college, you know. I was working all the time and I really didn't care about relationships then because I wanted to get somewhere and go somewhere and make something of my life... I didn't want anybody holding me back. That was the main part. It wasn't like I was afraid [of being gay], I was scared because I knew I wanted to do so much more and just live a happy life... make the best of it because it could be the end.

Ryan did not experience his coming out process as like that of the other participants, because of his experience growing up with a lesbian mother. He denied feeling particular pressure to identify his sexuality in any particular way, though he said that his own journey with sexuality was different than his mother's:

I still went against the grain, and I had to do things for myself and fall on my face. I guess my coming out process was, from what I can tell, very different... And I don't know how to say this without sounding like egotistical or snotty, but I feel

like I matured in areas much earlier than [many other people]. And while I was naïve about a great many things, I didn't have concerns that overall my family would disown me. I mean, I knew at least my mother wasn't going anywhere, and her partner.

#### Disclosure and the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition

Individuals who make meaning in the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition will display elements of each of those orders of mind, depending on this context or issue they are encountering (Lahey et al., 1988). Therefore, these meaning makers will make sense of some disclosure concerns in ways similar to the Interpersonal Balance, as described above, and some concerns in ways similar to the Institutional Balance, as described in the next section.

Because the current group of participants make meaning in at least a partially Interpersonal Balance order of mind, it makes sense that several of these men would struggle with disclosure to others and fear disapproval in a similar way to the fully Interpersonal meaning makers. For example, Cameron said that he continues to struggle to tell other people about his sexuality. He talked about wanting the “courage” to do this more, but his fear that this could mean that others would see him negatively:

I want to do something meaningful that expresses who I am and also that helps people. I feel like I'm just starting up a path and there are so many things to do... I just wish I had the courage to actually do that. I mean I know I have the courage, but it's sometimes so hard to actually go ahead.

Ronald said that he struggles to tell others about his sexuality generally, feeling concern that people may be negative or that he may lose important relationships. He talked about being from another country and said that the cultural differences made it harder for him to predict if he would be accepted:

In relation to telling people in this country about my sexuality, if I feel it's an unsafe situation... I kind of examine the relationship and the possible negative

consequence of [losing] the relationship if I disclose the information to the people. I will also examine their level of acceptance on these kind of issues. Basically, I probably will disclose to gay people more. I think most of the struggle comes from my expectation of my family and their reaction to knowing me being a sexual minority. So I haven't come out to my parents or my close family members. I'm still thinking if there is a good way to come out or not... I can see how [coming out] will decrease my anxiety and uncertainty about certain things, and also whether or not I will get the support from my family, if at least it's for sure, or if at least I have something I could work on. So not coming out to them is kind of nerve-racking... I wish I had a strong bond with my parents, but I would say we don't share so much... We kind of keep part of ourselves from each other, but I know I have very emotional dependency over them... I don't know exactly how they will respond to my coming out.

Ken said he still struggles to tell others about his sexuality at times because of his fear of losing valued others, which would be a challenge in Interpersonal meaning making. He talked about living in a small town and also being connected with a pastor he had known before he came out:

There have been some issues cause it's a very small town... I don't have one gay friend after [more than a year] of being here. You know, that's been really hard. I have some great, great, great friends that don't have an issue at all with me being gay, and I can totally be myself with them and stuff, but it's still just not the same as being with just gays. You know, somebody who gets the jokes and you can completely be yourself with.... So that's been really hard, and I think part of that was still wanting to please [my pastor] cause he really was a big impact on me when I lived [in this area] before. And [my friend] said, "You shouldn't be going [to live] over there. You can't be yourself there. I want you to be happy. I know you'll be happy cause you'll be doing good things and stuff like that, but you're not really going to be happy." You know, she was right.

Scott described how he met his partner through work when they were both very young and how he had that support early on from that partnership. He said that though the dyad went through the coming out process together, they were hesitant to tell other people that they were a couple because they feared being misunderstood and possibly losing their jobs or valued relationships with friends. He also talked about how difficult it was to tell his family and how he defined his disclosure related to their possible reactions:

It felt too scary at those earlier times to really speak of [our relationship to others] – we feared losing our jobs or our friendships... It would have been nice to have known about their support all along... My sister is the only close family member that I directly told about being gay, but it was very hard for me. I felt I was hiding and I was feeling dishonest, and that seemed inconsistent with me. My parents were older, and they were not well educated about gay issues. I thought they could feel confused or burdened if they knew I was gay. I don't know how much they could really understand about all of this. I didn't want to come out to my sister and make her have this burden of knowing about me and not talking to our parents about it. So it was after my parents had died that I felt I could talk to my sister about being these issues.

Kade said that he is unsure that his extended family knows that both he and his mother are gay. He described a fear about how they would react to this news, which led to his difficulty disclosing to them:

Why do I put myself in that atmosphere? Do they know? If they don't know and I tell them, will they care? Will it open their eyes? Would they [say] you can't come?... I would like [my partner] to be able to come [to family gatherings], but I'm not going to put him in that environment, let alone myself... I've started to look forward to [seeing them] less and less because it's an issue that just sits on my mind.

The comments that several participants made were more representative of the Interpersonal/Institutional transition itself. For example, Justin said that he was out to his family, though he was not out in many of his life contexts. He described some ongoing messages from his family that were not accepting of his sexual orientation. He represents this transition in that he is able to define himself separately from the expectations of his family, but he still struggles to “push the issue” because of what it could mean in terms of perceived losses in his family relationships:

My family knows that I am gay. They found out when they saw how upset I was after a break up... I think that my [siblings] are okay with it. It's not something that they necessarily dwell on or, I mean it's not that we're not a close family, they just, everybody has their own separate lives ... I think with my mom it's just partly religious, that's just not acceptable... I don't know if that is fair to say that she's worried about her social status because it's not like we're like in the upper class or anything, but I think it's just, you know, it's the way she was raised. I

mean we had a couple of talks about it ... I basically told her that I really felt that she didn't love me... I mean, she loves me, she would rather me not be gay, but, you know, and so it just doesn't come up and it really hasn't come up just because there is no reason at this point, for me to push the issue.

Kade was quoted earlier as struggling with his family related to elements of his meaning making that were more Interpersonal, perhaps because they were related to an important reference group (his extended family) that he could not imagine losing. However, Kade explained that he came out publicly during high school. He said that he had to be true to what he understood about himself, even if there were social costs related to the peer reference group. Therefore, he demonstrates the nature of the transitional stages, making meaning in two different Subject-Object Balances, relative to the context of the person:

High school was really the worst part of [coming out], because I was the only person for a long time in my high school that was out...so for two years I was in hell. I hated high school. I hated every last moment of it. I think it's because I was so sure of who I was...I'm gay, get the fuck over it, just really forcing the issue. Most of my classmates were not nice people. I had a few close friends who like accepted me for all of who I was.

Miles said that telling his parents he was gay was hard, but his coming out became increasingly difficult when he brought a boyfriend home from college and his parents saw him with another man for the first time. He represents transitional meaning making in that he could hold his own system for understanding his sexuality, but he had to escape his family when he did not feel accepted by them because of the power they held as a primary reference group for him:

Throughout the first year of college it became kind of clear that I had switched teams, at least to me. And I tried to be open about it with my parents [about my experience, even though I had already told them I was gay]... I went home for Christmas and we didn't really talk about it, but it seemed like, you know, it's kind of that don't ask, don't tell. I started dating someone over that year and I eventually invited him to visit with me and my parents... I tried to lay it out to them as best I could saying, you know, I have a friend coming to visit and he's very important to me, and they said okay, and I said we're going to be spending a

lot of time together, and they said okay. And I was like, and he's not going to be using the guest room. And they said okay. So I figured oh my God, they're going to be okay with it. This isn't going to be a disaster; this will be fine... When [my boyfriend] was driving away after the visit and I realized I would not be seeing him for some time, I was just devastated and crying, and I came inside and my mother was just like, "I can't believe you would do that to us, like with no warning, just bring some guy home, holding his hand, blatantly snuggling on the couch." And I was like, "Oh, so when my sister and brother-in-law were getting it on on the couch, that's okay"... So that intensity ended with me going to [another city] and spending some time with a couple of my friends for a few days. Just getting in my car, like still crying, and being like, "I can't even talk to you about this right now because we're just not seeing things the same way."

Randy said that he came out to several friends who he perceived to be supportive first.

He talked about his ongoing fear of rejection from his family and fear that he could lose relationship with them, though he had disclosed his sexual orientation to one family member. Randy also described how being from another culture informed his struggles in this area. His story is an example of the Interpersonal/Institutional transition in that he can define his own system related to sexuality, but he struggles to hold that system in relation to certain valued relationships or reference groups:

I came out to a handful of friends first, and they, in fact, encouraged me that I should tell my brother because he's the closest family that I have. So when I came out to him, he was very supportive. Although since then, he's gone through lots of questioning himself... just wondering a lot about is this right, is this not right, what should I do, my brother's gay, should I stand up to others when they're making homophobic jokes? So we have really struggled... He's straight, but he's done a marvelous job of just trying to sit with some of that and doing what he needs to do. The rest of my family doesn't know... I was *raised* Muslim because I don't identify with *being* Muslim at this point, and yet it's so much of my background, so much of my cultural identity. And you know, my brother is a practicing Muslim. My family are practicing Muslims. And yes, I mean, you know, we still have issues such as honor killings or hanging of gay teenagers in [my country]. You know, just in the Muslim world it's so much more of a taboo, and physical safety is an issue... I don't have a relationship with [most of my family] for a variety of reasons. But being gay is, I think, a big part of it. I live here. My family lives in [another country]. You know, I don't know how they would cope with that. You know, being gay is such a - a white man's disease is what I call it sometimes... It's not going to be part of our identity, of our cultural group. So, you know, I have often grappled with the idea of, you know, if I do

come out to my parents, for example, what are they going to do with that information? I mean, at least here in [this part of the world] there are some support groups and people. You know, therapists, for example. Yet in the third world there's not a thing. I don't know what would happen with that piece of information. So I'm pretty much out to everyone in my life except my parents and my extended family.

Tom communicated that he primarily identifies as Christian, so he tends to spend most of his time with other Christians. He described transitional meaning making when he could hold his own system of understanding sexuality while feeling unsure when he should disclose his orientation because of how he felt Christians can be negative towards gay people:

When I enter into a church or I enter into a situation with a lot of Christians, I don't introduce myself as a homosexual because they automatically know things about me then. You know, he's gay so obviously he has sex with children and he wears pink a lot. So I don't bother telling them that. My belief is that once they know me and see who I am and put a face on this monster, then they can hear that. And it's hard because how far in the relationship do you go before you say this, and how big a deception do they feel, and all this kind of stuff? But I don't want that to be the first thing somebody knows about me. I want the fact that I'm a Christian to be the first thing they know about me.

David said that though he generally does not struggle to come out to people, he sometimes is reminded of times in his youth when he felt more silenced and scared. He said that even currently, he sometimes will be reminded of how anxiety provoking those past situations could be and he can still be silent:

Being in situations that suddenly remind me of how so many people are not accepting can remind of those feelings of anxiety from when I was younger... Times like when I would be with all guys, and the guys were all pretty masculine hetero guys, and they would start calling each other faggot, or they would start like trying to say why someone else was gay and blah, blah, blah. It was just this big joke, and I just felt really anxious about are they going to call attention to me? I don't want them to call attention to me. I'm either going to leave the room or I'm going to laugh at their jokes and whatever. It reminded me of even just times where just being called a faggot or walking down the street; I wouldn't even be walking and I remember just being afraid that someone was going to hurt me or do something to me... aware of my safety or lack of, or even just aware of that



disgust or the hatred that people have towards gays... I do get really angry [when I am reminded of those situations today]. Sometimes I will express it to [the people I am with at the time]. Other times I won't. I'll just go along, but I'll tell them after awhile that I do want to leave and go somewhere else. I mean, I guess it's just anger and hurt put together... feeling like I'm being misunderstood. And not even misunderstood, but not understood, completely just not understood. Then I guess I also feel anger in terms of just the oppression and the injustice in the world, particularly with being gay. Like I know there will be a lot of situations where I just hear the word faggot or hear the word gay in a negative way.

### Disclosure and the Institutional Balance

Though participants in the Interpersonal/Institutional transition showed at least a partially internally-authored meaning-making system related to disclosure, the Institutional Balance participants defined disclosure in their own terms. At the Institutional Balance, as the individual can now take the interpersonal system as object, the person can now *have* relationships instead of being *defined by* relationships (Kegan, 1982; 1994). Now that the feelings and perspectives from the person's shared realities and experiences with others are moved to object, that person's knowing and understanding are understood in a self-authored point of view. The individual can now self-determine, perhaps choosing to consider but not being held in deference to the reference group, what his or her stance will be between competing demands or expectations. The individual can now name self-authored values and take responsibility for his or her own role in understanding the world. However, because the person now generates her or his own standards for making sense of the world, that person remains subject to the institution he or she has created. It is difficult, therefore, to have perspective on how this self-administered system operates. The person can see that others have their own approaches to understanding the world, but she or he can only judge these other systems through the lens of the system the individual has generated.

The Institutional meaning makers who described their initial disclosure to others were describing events that were some time past. Because of this, they described struggle with what others would think and fear about coming out for some time before they did so. Since these events happened in the past, these participants appeared to be describing earlier meaning making that had informed their feelings about disclosure to others. Therefore, some stories of initial coming out to others are similar to the stories described by other participants above. However, this group of participants clearly felt less current fear about disclosure than the men described earlier. For example, Mark talked about trying to hide he was gay, both from himself and from other people, for some time. He said that he hid it for so long that it felt odd to be as publicly out as he was now. He explained that he came out in a public setting as a way to honor his own experience and to help others:

I had a lot of very frustrating friendships [with men I was attracted to]... but the idea of like having full on gay sex never really crossed my mind. That was something that I didn't dare open that door, and I was, you know, a little scared of what might happen if I did... I came out very late in life... I have since told my coming out story very publicly, and at times it seems surreal to me, to be an extremely openly gay person after what it was like pretending to be straight so long.

Steve talked about how hard it was to begin to accept himself as gay, but then to struggle to tell friends and family. He demonstrated an earlier meaning making balance that was transitional when he said he kept a separate set of gay and straight friends for a time as a way to deal with this:

It got to the point where it was too hard... to have two sets of friends. You know, something interesting that happened in my gay life that I would want to share with my other friends...you have to leave too much out... I did sort of figure, you do the math here. You're not married. You're not dating anybody... they probably have it figured out anyway. They're not stupid... Since I've come out, being gay is not a big deal anymore... By finally coming out I mean telling my parents and

telling my mother, or telling somebody other than my physician, I guess I should say. You know, I never would have imagined that life would have taken such a 180 degree turn.

Perry said he came out when he was in college. He talked about never struggling with the fact he was gay, at least inside himself. In other parts of his interview, he noted that he had at least one sibling who was gay as well, which may have been helpful in his own self-acceptance. Perry said that he struggled with what other people would think, however, and that it was helpful to know other people who were gay as well:

I had two very close friends who had confided to me that they were gay... and I knew them to be very decent human beings. And so when I came out to them, I mean, I came out not really thinking that there was anything wrong with gay people... It's not that I haven't hidden it... I've gone through that kind of period where I would never want people to know I was gay. But I was fortunate in college to come out in a very positive way and environment of friends... I don't think I've ever struggled with it... The only people I had not told by the initial several years were my parents... Once [before he told his mother, she said], "If it's okay to be gay, then why are people ashamed to say it?" And of course I was ashamed to say it at the time to her... She certainly engaged me in the conversation and I chose not to share with her. But that struck me very sharply. If it's okay, then you shouldn't be ashamed to tell people... I think people struggle with these issues today because of fear of losing something. And I guess maybe... I have nothing to fear... there's really nothing that can happen to me adversely if people were to find out... Once you come out to your parents, there's really not much else left, I guess... I think it's gotten easier and easier to just be more comfortable and know that there's nothing wrong with me, and that's basically the way that I feel.

Interestingly, several of the Institutional meaning makers did not describe coming out in the detail that participants in less complex stages of constructive development did. This may be because they did not seem to struggle with disclosure as much as other participants. This is logical in terms of constructive development, in that Institutional meaning makers self-author their systems for understanding the world and interacting in relationships. These men may tend to not struggle as much in certain situations, as they are generally not as troubled by perceived disapproval from others. Therefore, there are

fewer quotations that describe an Institutional approach to coming out in the past.

However, the Institutional meaning makers did think of their current concerns with disclosure in terms relevant to their constructive-developmental level. Rodney is an example of one participant who did so. He explained how once his family knew he was gay, he was unwilling to keep his orientation a secret from his friends. He said that he did not struggle coming out at that point, because he knew what was true about himself and that he could accept himself:

I do admit that it was still hard to tell friends at times and I sometimes feared I would still not be accepted at times. Over time, though, it became less about whether others would accept me or not, and more about what I wanted and who I am. I think I was just sick and tired of living this double life, and with finally getting that out of the way with my parents [disclosing his sexual orientation to his parents], then I wasn't lying about where I was going and who I was with... then I wanted it to be the same with my friends. I was to the point that if you can't accept me for this, it's not an issue. I'm still the same person you grew up with, but you also have to know that I'm not the same as you are... I know what I am. I've known for a long time and now it's time for everybody else to know.

Aaron also explained how it was his self-authored understanding of what it meant to be gay that led to his coming out to valued others. He said that he decided to come out after he met others who were like him. He talked about how hard it was to tell his family, but it felt important to do because once he felt able to accept himself, he was not willing to keep his gayness silent:

I think [what led to my coming out] was just feeling sad or depressed about my sexuality or feeling very disconnected or an outsider. Then, knowing that I wasn't telling the truth to myself about what it was that I was feeling and experiencing, and then too, you know, feeling torn about then learning how to share with others. I don't know if I knew then that it was going to be as important as it has been in my life... I used to say that once I told [several people important to me], the hardest people to tell or share with and from there it kind of was like okay, well what am I tripping about? It just became, I put into practice that I'm going to walk into a room and be able to tell the truth about myself... I did have anxiety about that, coming home and doing that, but I knew it was important enough to do. And how I saw [my friend in the other country] living his life, I

knew I wanted that for myself, that freedom, that being able to walk in the room being gay and still be okay and be able to communicate that to others, not just by what you say, but by your actions... Outside of [my family], and since they didn't disown me or shun me or make me feel worse or anything else, like everybody else didn't matter... I don't have to make a statement to anyone else. I'm not expecting their validation. It was just like I'm doing my work to take care of myself, and so this is like my personal journey... It's not that I don't ever like have my moments [of struggle with being out today], but for the most part, I don't, but I'm so connected to a world that does say I'm okay. And so it's like it validates me to the extent that...

Ben talked about how being out to his mother had been an ongoing challenge and had forced him to have some hard discussions with her. He provided an example of how Institutional meaning makers still struggled with issues of disclosure, but more in relation to their own system for understanding the world:

[In recent years,] I have been really quite good about challenging [my mother] on what she says... I'm the only one I know in the family that does that so it has made our relationship very tense... it's really strange and of course my relationship with my dad is exactly the opposite, very loving and very supportive, very positive, very building... [My mother eventually] said it's either him or me. And I hold the mother's position and so if you want my approval you better play the game according to my rules. And I just said you know I'm not interested in a relationship like that at all. And I told her I wasn't a child any more, that I was an adult and if she wanted to have an adult relationship with me we could work on that... I've got a pretty good system. I think it is a positive thing. There are times when I regret that, there are times when I wish that I could be the person that she wants me to be, and I spend a few minutes recalling what she had said to me not in so many words but in specific words and phrases over the past you know the past 10 or 15 years which have let me know very clearly exactly what she thinks. And I compare that to what my dad has said to me, what he thinks and I ask myself which one of those relationships is life-giving to me. And the answer is very, very clear. So that's where I want to put my energy.

Similarly, Jack voiced a struggle in telling others he was gay, but he did so in a different way than Interpersonal meaning makers, in that his struggle was more related to his own system for understanding gayness than it was to his fear that he would lose himself or valued relationships in his disclosure. He talked about how he does not live near his family and he feels disconnected from them in important ways. He said that he struggled

with telling his family something that would make their relationship even more disconnected. Jack also noted that he would not consider having any other relationship in which he did not disclose this information:

I haven't come out to my mom or dad, so they're really the only people in my life that I haven't... it's sort of uncomfortable and times that I've been sort of close to telling them I've really felt resistance, like I don't want to know that kind of at the time. And I just think it would be very difficult, because when I come out to them, or when I come out to my mother at least, I know what her assumption is, because I grew up in the church where it sort of preached that like gay people are evil and sinful... I guess I worry about losing connection to my family but I don't think, I don't think at this point that like we would never speak again, I don't think that. But I already feel distant enough from my family in terms of living in a different part of the country and so far away from them, I'm far away from them in terms of my understanding of the world, I'm far away from them in my understanding of God. So if I made that explicit then I would also be far away from them in that sense. So I don't think I would lose them entirely, which has become, maybe that much more difficult... Other than with my family, I wouldn't even really consider putting myself in a situation where I felt like I couldn't be open or honest about [being gay]. So having that kind of integrity is important.

Sean said he did not struggle to come out to important people, once he finally was able to accept himself over time. He said that he feared what this would cost in relationships, noting that he did lose connections that had been very important to him. He denied current struggle in coming out:

I was afraid of losing my parents, losing my relationship with my parents when I came out. I did. That was the only thing I lost. I was committed to coming out and committed to lose absolutely everything. I was ready. I was prepared to lose my job. I was prepared to lose my friends. I was prepared to lose my wife and my parents, everything. And the only thing that I really lost was my parents, and I never have really gotten them back. They've never really come back. That's been challenging and hard, but you know, I certainly went to a different place with them in my head about accepting them for what they were capable of and loving them for who they are and not expecting them to be something that they're incapable of, but I don't look to them to give me self-actualization or happiness. They love me in their way... I would like them to embrace and enjoy my happiness, you know, and recognize that I am happy and that I'm happy being gay, and healthy and good, and I'm the same person I was before except gay. You know, they've made some progress, but they didn't come to my commitment ceremony. No one in my family came to my commitment ceremony... That hurt.

Rick said that he never was able to disclose his orientation to his parents, though it is important for him to tell people today. He said that he and his partner struggle with their desire to help others by being out, but that they also live in a small community and they have some fear about reactions from their church if they were to talk about being gay in too public a setting. Rick explained in his interview that he did not internalize the views of the church in this respect, but he chose not to break his religious ties:

We never told our parents, but I am sure that they knew. I think if we were younger, with the way it is more accepted and the way people talk about it today, we would have said something. Over the years, it has felt important to talk about these types of things with the people in my life... We go and speak to young people about being gay, but we would not want it known [in our religious community]. Hopefully it wouldn't make any difference to these priests, but you never know.

#### Disclosure and the Institutional/Interindividual Transition

Individuals who make meaning in the Institutional/Interindividual Transition employ elements of both of those orders of meaning in the way they understand self, others, and the world (Lahey et al., 1988). Such individuals may struggle as they understand certain issues, situations, and demands in one order or mind, while they make sense of other subjects or concerns with the other order. There were two men in the current study who made meaning in the Institutional/Interindividual Transition, so it will be important for the reader to not overgeneralize their voices when comparing their comments to those of the whole group. As a review, individuals in the Institutional/Interindividual Transition will make meaning about some concerns as described in the Institutional Balance above. However, at other times, these persons will make meaning as conceptualized by the Interindividual Balance, which is identified by in the individual's ability to consider the limitations of the system he or she has created

(Kegan, 1982, 1994). The self is no longer located in only *one* form. Instead, the self *has* forms. The person now realizes that she or he limited personal ways of understanding and experiencing the world by being overly identified with the meaning making system that he or she developed. The person now sees that the meaning-making systems that were created by others are just as valuable as one's own. With Interindividual meaning making, the person can explore the ways others make sense of the world and use this exploration to challenge personal systems of understanding. The Interindividual meaning maker can embrace the self-in-transformation without fear that he or she will lose self-definition by freely exploring other possible ways to understand and construct meaning in the world. The individual now *has* a self, in the way that she or he once *was* a self. As stated in Chapter 2, the idea of failure in work or relationships is no longer the threat it once was, because conflict was simply too much dependence on a singularly self-authored system. Change is now embraced as an opportunity for growth.

When the Institutional/Interindividual meaning makers described initial disclosure to others, they also were talking about the distant past. Therefore, they tended to talk about earlier meaning-making concerns than they experienced currently, particularly their earlier Interpersonal concerns about being accepted or losing themselves in some way, since at that meaning-making system the self is other-defined. However, it was clear that these two men did not struggle greatly with disclosure currently. For example, Jerry said that he did not come out until his early thirties. He talked about his fear at that time in telling his parents that he was gay and that he had begun to question his religion. Jerry compared that fear to how hard it is for younger men, who may not be as self-sufficient, to come out and risk perhaps losing their connection to home and family:



My parents were just horrified initially when I came out. They also struggled with how I began to question the Catholic church... Fortunately I stood my ground, even with them, but I maintained my convictions and eventually they came around... When I was first concerned with telling them, though, I felt like I had a lot to lose, if they decided to cut me off. But I didn't let fear override my convictions. [I now tell younger gay men to] never come out to important people in your life until you've already established a good social network of gay friends. And so I had done that before I came out to my family. And so I felt like I wasn't taking a huge risk... Unlike, let's say, a 16-year-old coming out to his parent, who runs the risk of being left homeless and penniless.

Mason also described a long and hard process of coming out. He felt that he was alone growing up and felt judged by others for his feelings:

My coming out process was something that took place over a period of time... It was the [several decades ago], and there were no gay publications. I mean, there wasn't even the word "gay"... It was a whole different time in our history, and so the experience of being gay was the experience of growing up alone in isolation. You know, you couldn't go to the library and find out anything about being gay. You know, if it had to do with the law, you were a criminal. If it had to do with medicine, you were sick. And if it had to do with religion, you were condemned to eternal damnation. So there was certainly nothing affirming and validating that was out there when I was wrestling with these issues. So it was pretty much an experience of growing up and coming to terms with my sexual orientation in a vacuum.

As noted, neither Mason nor Jerry described particular concern or fear with disclosing to people currently. They realized that others may not be accepting at times and this could be experienced as sadness or as loss, but it was not experienced as an internal struggle in terms of their understanding of themselves or their sexuality. Mason talked about personal losses as a result of his disclosure, but he was also able to see these events as gratifying in a way. His quotation is demonstrative of the Institutional/Interindividual transition, in that the struggle Mason encountered was able to be viewed as an opportunity for growth, rather than as a loss of a valued self definition:

A major event in my life was a time that I spoke up as a gay man, in a national forum about the ex-gay movement. Though I checked it out with my place of work before I spoke publicly, in the end I was terminated because of what I had

done. Though it was difficult at the time, I don't regret what happened now. I feel it led to many opportunities to speak out in support of LGBT issues, and I feel there has been much personal gratification in these opportunities over the course of my life.

Jerry talked about how after he began to question the Catholic church's stance on gay and other issues, he began to realize he could understand and interpret scripture on his own. He talked about this process of self-authority as important in his own journey of self-acceptance. He described an instance of activism while in his church during that time that demonstrated how he no longer struggled with disclosure to others:

I no longer had to listen to what the hierarchy of the Catholic church said the Bible said. I could read it for myself and knew how to interpret it. And that really was what freed me up and what enabled me to have strong stands and conviction. I was now able to stand on my own education and not listen to authority figures...I knew in the deepest core of who I was that what I was doing was right and the rest of society was wrong... When I think through something, anything, and I have a strong conviction about it, I'm willing to go down in flames for it. And I don't think that would have been possible had I not had to navigate and negotiate the treacherous shoals of coming out as a gay man... Shortly after I came out, I attended a large church service with a group of other activists at one point. During the public prayers, I stood up and in the loudest voice I could muster, and my voice can get pretty damn loud, I said that may God forgive the Catholic church for its sins of omission against its gay and lesbian daughters and sons... So this was prayed to the Lord... everybody stood up at this point... and the priest was just flabbergasted...so I tapped everybody... I said let's get our banners out and let's launch down the center of the aisle of the church... We walked very slowly, very deliberately, all the time that the Battle Hymn of the Republic was being played...but I was a child of the 60s...I was in all the demonstrations. I was tear gassed, you know, all this shit. That sort of stuff was in my blood. And so I just translated all that over to gay rights.

As the participants transitioned through stages of constructive development, they struggled less with disclosure to others because they worried less about what others would think. They were less concerned with acceptance of others as they moved through stages of development, and they were more able to self support and accept themselves, as will be discussed in Chapter 9.

## Chapter 9

### ACCEPTING SELF

As noted earlier, the participants appeared to find support from others and disclose about their sexuality in a cyclical pattern. Their self-acceptance seemed to increase as they continued disclosing and finding support, though they also continued to struggle, as will be discussed in the next chapter. As in the previous chapter, the participants described their self-acceptance in ways related to their constructive-developmental level. Therefore, results are again presented in terms of the participants' Subject-Object Balance. Overall, participants described two primary issues that led to self-acceptance. First, the support of others was vitally important in their self-acceptance. Also, perhaps because this is a religious sample, the participants talked about how important it was to find some new way of understanding their religion or spirituality as they moved toward accepting themselves.

#### Acceptance and the Imperial Balance

Again, because only one participant made meaning in the Imperial Balance, his experience should be generalized with caution. Dean said that it was learning to integrate his Christian faith and his gay identity that led to his self-acceptance. In Imperial Balance fashion, Dean did not talk about how the reactions of others were a primary concern. Instead, he talked about his own need to stay in the Catholic church, even if others did not understand or approve. Also consistent with Imperial Balance meaning making, Dean struggled to understand why other people would choose to leave the church in their process of accepting a sexual minority identity:

I feel like I have come full circle in my religion, though I have remained Catholic. I think I needed to take the time to accept that God made me gay. I think I

became closer to God by accepting this... Was I asking God's permission to come out? No. This was me finally accepting who God made me. They never teach you to accept yourself on who God made you... I'm trying to bridge gay identity and say, no, God made all kinds of people, and God made me gay and God made a lot of people gay. And I need to accept that, and I need to go to God and say, okay, God, I'm throwing in the towel. You win. I NOW [participant's capitalization in interview follow up communication] accept this is who you made me. I'm not going to fight it anymore... I cannot override the way God made me... all of those negative messages we hear, and a lot of church doctrine is all man-made stuff... Nowhere does Jesus condemn gay people... I'm staying in the Catholic church. Some people would ask me, you know where the church stands on homosexual rights and whatever, so why don't you leave? Well, there's a conflict there. Do you leave, which means they get their way because they want to get rid of you? Or do you stay firm, keep your feet in the door and say I'm not going anywhere? This is who I am, and you need to accept me because this is who God made me... I don't have reason enough to leave the Catholic church. Just because I'm gay isn't reason enough... I don't understand where a lot of gay people, they actually leave the church. They come out, and they actually get further and further away from church and from God, and that I don't understand. To me, I think coming out and accepting who you really are, it brought me closer to God, saying okay, God, you win. I didn't want to before, but I now accept it, and I wouldn't want to be straight now if I wanted to because I now accept that I'm gay... I'm this way for a reason. So actually I'm trying to bridge the gap between religion and gay identity, in my own personal way.

#### Acceptance and the Interpersonal Balance

For the Interpersonal meaning-making participants, acceptance from others was the central factor in being able to accept oneself. This is consistent with the Interpersonal Balance, since individuals who understand themselves and the world with that constructive developmental level are generally defined in connection to their relationships with others. Therefore, though these men talked about self-acceptance, it was the externally-authored acceptance of others that they integrated or used to understand the internal experience of accepting themselves. For example, Brad said that it was his connections with others and the support he received from friends that was instrumental in his own self-acceptance as a gay man. However, he voiced his fear that others would reject him and described efforts to ensure this would not happen. He also

talked about the importance of his spirituality and the value of developing connections to the gay community as a means of support, but he clarified that it was the “strong kind of backing” from others that let him accept himself:

...Just talking with people, and you kind of get a sense of knowing people... Then one day you just have to come out with it [that you are gay] and hope that they don't go the wrong way, you know, hating you or something. I think it just got to that point where it was building up so much inside, I eventually just had to get it out. And I checked with the person pretty well. So once it happened and it was all out, it was okay... My spirituality has helped a lot with that because I think once I found the right path and was on it and had that strong kind of backing, that really helped... something to believe in, helps everyone get through whatever they're going through... Also, it's just having people there to talk with, having friends who understand. I really felt more stable and comfortable once I got more into the gay community... I think that's just allowed me to be freer about who I am and be more open...if I was just by myself, I don't know that it would have ended up so happy.

Jake also described how the acceptance of others had been important. He gave an especially good example of the Interpersonal Balance in how he was able to hold his self-acceptance when surrounded by supportive others, but was not able to hold it fully when the people around him were not so supportive. Since Interpersonal meaning makers are externally authored, what they know and how they know can shift, depending on the reference group they are around and what is acceptable in that reference group:

I think it really depends on if my friends are around me or not. If I'm with them, the anxiety is not as present as if I was just with my partner and we were in either a public place that other people came into. It's totally a different situation if I'm going to the mall with somebody, or if I'm in my dorm room with somebody because over here I'm completely comfortable. I don't know if everybody around me is comfortable with it. Actually, I know of no other people who are uncomfortable. But 90% of the people are comfortable, and that definitely changes the environment and my comfort with it.

Theo described the support from his family as the most helpful part in accepting himself. In Interpersonal fashion, he was most able to accept himself in the context of his family

reference group, though in other parts of his interview, he reported that he was not quite as “fine” when he was away from them:

My family is my baseline for everything. I don't know what I'd do without them...They've always supported me no matter what I've done, and that's kind of where my spirituality and everything comes from...When you're home, everything is fine and you know it's fine, and you can say or do anything and you know you're fine...

Several Interpersonal meaning makers in this study described how they had to find some way to reconcile their religious beliefs with their sexual identities before they could accept themselves. For many of the participants, the church was a powerful and valued reference group and the participants had to find a way to address the negative messages they received before they could accept themselves. For some participants, this meant leaving the church and for others it meant finding accepting people who helped them to understand religion in a different way and begin to integrate their religious beliefs and their sexuality. Because of these participants' Interpersonal meaning making, it was important to find external voices who helped them to author their changing views on religion or spirituality. In the following quotes, however, the influence of these external voices is sometimes not as apparent as the reader may expect, since the participants speak from what they have come to know or believe. This is an important point in understanding the voices of Interpersonal meaning makers. These persons speak from what they know and believe and though their meaning making is externally authored, it feels internally authored and self-determined to the individual. However, these participants do imply that it is the acceptance from others that they found in their struggles with religion that was most helpful, which is consistent with Interpersonal meaning making. For example, Ryan talked about growing up in the Catholic church, but

eventually leaving because of his struggle with how he did not feel accepted when he questioned issues of faith. He implied that it was the acceptance from others that was central in his journey:

I was raised Catholic and I had a lot of interest in religion when I was young. After I was confirmed, I left the Catholic church... I found Catholicism to be unbelievably like a political party, way too bureaucratic... I really had nothing to do with religion for years after that. My mother's partner is Jewish, and during college, I was drawn to Judaism first because it was part of my home cultural experience. I then realized that I felt valued there, especially around how struggling and wrestling with your faith was valued... I felt that my varying perspectives and the exploration I've done... they're welcomed again because everything sort of rests on not believing blindly, and that's the initial thing I latched onto.

Jason described first internalizing the negative religious views he encountered growing up. However, over time he realized that if different people interpret the Bible in different ways, then the issues with sexuality in the Bible could also be interpreted, rather than "set in stone." Jason provides an excellent example of how Interpersonal meaning making can sound rather Institutional at times, since the following passage implies that he developed his own internally-authored system for understanding sexuality and spirituality. However, in other parts of his interview (see his quotation in Appendix G in particular), it became apparent that the view he was describing was one he had adopted from valued others and felt to him like a personally-authored system. This and the following quotation, though not the clearest examples of Interpersonal meaning making, are included since the theme of reconciling religion and spirituality was important to this group of meaning makers:

For me, growing up with religion, I believed it, you know?... other people's interpretation of the religion laws for them to be able to say oh, homosexuality is a sin, all homosexuals are going to hell and different things like that... I started looking at it, and I was like you know what, it's not set in stone...it's shades of gray. It's just how every individual interprets the meaning from the Bible. It's a

guide to life, and the way you interpret it and use it in your life is up to you. So throughout high school I never really made my own interpretation of it. I just listened to others, and I just kind of took what others said and used it. I did that for a long time until I started hearing about like other different churches having different interpretations of the same Bible. I was like what? It's the same Bible. Why do people have different interpretations? Shouldn't it be clear? Then I found out that it's not clear, you know? It's like poetry. It's art. Everybody who takes a look at a piece of art sees something a little bit differently. I see something a little bit differently. It's like I can be a Christian. This is just who I am.

Bryce is similar in ways to the above example, in that he speaks about a feeling he has about his faith that allows him to continue to believe in his religion, no matter what others say. However, his full interview reveals an Interpersonal approach and the religious understanding he was describing appeared to have been authored by valued others rather than being his own system for understanding faith. It may be unsurprising that it was difficult to find quotations related to this theme that showed a clearly externally-authored system, in that some participants found this issue to be so central in their self-acceptance. Therefore, consistent with their constructive-developmental level, the theme may be externally authored but is *adopted* and *voiced* as their own:

Now, it's like me personally speaking and searching for a personal relationship with God, and kind of focusing on that personal relationship rather than on doctrine and rather than on the words of the people who are trying to like say that I don't deserve to be a Christian or to take that away from me. So my personal relationship has made it more concrete in my mind... I guess it's a feeling. It's a feeling that I have in my heart and inside of me that, you know from what I believe... I think about the things that people were trying to say that say that you can't be gay and be Christian. I think about those things, but then I also think about the way that they have used the Bible in the past to try to oppress black people and make them slaves, to try to oppress women and all these other things.

#### Acceptance and the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition

Similar to the participants that have already been discussed, the men who made meaning in the Interpersonal/Institutional transition identified the acceptance of others as



important in accepting themselves. They also talked about integrating spirituality and sexuality or leaving their religious beliefs altogether. As noted earlier, since this sample identified religiously or spiritually at some point in their lives, it may be that the importance of addressing religious beliefs in self-acceptance is overrepresented and should not necessarily be generalized to all gay men. Also as in earlier chapters, some of the transitional meaning makers described their journey toward self-acceptance in more Interpersonal terms, some described Institutional meaning making, and one person captured the struggles of the transition itself in his description.

For the participants that spoke of self-acceptance in more Interpersonal terms, the support of valued others and valued reference groups was central in accepting the self. For example, Cameron described how it was his support from and connections with other people that had been most helpful in accepting himself. He talked about how it was even hard to really “celebrate” himself continuously, without others helping him to do that:

As much as all of this means to me and as much as I want to grow and help others, I think it is easier to do that when there are people who support you along the way. I think it is easier to celebrate myself when others are celebrating with me. I think I feel a need for that to happen with other people. So that’s why I feel that, you know, the need to do something because... [I feel] something like a knot inside of me that I’m not doing enough.

Scott also described his relationships with others as the central element of his self-acceptance. He talked about struggles with negative messages from his religious community and how finding supportive people within his religious group had been especially meaningful:

We were very blessed in finding priests along the way. We’ve always had priests in our lives as friends, and they’ve always been very important to us because I think it’s very important that you fill and nurture that spiritual part of you as well... We came upon this [religious community] in our area, and that was just the saving grace for us, and that became our spiritual home... That community

was very supportive always and very nurturing. Members of that community even surprised us and celebrated anniversaries with us, so it was very touching and validating.

Ken described several important moments in his journey toward self-acceptance, including his mother's acceptance and meeting other religious gay people. In a clear example of Interpersonal meaning making, Ken needed approval from others before he could consider accepting himself:

My mom was really sick... we knew it was really going to be any time [that my mother would die]. And I just asked [my wife], I said, "You know, we both know what needs to happen, and I'm just asking you to have some respect, if not for me, because I know you don't respect me, but for my mom." And I said, "I just cannot deal with the things that we're having to deal with, with her as a family right now, and trying to get divorced at the same time." So she did. She was very respectful of that [and they did not divorce until after his mother passed away]... One night [after I was living with my mother again], mom said, "You know, I really don't want you and [your wife] to get back together." And I said, "Well, Mom, you don't got to worry about that cause we're not gonna." And she said, "Well, will you promise me something?" And I said, "Mom, that just depends. You're not going to be here much longer, and I don't want to promise you something that I can't keep." She said, "Well, just be happy with who you love." And in that instant I knew my mom really got it... To me, that was almost like her giving me permission to be gay. I think somewhere deep down I really needed that. So then she passed away [on a certain date], and we started the divorce proceedings and stuff... After all of this, I really got down on my knees, seriously, and prayed one night, and I said, "Lord, either you're going to change me completely, or I'm going to be gay, but I want to know what's true, and if I'm going to be gay then I know that I want to be okay with you. If being gay really is wrong, and I have to be by myself for the rest of my life then I'm willing to do that to have a relationship with you. But if it is okay then I want to know the truth and what it really says." I began my own study of the Bible and of differing theological views, and I became really confused...

Some participants described a more Institutional meaning making in their stories of self-acceptance. For these men, self-acceptance was tied to an internally-authored system for understanding the self. Since these men still made meaning globally in the Interpersonal/Institutional transition, they struggled at times when the voices of others were disapproving, which could challenge their self-acceptance at certain moments. For

example, Randy described a process of learning that he was not alone in his feelings as a gay man. Though this connection with others was important, over time, he felt that he could trust his own self-acceptance and he began to feel empowered to more vocally fight oppression in multiple contexts:

When I could see images on the outside [of other gay people]... I knew that I wasn't struggling with this by myself... it's like okay, I'm not crazy. This is real. I think that was just a shift of, you know, enough is enough, and I'm not crazy. I don't have to live the way I've been living... The changes in me are, you know, I have hope, and I have more of a desire to succeed and be able to do what any of us should be able to do. And also my anger has increased, you know? As I've become more confident, I have become much more angry and have allowed myself to speak up more... A strong belief that I have is... relates to being a person of color within the queer community, or being a person of color and being queer within mainstream America... we all have to take stands against all sorts of oppression. It doesn't matter whether you're queer, or whether you're a person of color, I think both groups have to support one another, and that would further extrapolate to issues of women's rights, issues of immigrant rights. It's all kind of interconnected... I think what [people who do not understand this issue are] missing is their own pain and suffering and the awareness that, you know, it's really the same as the pain and suffering that these other individuals are experiencing.

David said that though he was raised in a Christian denomination, he was not willing to let rules set down by others define him or limit how he could perceive or act in the world. In this particular quotation, he speaks from an Institutional voice. See Appendix G for examples of how his global meaning making is more transitional than necessarily voiced in this quotation:

I was raised Catholic, and growing up Catholic I definitely heard all these rules and all the ways of being.... I think that people can't just be told what to believe. I think that people need to educate themselves and to be able to make a decision for themselves of what they believe, I don't want to say right or wrong, but what feels okay for them. And the spectrum between right or wrong is, I think, all the time religion teaches you things like in such a dichotomous black and white way of thinking without really understanding that there are several in between... [Currently], I'm really non-religious. I probably identify as agnostic... for me personally I don't believe that religion would have any place in my life, and I just don't believe in any kind of organized religion in general, simply because this

idea of believing in something else or following what someone else is telling you to do as opposed to having your own personal choice in it. I think with every organized religion, regardless of how strict they are or not, that there's still going to be this sense of not having to think for yourself, or not being able to think for yourself. So I just can't see myself ever being religious just because I don't want that feeling and I value my freedom so much.

Justin said that over time he had learned that he could trust his own "relationship with God," and know that it was not sinful to be gay, even if many in the church disagreed with this. This represents his move toward an Institutional system for understanding his faith. Justin said that he felt contented with his personal understanding of Christianity:

I still consider myself religious, I talk to people all the time that are like I'm spiritual but not religious and I can't stand organized religion. I don't have that problem... a lot of people would say that's a cop-out and that it's just been my way of reconciling the two things. It's just something that I know I feel inside of me, you know. And it's something that just God and I came to an understanding about and I'm okay with it... to me a lot of gay people have basically let the church tell them or dictate their personal relationships. And I just refuse to let any person or society tell me that or be that to me. That's my philosophy, that's the way I was, that's just the way I came to be able to deal with that reality.

I include a second quote from Cameron in this chapter as an example of the central struggles of transitional meaning makers. In certain contexts or struggles, such individuals will make meaning in one part of the transition, while with other issues, they will understand themselves and the world with the other Subject-Object Balance. Though Cameron spoke with an Interpersonal need for other-authoring earlier, he speaks clearly from his own system for understanding the world as he talks about his religious beliefs:

I read a lot so I knew what the church said and what the church didn't say, and I knew also that even though sometimes [the church] has not been very kind to homosexuals, but on the other hand it does not condemn homosexuality... that even within the church there are all kinds of... theologians and priests that actually do not agree, and that's okay. So actually it was kind of liberating to know that many times it's actually lay people who are a lot more conservative than the priests or the people that actually studied for so many years... On the one

hand, the church teaches that... human beings are being called to develop yourselves totally in all your dimensions, and part of those dimensions is loving, experiencing love with another person. And so that's the basic teaching of the Catholic church and that's not compatible with the church... and on the other hand, of course the church accepts homosexuality as something that's there, that's natural in a sense.

Most transitional participants described self-acceptance in either Interpersonal or Institutional terms. However, one participant gave a clear example of transitional meaning making when describing his struggles with accepting himself. Tom talked about two things that were initially helpful: learning to define his religious faith differently than other people did, and having several close friends who were accepting. Though at the beginning of the quotation, he suggests an internally-authored system for understanding religion, as he continues, his Interpersonal meaning making becomes clear when he talks about feeling overwhelmed by his struggling with issues of faith and how it was the acceptance of others that clarified this for him:

My solution was to create my own God. I decided that the God I believed in was different from everybody else's God because my God wouldn't judge somebody for loving... I felt like God and I were fine. I didn't understand why everyone was telling me that we weren't fine... I felt like I was a Christian... like God didn't despise me or hate me or anything, but I was conflicted. I didn't know if maybe God wanted to cure me.... It wasn't everyone who was negative, though. There were some close friends who were Christian and who also accepted me, and that was really helpful. As I went to college, I stayed very busy. I think it all felt too overwhelming to try to figure out at the time. People just kind of accepted me and I did not want to examine that too much at the time, so my answer would be to just try to not think about what all of this meant and try to save it for later. It was after my faith deepened that I began to take on how to reconcile my faith and my sexual identity.

#### Acceptance and the Institutional Balance

The Institutional meaning makers talked about the same two central themes in accepting themselves, which were the acceptance of others and developing some new kind of understanding related to their religious beliefs. Because these participants tended

to talk about self-acceptance in the past and as occurring over the course of earlier meaning making, they at times sounded more Interpersonal in their stories of self-acceptance. However, these men still explained that it was their own understanding and the meaning they had internally authored of their experiences that was most important. For example, Bob said that it was seeing other gay men who were self-accepting that initially led to his accepting himself. However, he talks about how he was able to internalize this acceptance, making it more fully his own instead of something that was only offered from others over time:

After I had been excommunicated from the church and living alone, divorced, and I had lost my job and everything... [someone I had known in the church] said, "Well, I have a gay friend who has taken me [to a gay bar] several times and it might be something for you to pursue and find out about." He said would you like me to have you go with us the next time we go. And I said yes. And so the next week he took me with him and this friend of his and we walked into the bar and this guy saw an old friend of his and he ran up to him and kissed him right on the mouth... I just hit myself on the head and said this is who I am, this is where I belong, these are the people I want to be with, people like me. And I just kind of let go of everything else. So it was almost just being to see two men kiss each other and love each other that way just; it was what I had been so afraid of and so hiding from all my life... it was like all at once. And then the other stuff like the idea of getting back into the church or anything like that made no sense to me. It was like no. And anyway, then it became very important to me to have respect and rights and protection for gay people.

Sean described how he was unable to even think of being gay early on, with his conservative background. He talked about falling in love with his best friend, a woman, and having a long-term relationship with her because of how he could not consider his sexuality for some time. He said that he finally became able to accept himself as a gay man when he began to see that there were other people like him who were happy with being gay. Again, Sean talks about how this acceptance became internalized and owned, rather than only granted by others:

I fell in love with my very best friend. She and I met and I fell madly in love with her. I was able to sustain a sexual relationship with her for eight years... Then I finally decided that I couldn't do it any longer... I was working more in [a large city], and I was also beginning to work with... all different kinds of people from all walks of life who were really exposing me to all different kinds of lifestyles, too. Not just gay people, but I mean all different kinds of people. I began to see some gay people that were just like me, you know? And it was for the first time that I really was able to accept myself and see myself being happy and whole, and looking in the mirror and saying you're gay and it's okay, and you can be successful... you can walk down the street and hold another man's hand and it will be okay.

Zach said that it was developing connections with the gay community that allowed him to accept himself and face his real feelings, though he described an internal need to “find out what this means” as central in his journey:

I think at the time there was a huge amount of confusion in my head. There was such conflict there. I was in such agony. I felt like I was in pain because I really believed my ex-wife was my soul mate, and our relationship was being ripped apart. But she had virtually at that point in time had said she was categorically divorcing me, and looking back I think what happened was that I gave her terribly mixed signals at the end. What I was really saying was, “I need to figure this out. I need to find out what this means. I don't understand this.” So I was venturing out into the gay community... I kind of felt that I wanted to go on a few dates at that time without any sexual activity. I knew I was tired of the sex. I mean, I like gay sex, but I had thought, you know that, there's too much pain in this illicit kind of sex. If I'm going to stay with my wife I have to be monogamous. If I can't be monogamous I have to divorce. For me there was no middle ground like some people, where they can remain in a marriage and have a relationship on the side with their wife's permission. She couldn't have agreed to that, and I couldn't have either because I'm not that kind of person. So I ventured out into the gay Mormon community and was finding out that these people were wonderful people.

Steve talked about how supportive others and his experience with people with AIDS moved him toward more self-acceptance and toward coming out. He names how his self-acceptance had to be internalized before he could take some of the public stances he did later in his life:

I met some people that certainly grew up in a very different way of life than I had, and being gay was no big deal to them. I mean, it was just like they were born to

be there, and I gradually grew as a person to the point where I was able to say, “Hey, this is me”... I think one of the things that really moved me toward coming out more publicly was the AIDS epidemic. People were dying. There wasn’t anything they could do... people were getting kicked out of their houses. I guess I don’t want anybody to know this, but I have some compassion, and I did say yes [to working with a local AIDS group] even though I was embarrassed. I mean, I was embarrassed for awhile to tell people that I was doing it, because obviously I’m single and I’m thirty-something, and they’re going to figure out I’m gay. But that’s what did it for me.

Jack reported that self-acceptance was related to addressing issues of faith. He said that what was most helpful in accepting himself was to realize that he was not condemned by God for being gay. In Institutional fashion, he talked about how this was more of an internal realization for him over time, rather than something he “was supposed to feel” from others:

It was really hard actually to conceptualize a church where it wasn’t along the same kind of lines of what I had grown up with... I think it’s hard to describe how it happened, I think that what became clear to me was that I didn’t feel condemnation from God or what have you that I was supposed to feel. In fact, I think I realized that I felt the opposite. And that was more to me than whatever the authority figures were, even scripture might seem to be saying.

#### Acceptance and the Institutional/Interindividual Transition

Both of the participants who made meaning in the Institutional/Interindividual Transition described their self-acceptance in clearly internally-authored, Institutional terms. They articulate a self-system for understanding and accepting themselves in the world. These two men do not necessarily speak from an Interindividual viewpoint when describing self-acceptance, but what does appear unique about how these participants describe their journeys is the way that they seem to automatically apply what they learn about themselves to their experience in multiple contexts and institutions. For example, though not necessarily the only thing leading to self-acceptance, Mason talked about being able to realize that the negative messages he received from the Christian church



were not consistent with what he knew to be true. Though he struggled to explain how he was able to do so, he talked about an inner knowledge of acceptance that he was able to hold on to:

I wasn't raised Catholic, but I remember that the Catholic church said if you weren't Catholic then you had no chance for redemption, that you were just going to hell. And I remember a classmate named [he names the person], and he was Jewish, and he was the greatest guy... And it just occurred to me that there was no way that he was going to hell because he was Jewish, that if there was a God, that there would be no reason that God wouldn't love [my friend] as much as anybody else... My spirituality, I think, is the result of a series of personal experiences that have assured me that there is a power greater than myself... I guess it was just this deep sense of myself that enabled me to hold onto it... I knew, more importantly for me at least, that God loved me, although I couldn't articulate it. I think the idea that I'm part of God's creation and that God doesn't create sick, perverted, or whatever the stereotype was, it just gave me a faith that I was on the right track. Even though I wasn't clear about what the track was, at least I knew that the direction that I was moving in was one in which I was on a course to debunk all of the myths and stereotypes that the world had laid on lesbian and gay people.

Jerry said that several things were incredibly helpful in accepting himself. He said that he met others who were "out and proud," and this, along with his own study, led to his first rethinking his religious views on gay issues and then considering how issues of power and oppression had informed the way he struggled to accept himself. He also clearly described how his internalization of self-acceptance led him to challenge larger discourses and social systems related to oppression of sexual minority individuals, which is an example of beginning to challenge the system through which Jerry himself understood the world:

The year before I came out, I was part a conference and I heard all these out and proud gay people talking about their lives, [and I was] getting this whole concept of homophobia and that that's what was making me feel guilty and ashamed... Meeting people like this and reading books on my own had a profound impact on me... relocated my whole way of thinking about homosexuality in the framework of religious morality, which is the way I had always thought about it... And the realization that there is a group of people who run the world and they believe it's

theirs to run, and they're known as straight, white males. They define the values of the culture... And women don't count, and non-white people don't count, and non-straight people don't count... And so for me, that created an internal, tectonic plate shift in the way I now thought about homosexuality – my own and other people's – and that was absolutely critical... The meaning shifted, the feeling with the issue of meaning. The meaning of homosexuality was relocated for me from the area of religion and psychology into the area of politics, domination, economics, etc... I internalized it.

Though the participants began to accept themselves over time, they still experienced the homonegative context. This led to feelings of distress, renewed attempts to avoid or hide being gay, and ongoing hope for support, and a continual process of disclosing to others in new life contexts. Because gay men are not fully accepted or celebrated in this society, the participants experienced some degree of ongoing struggle, no matter how much they begin to accept themselves. Chapter 10 focuses on this experience of ongoing struggle.

## Chapter 10

## CONTINUED STRUGGLE IN AN OPPRESSIVE CONTEXT

For the participants in the current study, some degree of continued struggle seemed inevitable while living in a homonegative society. However, the constructive-developmental level of the participants had bearing on how they struggled. Kegan (1982, 1994) argued that the process of development not only in *what* one knows, but also in *how* one knows. Therefore, though participants struggled with the reality of being gay or bisexual in a society that did not accept them, the ways they struggled and the things they struggled with were related to the ways they made meaning. As noted, the processes of accepting self, disclosing to others, finding support, and continuing to struggle seemed to be ongoing and simultaneous for these men.

## Continuing Struggle and the Imperial Balance

Dean, the only Imperial Balance participant, talked about current struggle as related to his difficulty in connecting with others. He demonstrates how meaning makers in the Imperial Balance cannot understand how things feel to others, since they have not yet reached the constructive-developmental stage in which they can take perspective in that way. They cannot feel inside themselves how others may feel. Dean talked about how hard it is for him to understand others and how he tends to keep distance because of this:

Now I don't care if anyone knows about me [being gay], but it took a long time to feel this way. I still find it hard to let people in – to let them connect with me emotionally. It helps if they have had some kind of experience I have had or can relate to. Once I do let someone inside, if they then disappoint me, it's almost like I have to do something violent to get them back outside my walls and break the connection. Sometimes, it's just easier to stay alone than it is to deal with all of this – like I struggle with being around others, but I also am afraid of being alone... I don't have a lot of gay friends. Pretty much all my friends are straight.

For some reason it's hard, with that wall being so high it's hard for even gay people to get over that wall, and I don't know what I can do to lower that wall to let more gay people in because I want gay role models in my life. And they're really hard to find, I think.

### Continuing Struggle and the Interpersonal Balance

Each of the Interpersonal participants described ongoing areas of struggle related to their gay identities. They described personal doubts, fears, and concerns, related to both their own unanswered questions and connected to ongoing negative feedback from loved ones. Though many of these men had come out in most life contexts, they still struggled with disapproval from others and found it hard to fully accept themselves at times. These men demonstrated Interpersonal meaning making as they described their current struggles. For example, Jason described concerns with his family, and he explained how he finds it difficult to fully hold his views on sexuality when in the presence of his parents. He talks about how he is learning to "not let it bother" him that his parents are not accepting, but he seems to struggle greatly with their reaction to him:

My dad keeps saying that I will change over time, while my mom says I should try to change and then if I don't she guesses it will be okay. My dad seems worried about how other people will look at our family when they find out, while my mom seems more worried that she will not have grandkids and I will not have someone to take care of me when I am old... My conversations with myself and my mom - it kinds of hurts me a little bit. With my dad it's like I don't feel that much emotion. It's not impersonal. It's more just like here's the layout, here's the policy, here's the procedure, here's the protocol. Follow it. With my mom, there's a lot of emotion to it. It's harder to tell her that I am the way I am because I can't really react negatively to it and I can't be like well, that's just something that other people think... Initially, I was afraid of [my parents] kind of just shutting me out and not talking to me. Over time, I realized that how they're reacting to it is their own problem, okay? As long as you know that you still love your parents, now you're just waiting for them to take it in, digest it and turn around and start loving you again. That's all you need. There's no need to be angry about this... If it takes a whole lifetime for you to accept that then it takes your whole life. I'm not going to let it bother me.

Brad explained how his family is very religious and noted how they continue to struggle with his coming out. His example of ongoing struggle represents Interpersonal thought in the way he allows himself to be silenced when visiting his family. He knows he feels “betrayed” by his family’s treatment, but he seems unsure how to move in to a different relationship with them:

Originally, when I came out [my family] wanted me out of the house... I’m not allowed to bring boyfriends home and stuff like that, but I do go over and visit with them every once in a while, and they still talk to me and help me out with my bills and stuff... But we don’t ever talk about the gay thing... you kind of feel betrayed because that’s your family, you know? But at the same time, I kind of pity them in the way they think, that they’re so closed minded... you think they’re these great people, and then you see this really dark side of them come out. So that’s getting over and trying to realize that it wasn’t anything I did. It’s just their beliefs, and hoping that one day they’ll come around. You know, there’s always that hope that kind of keeps that alive.

Theo, on the other hand, felt so supported by this family that he struggles with feeling he has different values than the gay men he meets. He provides an example of Interpersonal meaning making as he continues to define himself largely by his family’s mores and define others as opposite to that primary reference group:

The relationship with a gay man, it’s like I’m looking for this comfort level and this connection like I have with my family with my partner, and that seems the most difficult and saddening thing for me... I’m sad that sometimes I realize it will probably never happen... Is there anybody going to be capable of that?... Pretty much everybody I’ve dated...has had substance abuse problems or alcoholism or depression and things like that... I try to help them past it, but it’s like they want to be stuck there... To me, that’s one of those things that there’s more to life than just worrying about being different. I’m different in many other ways than gay. I struggle sometimes to understand how people don’t see the support they do have and people who don’t love life like I do. It’s like people believe in hopelessness sometimes.

Ryan described the emergence of recent concerns after moving from an urban to a rural area. He described Interpersonal meaning making when he talked about how much more difficult it was to feel validated without supportive others around:

When I was in college, many people were out and it was easy to feel comfortable and validated. Now I live in a much more rural area and I am much more aware of feeling uncomfortable or unsafe if I am affectionate with my partner.... And it constantly makes me think of how I was perceived [before this move]... and now I am guarded when I talk about certain issues... I see now when they say ignorance is bliss, well, it is.

Jake said that he still struggles with what others will think of him, even though everyone close to him had been at least generally accepting of his sexuality. Since for Interpersonal meaning makers, the self is in effect made up of what others think, this worry is consistent with that Subject-Object Balance:

I think in general for a teenager you always feel that everybody's eyes are on you, not even pertaining to my homosexuality, but just in general. Like oh, everybody's looking at me, I have to look my best, and I can't do anything stupid. But I think over time you realize that nobody really cares about what you do....I think it really makes my relationships difficult when I try and be in a relationship with a guy and sometimes when we're in public I become a little more avoiding, and I think they realize that. And that's difficult for them. I think I've been better about that over the years.

#### Continuing Struggle and the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition

The men who made meaning in the Interpersonal/Institutional transition gave examples of a struggle between their Interpersonal and Institutional meaning-making systems. This is consistent with Kegan's theory of constructive development (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Lahey et al., 1988), in that the central struggle of the transitional meaning making levels is the pull between two different ways to understand self, others, and the world. Therefore, in each of the following quotations, the participants seem to alternate between defining a self-system that is fully self-accepting of their sexual identities and feeling unsure that they can fully author that system without the help or approval of valued others. A larger number of quotations is provided in this section, as the participants described the transition more clearly when they talked about their current

struggles. For example, Scott described struggle with how he feels he has to hide things that are wonderful for him, because of the lack of acceptance from others. He talked about how isolating it feels at times to have to make such choices, especially in regard to his work and his religious life:

My partner and I were married in Provincetown in [a certain date]. Though we were so happy, it was hard to go back to and live in a world that could not really celebrate with us. It was very emotional, and it was wonderful for a week. We had all the rights and privileges of a married couple for a week. And then it's just you come back here, and it's gone. We had this wonderful time, and we're like who do we tell?... We did tell several of our colleagues who threw a party for us and were very kind, even if we could not get the public recognition that straight couples did... Though we are generally out as a couple where we live now, we still are unsure how the local Catholic church and other Catholic organizations would react if we were to talk about it too directly. We're very visible always... but we just have not had that conversation... I think you have to establish a relationship first. You have to get to know one another, and then I think if and when the time comes, you know? But I don't think those things happen fast... I think it's best to wait because it's something that is very important to me.

Miles described how he cannot feel as excited about certain events in his life because these events are not honored by others the way they are honored for heterosexuals:

Seeing these awesome things happen to other people, like one of my best friends from college is getting married... and I'm thrilled because they've been dating forever and they're so right for each other... we're all really happy for them and then it's like, and I can't get married. You know? There are things that are so awesome that happen to people that I see, but at the same time, it's like but that'll never happen to you. Or it will happen to you, but in a different way and in a way that other people aren't going to see as okay... So like, my kids are going to have to deal with things that other people's kids might not have to deal with and that's going to be something that I'm going to have to deal with.

Kade described his struggle with the stereotypes society holds for gay men, feeling torn between being himself and not being perceived as “playing into” those stereotype. He said that he particularly struggled with this issue because he felt many gay men tried to portray stereotypical roles of some kind so that they can feel accepted. Kade relayed that this struggle affects his personal life as well, since he feels he may have to hide parts of

himself in public to be safe. Kade added that wondering about these issues and staying engaged with them constantly is tiring and overwhelming at times.

I don't even know what I do that is what I want to do and what society has told me I should be doing... I think it's such an intricate dance in our heads... I think people should be who they are, and do what you want to do, as long as you're not infringing on other people's rights. I don't understand why you should have to conform your behavior to what other people expect of you... I felt like saying don't be gay – just be who you are. Don't be gay acting. If that's who you are, that's who you are, but don't do it just for attention.... I don't think people should feel they need to act gay to be accepted by gay society... but also being frustrated with people that felt like we should not be gay acting... You should be able to act who you are... I've started to analyze every single thing I do.... [I] wonder how much of my decisions that I don't constantly think about are me being who I am or me being influenced by what I've been taught or told that I should be... This struggle affects my personal life too. I am not willing to denounce a part of myself... but in some situations, it becomes very contextual. Like where am I and do I feel safe?... So when I have seemingly less power or don't know where I stand, I have a diminished ability or desire to flaunt [being gay]. I mean, this is a decision whether I should be myself, or if I should have to hide myself... How much do I have to hide myself today?

Randy described feeling touched by seeing gay people who are able to live their lives freely, noting that in his home country that is not the case. He talked about being able to accept himself generally at the current time, but said that he sometimes fears that he will again lose that ability, or in other words not be able to hold it on his own, without living in a more accepting culture than his own. Randy also noted that though others seem to feel he has grown and progressed, he sometimes feels he is still “behind” where he should be in his own development, especially as related to having a family of his own:

The marriage ceremonies in San Francisco... Every time I did see those images or do see them, I find myself getting really tearful... they're such rare images, I think, for LGBT folks. It's my memory of the first time I've ever seen two queer people being united in that way, in a marriage... I had never seen images like that before, you know, in magazines, or on TV, or on the news. I think that was really the first time I'd experienced that. And for them to be able to be themselves, it seemed like, without fear or judgment... I don't know if I can put it into words... I have some moments when I am afraid some parts of my earlier struggles [with being gay] could return in some way... I guess what the fear is about, I mean



that's also very deep fear as you know, fear of rejection, fear of physical harm, fear of isolation, fear of loneliness. I think that's pretty deep for most of us. And myself, I mean, I guess I shared a little bit of what it was like when I wasn't out. You know, the inauthenticity in relationships and how lonely that was, how depressing that was. So fear of that even... but not as such a deep paralyzing [fear]... I think the fear is always there at some level, but it's not nearly as profound as it used to be... I think my friends and my family members, they look up to me at this point in my life... And I really don't know if any of that would be possible if I hadn't gone through the struggles that I went through.... Most of that I would attribute to my struggle with my queer identity.... As far as negative consequences, I often feel that I am a little bit behind in my development. It's such a contradiction. I feel like that people look up to me, and at the same time I feel a little bit behind... People settle down and have their families at a pretty early age. I often feel that being queer I'm a little bit behind in that. I'd like to have a family. I'd like to have children, but it's going to be a little more difficult for me.

Justin described an ongoing struggle with disclosing his sexual orientation to others. He talked about a clear self-acceptance, but a fear of how people would react that led to his having to ensure that anyone he revealed this to would be really supportive, and how he had to “play [his] cards close to [his] chest” until he could figure this out in relationships:

I'm never going to carry a flag, I'm never going to be one of those militant people because to me, first and foremost, I'm a [names a certain career]. My sexuality is secondary to that... I don't make a big deal about, you know, forcing the situation, you know, or issues on people... If I do talk to people about my sexuality, I think there's a level of friendship that I reach with somebody that it becomes, I don't know if it becomes necessary so much as it's just easier to go ahead and [disclose about my sexuality]... I haven't had anybody react negatively to that information.... I sort of play my cards close to my chest... I tend to try to reach a level of absolutely feeling like I can trust somebody at which point then I am willing to share that information... I don't think most of the people really care. I mean, I'm sure there are probably some that might be a problem for, but I think that the majority of people would not be terribly affected. But it's really, because I'm a private person it's just not something I talk about because I'm not really on that kind of level with a lot of my colleagues. So there are certain things you just don't talk about and you just don't share because it never comes up.

Ken said he still struggles at times with pleasing people and with some leftover wonderings or brief worries related to his religious faith. His transitional meaning making is evident in his struggle to hold his self-acceptance with certain valued others:

Every now and then my Baptistness will creep in, and I'll have some doubts... [Living in a smaller town] been a bit of a culture shock, and I tend to find myself going back into that people-pleasing mode. The Pastor here is someone that I've always really respected and everything, and even though he knows that I'm gay, he kind of has that evangelical Christian mindset of if you're not in a relationship, you're not really gay. You know, currently I am not in a relationship. But when I was talking to him about [working with him in ministry] I said, "You know, I don't mind coming... but this is where I am in my life, and if you are okay with it then I'll come. But if somebody asks me I'm not going to lie..." He was like, "If you're not having sex, you're not really gay..." So I said, "Well, let me ask you this. So when you're not having sex, you're not heterosexual?" And then he just couldn't answer me. We just kind of didn't really finish it.

Tom also felt a need to separate faith from sexuality in some ways, because he had not fully articulated a self-system that had room for both of these identities:

My faith is integral to my identity. I'm a Christian first and a homosexual second. That's how I identify myself... Because that's what it means to be a Christian. It's your absolute devotion and dedication to God, and his dedication to you... plus my sexual identity is not central to the way I live my life... my sexuality really isn't anybody's business unless I make it their business for whatever reason. But my faith is definitely something that I want people to recognize in me and see on a regular basis.... I believe that a personal relationship with God is the most central part of my faith.

Two of this group of participants wondered at times if they were bisexual.

Ronald said this wonder was ongoing, even though his attraction to men has remained consistent and primary. His struggle was that he desired to be heterosexual, even though he identified as bisexual or gay at different times during his interview. His transitional meaning making is clear in his difficulty feeling "peaceful" if others around him were not supportive:

I won't say I tried to change [his sexual orientation through conversion therapy], but at times I tried to think of like I'm bisexual, and I still can lead a heterosexual life in the future... But I didn't think of changing my sexual orientation because I think I'm pretty much open to what I feel in terms of attraction. So especially when I have pretty strong reaction to someone, and I couldn't conceal this feeling. I couldn't feel peaceful with these feelings if the current situation doesn't allow me to explore these feelings with the person, or try to deal with the feelings. So I'm pretty much open to my sexual attraction, but in terms of labels, or how to

think of the future, I will say I was kind of trying to think of heterosexual in my future more recently... But I pretty much know that my same sex attraction is pretty stable over the years. So maybe it's the time for me to think that possibly my sexual orientation won't change.

Taylor described ongoing struggle with integrating his religious beliefs and his sexuality in an ongoing way, which led to his questioning his sexual orientation at times. He was the only participant who said that he still may consider conversion therapy in the future. He talked about being able to fully know and accept that he was gay when he was in a supportive relationship with a man, but demonstrated transitional meaning making when he was unable to hold this certainty when he was alone or feeling unsupported:

I have met some guys who were so convicted by the Bible that they just totally, totally ignored all of their own feelings and forced themselves to get married, even though they were miserable. But they went totally, totally by the Bible. I'm not doing that. I mean, I recognize my own feeling, and I pray to God if they're wrong please do something about them... For a while, [I] was constantly going out to the bars and drinking and going to bed with just tons and tons of guys. And I look back now, and it's just so shameful. It really is. I mean, that's all I had been doing, and then finally I just said not. This is terrible. I should not have done this. You know, I just feel filthy and dirty. I said I don't want to do this anymore. I'm not doing it without love or something... I was depressed for days, probably weeks afterwards whenever I thought about what had happened. I know it was from God. I mean, God was saying okay, look, I'm fed up with this... Who knows? Maybe one day there could be an emotional connection with a female. Maybe if that were to ever happen, and I know it has happened to lots of other gays... in the past few years [I have begun to define myself as bisexual] because you just don't know when that emotional connection is going to happen. It could be with a woman... However, when I was with my [male] ex I was very much in love... you know, I still am in love with him... I don't recall feeling that it was wrong because when I was with him it just felt too right... With him, actually, I think having sex is what sex is supposed to be. With him there was so much passion, just being with him, anything with him. To me, that was a marriage. We were one.

#### Continuing Struggle and the Institutional Balance

For the Institutional participants, struggle seemed less related to who they were or their ability to accept being gay. Instead, their struggle appeared related to when their

own system for understanding the world was in conflict with the rules of some institution or the understanding of some other person, which is consistent with Kegan's (1982, 1994) conceptualization of this order of mind. These participants talked about struggling in many individual areas, but the struggle did not seem to make them struggle with the things they knew about themselves or cause them to need others to validate their ways of understanding the world. For example, Bob provided a clear example of how he had come to internally author himself. He demonstrated an Institutional meaning making trait when he took perspective on his own system for understanding himself in relationships. Bob talked about struggle as more related to how he would lose himself in relationships in the past and how he had realized over time that he deserved better:

My gay relationships have not been very positive really... I realized that I have been in love with relationships mostly – more than in love with the guy... I can see myself falling in love with someone, but for some reason I've always put so much into a relationship there that actually it has turned out that somehow I set it up so that I think it's okay for them to take advantage of me... But I'm getting better... I am beginning to understand that I am too vulnerable to being taken advantage of... Every once in a while I would just finally stand up for myself and let [the man I was dating] know what it was doing to me, which was really unusual for me, to stand up for myself and fight back and whatever. It never worked for me. I would just let this happen to me. But you know, that didn't come naturally and it didn't come with the territory. It came through a very good counselor and through lots of work and maybe a little old age, too. Once you get a certain age it's like you know, I deserve better than this.

Ben described a recent instance in which he had struggled with discrimination, but held his system for understanding who he was and knew that he deserved fair treatment in an Institutional way. He also talked about how he continued to struggle with the potential difficulties of coming out more publicly:

A recent time I really struggled with was when my partner was having some medical concerns. I asked to stay in the room with him, but the doctor said that he would not treat my partner unless I left. The doctor said, "I'm not going to let you stay until you get a marriage license." I looked at him and I said, "Are you

telling me that every single gay patient has to have a marriage license?" And he said, "Yes."... I said, "[My partner] is in a great deal of pain... I know what I've seen over the past couple of months. I am a great resource for information and I'm also his partner and I have a right to be here." And the physician said, "I am not even going to talk to him with you in the room."... I said, "This is discrimination."... We found out later that this physician was a member of a Pentecostal, Fundamentalist, Christian church, and he just thought what he thought...I actually tried to get some legal help on that... but I couldn't find an attorney who would represent me... I no longer see doctors as God and I think typically the way people do, if they are still under the sway of you always do what the doctor says and you never question a physician, and I'm just not there if I ever was... I'm also very committed to the reality that where there is a public trust, there is a public obligation. And he utterly violated that... I'm still living ostensibly as a straight white male. I mean I don't have any outward sign that I'm gay. By outward sign I mean things like the rainbow flag on the front porch, the decal on the car or something like that... And I don't do any of that stuff and I think, I think because of that I probably haven't achieved a level of comfort at all being publicly open and out... I think as a person to whom society does give a great deal of power, I have more opportunity to most people to shock individuals out of a stereotype understanding and if I don't do that, a cascade event doesn't occur that might result in some real changes of heart and change of mind. But I really do believe in what literature tends to indicate that people of good will are very often moved by individuals they know coming out to them. And there's a lot of people that hold me in good will, toward whom I have good will, but the cost of coming out to them is not something I'm willing to pay. And that alone tells me right there I haven't gone very far in my own journey... I think [coming out more publicly] would isolate me from a great deal of things that I currently enjoy. My job for one... And then I would find myself having paid a great price to achieve an outcome which I'm not sure is totally necessary.

Mark said that his family is still not accepting which was sad for him and is an ongoing concern. He demonstrated Institutional meaning making when he accepted his feelings but did not allow his beliefs to be defined by this powerful reference group (his family):

I mistakenly thought that my parents would be accepting and thought they were trying to find out if I was gay. I wrote a letter and told them. They didn't speak to me for about six months after that. And though I kind of expected to be universally disowned, everybody else in my family rallied around me. With my parents now, they don't talk about it. We just don't ask, don't tell... I've learned to pretty much edit what I say to them... usually when I have just flat out said something, my mom says, we have to get going to the store now... end of discussion... but they're just of a generation that I don't think is ever gonna get it, as sad as that is... A lot of those [gay themed] movies hit me... that it seems they never really reach any sort of peace with their father. And I am, I think, as at

peace with my father as I'm ever gonna be. And it saddens me to think that he's gonna be dead in a few years... and that he will never really know who I am.... there's lots of things that we will never talk about because he will never allow those conversations to happen. I think that's sad.

Similarly, Perry said that in his current workplace, he struggles with some homonegative attitudes. He said this motivates him to take action and try to make change, rather than making him doubt what he knows to be true:

I have been pretty strident, calling and sending letters, asking that policies be reassessed. It is a matter of justice. I'm basically at a point in my life where I just don't give a shit who I alienate as a result of them not doing quote unquote the right thing. So I... send letters to people. I let them know this is not the right thing to do.

As with other groups of participants, several of these men struggled with issues related to religion or spirituality. Aaron said that he prayed to die when he was young because he had received the message that what he was feeling towards other men was wrong. He said he eventually moved away from the church as he accepted himself (and internally authored his system for understanding the himself) and saw the church as inconsistent with his beliefs, though religion was an issue he still struggled with to some degree:

When I speak about like praying to die, I've been connected to the church as long as I can remember, certainly not so much so now, and that's a conscious decision. But literally, I can remember praying to die at age 6. Like it's been that long that I've known that I was different. Of course, not calling it sexuality, but knowing that there was something different, and I don't know exactly what I called it in my prayer, but I knew I had feelings that were different and feelings even for men and an attraction for men. But I knew even as early as six; not that anybody sat me down and told me what was wrong, but I knew it was wrong. Somehow I had already got that message at that early age... Now, I still believe in God, and I feel a connection to God, and I just have learned from him... like it's very personal. And so organized religion-church doesn't feed my spirit... I just don't agree with organized religion, and I don't always agree with how people believe in God and how that comes out in their practice... And like going to church, that doesn't do anything for me... some of that is about, like the truth about my sexuality is what

it is, and that feels so natural, and I feel so connected to God in that it's okay. Like that's important, more important than going to church.

Steve also talked about concern with his desire to join a church, because he was unsure he would be accepted and he was unwilling to join if that was the case, since he knew his own beliefs about what should happen before he would be willing to participate. He described talking to staff of his church of choice and finding comfort, but still having to manage that his experience is not fully supported:

I was torn about joining my church. I actually went and talked to them because I've been proselytized for a long time. Some are gay friendly, but not the gay friendliest. I felt like I was the only black person in an all white church and that I was the object of people staring at me... Also, they sponsor a Scout troop, and you know, that's not okay [because he perceived the Boy Scouts as being negative about gay men]... So I went and talked before I joined, and [a staff member] was comforting and reassuring... You know, everybody at church knows I'm gay and I don't think it's a big deal to them either... I think anything other than unconditional support would have been... horrible... but I do try to skip church when it's Scout's Sunday.

Jack talked about a struggle he experiences in his call to ministry. He said that because Christians have been negative toward gay issues, when people realize he is going to be a minister, they wonder if he will be homonegative even though he identifies as gay. He talked about understanding why people who did not know him would be concerned about this, but he voiced a weariness in regard to having to explain himself:

I think the people who proclaim they are Christian in this country, are really kind of nasty, sexist, homophobic sort of people, and so when I say that I'm [Christian], I assume that people who have this image of Christianity will assume that I held all of those up too or that I am kind of oppressing myself or like lying about the truth of who they are and stuff like that. So if I'm in a crowd of people that I don't know and who I know sort of aren't Christian or aren't religious, then I'm sometimes reluctant just to say that, because I don't want them to think of me along those lines... I think that so many gay men have been so deeply damaged by religion during their childhood years that I think there's like this huge amount of suspicion about me... how soon do I tell people that I'm going to be a priest... what they consider to be a very oppressive and which can be a very oppressive, regime? That is very difficult. So that was kind of a struggle... I feel even now

that I have to kind of explain... I'm not a kind of self-hating person... that there are people of faith who do think about this differently. It just sort of creates an extra level of stress in my life because I have to kind of be like, no really, I don't hate myself. I don't think you should change or I should change. So it's all been something that I don't share with people immediately... Right now my faith is moving in new directions. It's more about learning new paradigms in which to think... taking a queer lens to the scripture... really investigating the ways in which we read our cultural construction into scripture and the way in which that's really incompatible. So it's interesting to reconsider text which even after I've sort of reconciled them for myself, realizing how much I still, that everyone is still kind of blinded by the cultural perception that we place on them.

Zach was the only member of this group who wondered if he was bisexual, so his struggle was related to understanding his sexual orientation. He said that he struggles with feeling unsure if he identifies as bisexual or gay, and feeling that many people in the gay community assumed that bisexuality was what someone who could not come to terms with being gay would claim for themselves. In his interview, Zach tended to identify himself as gay most of the time, but in Institutional fashion, the opinions of others were not so powerful that he would let himself be defined by them:

I'm sometimes uncomfortable with the whole bisexual thing because, of course, there's this huge discomfort within the gay community itself about bisexuality with many of them characterizing a bisexual as somebody who just can't come to terms with the fact that they are homosexual. It's kind of like, "Get on with it, buddy!" You know, "Get on with life and just accept who you are."

#### Continuing Struggle and the Institutional/Interindividual Transition

The two participants who made meaning in the Institutional/Interindividual Transition talked about current struggle similar to the Institutional participants. Though there were issues that these two men were troubled or frustrated about, they did not seem to doubt themselves or what they knew because of encountering difficulty. A hallmark of the Interindividual Balance would be if these two participants seemed to take on their struggles and let them simply be a new way to learn about themselves. This was not clear



in the available quotations, perhaps because these two men seemed to struggle less overall than the other participants with the issues they described. Though Jerry described a desire to have a long-term relationship and he said that he has moments of struggling with this, he did not appear to struggle profoundly with this issue. He seemed, instead, to feel content with the focus of his life even if it was without an intimate partnership:

I haven't been very successful in holding onto a long-term relationship. I can make friends pretty easily, and so I have a wide circle of friends and good acquaintances... and I've never, in a sense, really hungered for a single person relationship. I mean, it was there much more when I was [younger]... But in the last 20 years, that urge has just not really been there. It's been very, very mild. And so my energy goes to friends and to the work that I do, into the political activities that I get involved in, and I'm apparently pretty satisfied with that.

Though Mason described particular struggle with coming out or discussing gay issues in this culture, he talked about a recent struggle in which he was learning to navigate self-disclosure in the context of other cultures:

I have recently learned that I have biological family members in another country, and it has been meaningful to me to know this and to begin to know them. However, I have felt torn about coming out to them, because of the cultural differences in the way they do not talk about personal issues like Americans do. So it's just not having a good handle on the culture and just being so touched by their generosity and hospitality and kindness that being open about my sexual orientation, I feel very torn about that... I'm looking for an opening I guess. I'm looking for some kind of sign. I'm looking for some kind of indication. My sense is that they know that I'm gay, but my sense also is that in the [he names the country], people are just very private about the personal aspects of their lives. I mean, even between husbands and wives and so on, people keep to themselves in a way, that to have some brash American come in and start being self revealing when being self revealing is just not part of the culture... I don't know... There, they recognize that there are these differences, and I respect yours, and you respect mine, and I won't cram mine down your throat or whatever. At the same time there's this strong desire to be fully who I am and be able to mobilize that in some way.

The cyclical processes of disclosure, seeking support, accepting self, and continuing struggle have been discussed in the preceding chapters. Each of these categories of

participant experience were linked through the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development in the lives of the participants.

## Chapter 11

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

GAY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AS A PROCESS OF  
MEANING-MAKING DEVELOPMENT

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), an important aspect of a grounded theory is to demonstrate process, or the course of occurrences, actions, and resulting interactions that occur over time, as individuals encounter and respond to the phenomenon of study. In the present study, the phenomenon is gay identity development as viewed through the lens of constructive development. Process was first illustrated through Figure 4.1 by the arrows connecting the primary themes of the participants' experience in the current study. Describing process allows the grounded theorist to explain the expected variation in the ways individual participants move through the stages and phases of the theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this chapter, I will discuss process as an attempt to view the theory in action, or in the lived way participants experience the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*. I will do so by summarizing the findings in a discussion of how individuals move through the categories of the theory. This process will then be illustrated by the presentation of a lengthy quotation from one participant, which demonstrates the theory in action and includes examples of the stages or phases of the emergent grounded theory in the voice of a participant himself.

Process: The Grounded Theory in Action

Other than in the initial summary of the theory in Chapter 4, the elements of the emergent theory have been presented individually to elucidate the dimensions of the core category of the *Linked Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity*

*Development.* After reading through the results chapters in order, it would be easy to assume that participants processed through the categories of the grounded theory linearly, rather than in a cyclical fashion. Throughout the findings chapters, I attempted to demonstrate ways the various categories linked to one another while stating that participants returned to various categories at different points in their journeys. Specifically, I noted that when the participants realized they were attracted to same-sex others, they were also aware of living in a context that was not accepting of their feelings (*Realization of Being Gay*). This led the participants to feelings of *Distress and Struggle* related to that realization. Though participants wrestled with this distress in individual ways and each had idiosyncratic concerns, they all noted struggle with their families and with understanding how to integrate their sexuality and their religious or spiritual views. The amount of distress and struggle varied for participants, but their discomfort led the participants to at least some initial *Attempts to Avoid, Hide, or Change Being Gay*. For several participants, the attempts to change were much more profound, resulting in participation in conversion therapy so that several of the men could try to become heterosexual.

The distress experienced and the attempts to avoid, change, or hide their same-sex attraction led the participants to make attempts to *Find Support* from others related to their emerging sexual identities. There were individual efforts to find acceptance from others, but the participants discussed several sources of support that were especially important for most of these men, such as friends, intimate partners, and family. For participants of color, it seemed especially important to find others from their own racial or ethnic groups that were self-accepting and supportive. Again, there was a cyclical

process to these categories for participants. For example, the experience of distress could lead to attempts to hide or change being gay, which could then lead to attempts to find support from others. However, if support was not forthcoming, participants experienced increased struggle and may have attempted to hide, avoid, or change being gay in some new way.

The search for initial support from others and the hope for that support to occur led the participants to several other elements of the theory that tended to take place simultaneously and cyclically. Specifically, the desire and search for support led these men to *Disclose to Others* and to begin to *Accept Self as Gay* as they received that support. However, because of living in a context that is oppressive of sexual minority identity, the participants experienced *Continued Struggle* in relation to understanding and claiming their gay identities. The elements of finding support, disclosing to others, accepting the self, and continuing to struggle were ongoing in some ways for participants. For example, as the men told valued others about their sexual identities, they felt supported and they began to accept themselves more. However, because they would continue to struggle in certain contexts, such as with family or in religious groups for example, individuals again made choices at certain moments to hide being gay, to again seek support, or perhaps to reconsider disclosing in certain contexts, all in an ongoing process of slowly accepting themselves more fully.

The continued struggle the men experienced did not necessarily end as they were older and more self-accepting, as a result of living in a society that did not fully accept and celebrate them. Therefore, the men continued in the cyclical process described. However, their experience of that cyclical process and the distress it caused was greatly

different across participants, because of the core category of the grounded theory, the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*. Specifically, as the men progressed through stages of constructive development, they made choices related to disclosure, the types of support they needed, and the ways they could accept themselves that were relevant to their constructive-developmental level. As their meaning making became more complex, they were more able to stop internalizing the continued struggle as related to their own sexual identities. They felt less overwhelmed by the reactions and viewpoints of others and more able to fully accept and integrate their gay identities into their lives. I entitled the core category of the grounded theory the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development* because it was the men's movement through stages of constructive development that allowed them to accept themselves more fully and therefore more completely integrate their gay identities. Readers are encouraged to see Appendix G for extensive examples of how individuals at each stage of constructive development represented by participants described their struggles with and journeys through tasks of gay identity. Interestingly, all participants had all come out in many life contexts. Even the younger men had come out to most people in their lives, perhaps because of an increase in general social support for gay issues in recent years. However, it was the men whose constructive development had become more complex that were able to more fully accept themselves and who did not appear to struggle as deeply with internalized homophobia, as did many of the men whose constructive development was less complex.

### Case Example of the Data Depicting Process

An example of actual interview data is presented below to illustrate process in the theory, through the words of an actual participant. The categories of the theory are inserted in parentheses to illustrate the elements that make up the theory and demonstrate the theory in action. One participant said:

I remember vividly an experience at age 7... all of a sudden a blinding realization that I was gay. That I loved, that I liked men and that I didn't like women and it was always going to be that way (*Realization of Being Gay*)... Now as I grew into adulthood and or through adolescence and realized that I was extraordinarily fearful of burning in hell (*Homonegative Context*), my decision wasn't that I needed to stop being gay, my decision was that I needed to stop being sexual...and to stop being sexual I either was going to be sexual with a woman, which I knew that would never work for me at all... By that time I don't think I had ever known anyone who had, you know, come out and destroyed a marriage and kids and the whole bit... I just knew that wasn't going to work for me and I knew I shouldn't do it. I thought it was even worse; it's not that I didn't want to do it; I knew that it was wrong to try (*Distress and Struggle*). And I still felt fearful of being a sexual being so the next best option for me was to follow you know friends and family and be a priest (*Attempts to Avoid, Hide, or Change Being Gay*)...

I went to the seminary and then one of the first things that the [inaudible] is telling you is that you are a sexual being, you can't be sexual but you are a sexual being. So try to put that dichotomy together... And I was in the seminary almost eight years. But during that time you know we had all kinds of conferences and whatnot on trying to integrate sexuality into the whole person. Well my whole person in being there was to disintegrate sexuality from the rest of my person [to try to not displease God by being gay] (*Distress and Struggle*)... Only after ordination did I discover that hey you will do a lot to get to the destination, people will do a lot. I did a lot. (*Attempts to Avoid, Hide, or Change Being Gay*). Once having arrived at the destination I learned the truth, that the secret, or the journey on the destination, but once I achieved that milestone I suddenly realized all my energy had been in getting there but once having arrived I was ill-prepared to live the life (*Linked Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*). I had not prepared for it at all. I did not acknowledge the power that being a sexual being had over me. And that was a big shock and I really felt betrayed especially when I looked over, and I was committed to celibacy I was just committed to it and I looked around and in my first several years in my priesthood and I looked around and saw all these priests that were in heterosexual and homosexual affairs and they are productive, healthy, happy priests. And I was so angry (*Distress and Struggle*). I was so angry at them because I had paid so much in my dues and I felt that they were, they were

able to have their cake and eat it too and I could only do one of the two but they were doing both...

I came to the conclusion that [the church] had just plain lied to me. And I realized then that if that were true, I believe it was and is, then I need to be thinking about other sources of truth and probably paying more attention to my inner conscience (*Linked Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*). And I sought for all my adult life to inform and inform well and to be a good person and to try to find out you know at least if I couldn't obey the rules at least to be aware of my inner foundations, my inner structures and to be - good... I think that probably as I've talked to some older priests who are gay, we've agreed that we are a phenomenon, or the phenomenon that you can see in ministers of just about any congregation as they grow, as their life history departs from the rule book, they either have to leave or they have to make sense of their own experience in light of the information that they have (*Find Support/Disclose to Others*). But where there is a serious diversion from experience, if they stay they have to create their own reality within that environment that is acceptable. And I think what the older priests have told me is that they have come to the conclusion that they are followers of Christ and the institution just has it wrong. And we have to put up with the institution but throughout history the evidence is blindingly clear, that is not a very good image, but it is very clear that the institution has often been wrong (*Linked Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*)...

What is an appropriate response on my part, do I just say well screw you all and you know run right off into the sunset and do my own thing (*Accept Self as Gay*) or do I try to stay where I am and be a voice of reason for some people?.. And I've chosen the latter even though it makes me crazy (*Continued Struggle*)... And it also cost me every single one of the friendships I had in the seminary and in the priesthood. I know that I have some friendships that survived but they survived only because those priests themselves left the priesthood (*Find Support*)... And when they left the priesthood, all of a sudden I became public enemy number one because I'm still a gay priest (*Accept Self as Gay*)...

I do think that the day is possibly going to come when I'm expected to stand up and do the right thing for the wrong reason or stand by my guns and have to pay the price (*Continued Struggle*). I can't predict for certain which one I will do, I can say more likely what I will do, but fortunately that hasn't happened yet... I think I'm readier now to consider the possibility of leaving the ministry in the Catholic Church than I ever was before... that lessening of fear and again accepting of myself (*Linked Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*).

The use of grounded theory methodology has allowed me to understand how an individual's constructive developmental stage frames the way that person makes meaning of the tasks of gay identity development. I presented the findings of the analysis of semi-



structured interviews with 33 men who identified as gay or bisexual in chapters four through eleven. The aim of this research was to answer the pre-study question of how constructive development may influence the way individuals take on or struggle with tasks of gay identity development. The core category of findings in the present study was that individuals began the process of gay identity development in any stage of constructive development. However, it was the men who made meaning in the Institutional or Interindividual Balances who were able to more fully accept themselves and for whom the continued struggle of being gay or bisexual in a homonegative society was not as overwhelming and internalized (see Appendix G). The following chapter is a discussion of the process of the current research and the implications of these results.

## Chapter 12

### DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study employed grounded theory methodology to analyze qualitative interview data collected from 33 men who described their experiences of gay identity development and constructive development. The theory that was developed through this research was described in the findings chapters (Chapters 4 – 11). The theoretical model included a core category related to how constructive development and gay identity development were interrelated processes in the lived experience of these participants. Six other major categories were discovered to be related to this core category. These included (1) *Distress and struggle* related to this realization, (2) *Attempts to avoid, hide, or change being gay*, (3), *Finding support* from friends, intimate partners, family, and from others of the same race or ethnicity, (4) *Disclosure to others* in an ongoing way, (5) a process of *Accepting self as gay*, and (6) *Continued struggle in an oppressive context*. A concept map (see Figure 4.1) was developed to illustrate this theoretical model, as discussed in Chapter 4. In the final chapter of results (Chapter 11), the theory in action was depicted by discussing how individuals move through the categories of the theory and by providing a long quotation from one participant to illustrate such movement.

In this chapter, I will first situate the findings in the context of existing research on constructive development and gay identity development. I will then review strengths of the study, focusing on how the current research advances the literature in several specific ways. I follow that discussion with a review of the limitations of this study. Directions for future research and the implications of the findings are then discussed. I will again situate myself in relation to the study, as it is approximately one and one-half

years later than the earlier personal contextualization. The chapter will close with the voices of the participants themselves.

#### Situating the Current Study in the Context of Existing Research

It is appropriate to first situate the results of the current study in the context of existing research, or show what was consistent with present literature before discussing how the current study may advance that knowledge. I will first return to the small body of existing literature (reviewed in Chapter 2) that explored relationships between constructive development and gay identity development, to examine the current constructive-developmental results in that context. I will then examine the results of the current study in relation to recent literature on gay identity development.

#### *The Current Results and Literature on Constructive Development*

In general, the results of the current study were consistent with existing literature on constructive development. It was noted in Chapter 2 that Marszalek, Cashwell, Dunn, and Jones (2004) explored the relationship between gay identity development, as conceptualized by Cass (1979), and cognitive development, as conceptualized in Ivey's (1990) Developmental Counseling Therapy (DCT) Model, which like Kegan's (1982, 1994) conceptualization is based on Piaget's (1950, 1952) developmental theory. These researchers found that participants in the more advanced stages of gay identity development were also likely to have scored in more advanced stages of cognitive development, as defined by the DCT model ( $X^2(1) = 9.99, p < 0.01$ ). This is consistent with the results of the current study, as participants in more complex stages of constructive development also described their gay identity development in later stages of the Fassinger and Miller (1996) gay identity development model.

Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) employed grounded theory methodology in a study that examined the role of ethnic identity development in constructive development. These researchers found that the experience of cognitive dissonance related to minority racial/ethnic experience and the resulting construction of more complex meaning making in participants was the key element in the way 28 Latina/o students developed more positive racial/ethnic identities and decreased their own sense of vulnerability in reactions to racism or bias. In other words, meaning-making capacity led to more complex identity development, and the struggles participants experienced as racial/ethnic minorities caused cognitive dissonance that was an impetus for increased constructive development. This finding was consistent with the results of the current study, and was represented through the central category of the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*. With the participants in the current study, the cognitive dissonance experienced through realizing they were gay, experiencing a homonegative context, attempting to hide this identity from others at times, disclosing to others while only finding support at times, and so on (in other words, the tasks of gay identity development), was an impetus for constructive development. In turn, as the meaning-making capacity of the participants developed, these men were then able to address the tasks of gay identity development in more adaptive ways. Gay identity development and constructive development processes influenced one another, leading to ongoing development with each of these individual processes over time for the participants.

The final study discussed in Chapter 2 that was specifically related to constructive development was the Abes and Jones (2004) exploration of how meaning-making capacity informed self-perceptions of sexual identity development in 10 lesbian college

students. Abes and Jones reported that as their participants' meaning-making became more complex, they became more able to transition into final stages of lesbian identity development and integrate their sexual identity with other elements or dimensions of identity. As a result of what seemed to be somewhat advanced constructive development related to the ages of their participants, these researchers wondered if identifying as lesbian and addressing heterosexist expectations was an impetus for constructive development. Again, the results of this earlier research were consistent with the results of the current study. The overall constructive-developmental levels of the current participants related to age were similar to the results Kegan described when conducting Subject-Object research with other groups (Kegan, 1994). However, more advanced stages of constructive development and gay identity development were linked in the current study, so that it was the men who made meaning in more complex ways who were able to integrate or synthesize their gay identities more fully into all life contexts. There were some participants who made meaning in complex or advanced stages of constructive development related to their age, but there were also men whose meaning making level was less complex than may be expected if development was only linked to age (see Chapter 3 for details). Therefore, though the struggles of being gay and living in a heterosexist society may have been an impetus for constructive development in some participants, in the end, the process of constructive development is often lengthy and is informed by the individual's entire life context and experience. In other words, the present study suggests that though constructive development can be prompted by gay identity development issues, the actual movement from one constructive-developmental stage to the next remains a lengthy process for most people.

*The Current Results and Literature on Gay Identity Development*

In general, the model that emerged from the data in the current study was consistent with the models of gay identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; and Troiden, 1989) described in existing literature and reviewed in Chapter 2. The current research participants described a sequence of: becoming aware of their sexual identities; struggling with the messages they received about being gay; eventually exploring, accepting, and disclosing their identities; and then beginning to integrate or synthesize a gay identity into their lives. A category in the emergent theory was how the participants experienced *Distress and Struggle* in relation to being gay in a homonegative context. This is consistent with current literature, in that psychological distress in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals has been linked to internalized homonegativity (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Syzmanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001) and sensitivity to negative evaluation of a minority sexual identity by others (Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski, 2003). The current participants also described earlier or current internalized homonegativity and sensitivity to the potential of being stigmatized in some way in their *Attempts to Avoid, Hide, or Change Being Gay*.

In the results chapters, I attempted to elucidate how the theory categories of *Finding Support, Disclosure to Others, and Accepting Self as Gay* occurred in an ongoing and simultaneous fashion. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) suggested that outness may be related to perceived social support, instead of to a lack of psychological adjustment. In the current study, all participants were out in at least some important life contexts, and the support they received from others influenced both their self-acceptance and their disclosure choices. This is consistent with existing literature, in that self-disclosure of

sexual orientation status has been linked with social support (Balsam & Mohr, 2008; Berger, 1992) and low levels of internalized homonegativity (Turner, Hays, & Coates, 1993; Szymanski et al., 2001). Further, Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, and Strong (2008) found that gay men and lesbians saw their strong connections with others and living authentically and honestly, along with several other traits, as positive aspects of sexual minority identity that contribute to a sense of well-being and perhaps increased psychosocial health. The current participants were clear that *Finding Support* and *Disclosure to Others* were not only interrelated but were linked to their ability to *Accept Self as Gay*.

The minority stress model, as conceptualized by Meyer (2003), addresses how stigmatization of a sexual minority identity may increase stress in gay men or lesbian women. The findings of the current study were consistent with this model as well. In Meyer's model, as an individual experiences discrimination, that person likely expects rejection and then he or she attempts to hide or conceal a sexual minority identity from others. The internalization of negative societal or reference group views of lesbians and gays can result in distress or mental health concerns. As described above, the participants in the current study realized they were gay, experienced distress or struggle related to what others would think or if others may reject them, and made attempts to hide or change their gay identities. These men also talked about believing the negative views that important reference groups or the larger society espoused about being gay, especially before they were able to accept themselves as gay and before they made meaning in the Institutional Balance in terms of constructive development (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

### Strengths of the Present Study

The theoretical model that was developed through the present research advances current knowledge in several specific ways. First I discuss how the central category of the grounded theory, the *Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*, extends and adds more complexity to existing literature. I then discuss specific additions to the literature in terms of constructive developmental research and theory, particularly in terms of the use of a focused SOI (Lehay et al., 1988). What follows is a review of ways the current study extends our understanding of the process of gay identity development. I next discuss how the current findings may advance knowledge of the experiences of gay men who are also religious. Finally, I describe how the rigor with which the current study was conducted is a strength.

#### *The Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*

The grounded theory that emerged from the qualitative data suggested that constructive development and gay identity development were interrelated processes in the lives of the participants. To my knowledge, Abes and Jones (2004) are the only previous researchers who have found a relationship between constructive development and sexual minority identity development. The current study advances the literature by extending the findings of the Abes and Jones study, which was focused on lesbian identity development, to the experiences of gay men. Also, Abes and Jones focused their research on the lived experience of 10 lesbian college students who were 18 to 23 years of age at the time the research was conducted. Related to constructive-developmental stage (Kegan, 1982, 1994), Abes and Jones focused on how primarily Interpersonal meaning makers began to transition to Institutional knowing. The participants in the



current study ranged from 18 to 66 years in age and represented a wider sample of stages of constructive development, allowing for a more thorough exploration of the interrelationship of the processes of constructive development and gay identity development.

Abes and Jones (2004) compared the emergent themes in their own study to theories of constructive development (e.g., Kegan, 1982, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1999), rather than using the SOI (Lehay et al., 1988) to assess specific stages of meaning making with their participants. A strength of the present study was the focus on the current participants' lived experience of these specific stages in relation to sexual minority identity development. Abes and Jones found that lesbian identity development was an impetus for constructive development. Perhaps because of the increased number of participants and wider sample of constructive-developmental stages in the current study, a more complex view of the relationship between constructive development and gay identity development was found. Specifically, though for many participants it appeared that gay identity development led to increasing complexity in meaning-making development, the converse could also be argued. I called these processes interrelated because it was also changes in constructive development that led to more complex gay identity development with the current participants.

As Kegan (1994) has suggested, many life issues can be an impetus for constructive development. Because Kegan's conceptualization is a neo-Piagetian theory, any experience that causes accommodation, or that requires the individual to change the ways he or she understands self, others, or the world, can be an impetus for constructive-developmental change. Kegan's theory is therefore a global theory of meaning making,

so not only tasks of gay identity development lead to constructive development. In fact, if constructive development is occurring, then all understandings of self, others, and the world are being affected, including those understandings related to identifying, claiming, or integrating a sexual minority identity. This more complex understanding of the interrelationships between constructive development and gay identity development that emerged from the current study are consistent with Kegan's theory and extend the findings reported by Abes and Jones (2004).

The current literature on symbolic interactionism (e.g., Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunson, 2002, 2004), often used when exploring issues of and interactions with racial identity concerns, provides a useful example of the above points. Interactionists argue that social interaction shapes how individuals understand themselves in relation to the world. Therefore, what individuals come to know and believe about themselves, including in relation to their identity statuses, occurs as a result of the positive and negative interactions that come to pass in valued relationships. In terms of intersections of identity in this theory, then, the socially valued identities strengthen over time, while invalidated identities are suppressed. How then would an individual develop a strong and personally-valued gay identity in a homonegative culture? Would symbolic interactionists argue that it is only through acceptance from the reference group that individuals can fully accept a gay identity? The participants in the current study stated that support from others led to self-acceptance, so it is clear that social interactions were important in self acceptance. However, in many cases there were still primary reference groups and certainly large segments of society that were unable to provide support for the

participants' gay identities. Some participants described an internal knowledge that it was acceptable to be gay, even when they could find no external support.

I would argue, consistent with Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory and with the results of the current study, that the symbolic interactionism model (e.g., Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunson, 2002, 2004) may be an example of identity interactions for individuals who make meaning at the Interpersonal Balance. At that meaning making level, individuals are defined by the psychological surround and therefore ruled by the mores of the reference group or the larger society. However, in the current study, as meaning makers transitioned to the Institutional Balance, they began to determine the primacy of specific elements of identity, rather than allowing the value of specific identities to be externally authored. Further, it was the Institutional Balance participants who appeared able to actually accept their gay identities and who struggled less internally with what it meant to be gay in a homonegative culture. Therefore, though social interactions appear important in the acceptance of a gay identity, I contend that the theory of symbolic interactionism conceptualizes part, but not all, of the struggle that individuals journey through as they begin to accept themselves as gay. I argue that Kegan's theory of meaning making development provides a more global conceptualization of these concerns.

Though I have contended that it is the interrelationships between the processes of constructive development and gay identity development that form the central category of the emergent grounded theory in the current research, there are strengths of this study that are related to each of these constructs. I will note several specific advances to research

and theory of constructive development, as suggested by the current research, followed by advances related to existing literature on gay identity development.

*Advances to Research and Theory on Constructive Development*

It seems important to first note that Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of constructive development has been employed in educational and student affairs research most often, rather than used extensively thus far in psychological literature. The current research advances existing knowledge by adding to the relatively small body of all existing research on constructive development, by extending this theory more extensively in psychological literature, and by specifically integrating its influence on the lived experience of gay identity development, as will be discussed below.

*A focused SOI.* A primary advancement of the current study is the inclusion of a focused Subject-Object Interview (SOI). The SOI (Lahey et al., 1988) was focused on the experience of gay men as detailed in Chapter 3. As a reminder, in the original SOI protocol, participants were to reflect on and react to specific words and phrases that were intended to generate developmentally rich data that would make clear the constructive-developmental stage of the individual. Therefore, the specific topics that participants would discuss were of secondary importance, while the meaning making of the participant was primary. I believed that an SOI focused on the experiences of gay men would be useful, so that both constructive-developmental and thematic analyses could be performed on the data. In discussions with SOI researchers and my research advisor, it was concluded that such a focused SOI was theoretically sound, in that a focus on a particular personal context should still reveal the constructive-developmental stage of the

participant, since it is the meaning making about that context that is important, rather than the specific content the person chooses to discuss.

In the current study, this focused SOI was indeed useful in the theorized ways, though several other issues became important in the use of the instrument in this fashion. First, because the goals of the focused SOI were to allow participants to generate qualitative data and to gather information on the constructive-developmental level of each person, the interview proceeded slightly differently than when only administering a standard SOI (Lahey et al., 1988). In other research studies, when I have administered the standard SOI, my intent in following up with participants' responses was only to explore their meaning making about the issues they raised and to determine the constructive-developmental level of each person. Therefore, though I was interested in the content and made every effort to be caring and authentic with each person, the primary goal was to gather information on constructive development. I find this standard SOI interview process to be incredibly interesting and fulfilling, usually both for the participant and for myself, but I have found that it takes a good deal of concentration and a thorough understanding of the SOI and Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory itself.

With the focused SOI, I still wanted to gather developmental information, but I also wanted to explore the content the individuals were raising and make sure that I understood that content with depth. I believe that this required even better interviewing and thinking skills than a regular SOI, in that I needed to sometimes follow up with whatever topic the participant had raised, even if it did not necessarily provide information about constructive-developmental level, to ensure that I was gathering qualitative data that had depth and breadth. I had been comfortable with the regular SOI

process before this point, and I had to learn to let the participant lead the discussion, while following up with questions that both gathered qualitative data and pushed for information that would elucidate constructive-developmental stage. In my opinion, this requires a great deal of comfort with the process of SOI assessment in and of itself, so that the process of qualitative data gathering can be integrated in that assessment. I would encourage researchers who would like to use a focused SOI to first become proficient in conducting a standard SOI, because of the added complexity when attempting to gather both types of information in the same interview. However, even with the added complexity for the interviewer, I found the use of the focused SOI to be extremely helpful in that all the information gathered was focused on the topic at hand and could also be examined in the qualitative analysis.

On a final note, the use of an SOI focused on the experience of being gay led to participants providing information that was retrospective at times. In the results chapters, I noted that this led to some participants describing an earlier meaning-making system when they recalled their interpretation of and behavior in events that had occurred in the past. I do not find this surprising, in that these participants simply provided examples of their earlier reasoning related to some specific event or concern. However, it was the participants that were more advanced in terms of constructive-developmental stage who could also describe how they would make different choices currently. I found this interesting, in that other studies in which I have conducted an SOI employed the standard SOI format and were focused only on the current meaning making of participants. It seems important for interviewers to consider how a focused SOI may necessarily involve

retrospective information and therefore it will be necessary to distinguish between current meaning-making systems and earlier systems that participants could be describing.

*Using the SOI with oppressed groups.* Another important concern in using a focused SOI had to do with the sample for this study. The SOI assesses constructive development, and a major element of the assessment is a determination of how the individual internally or externally authors the self. This is difficult at times in the assessment process with any person, in that a cursory examination of certain words or phrases may not reveal the deep meaning the person ascribes to the topic at hand. For example, any person could discuss her or his distress at some type of disapproval that is communicated from valued others. However, it is the meaning the person makes of that disapproval and the way the individual addresses those feelings of distress that are most relevant in a constructive-developmental assessment. Therefore, when I focused the SOI on gay men, a group of people who are oppressed in the social context, it became even more important to be clear about the meanings the participants were making related to the content they raised. For example, when one participant talked about how he avoided a discussion of being gay in certain contexts, a surface evaluation of that content could imply that he was making meaning in the Interpersonal Balance because of fear of what valued others would think. I print a comment this participant made below, but my intent is offer an example of the concerns in using a focused SOI rather than to present more results at this point:

[Being gay is] not the kind of thing that I would bring up [in certain situations, unless someone] was just really inappropriate or disrespectful. I'm hoping [I'll one day work] where I'll be out and it'll be fine but right now, especially just starting out, I don't feel comfortable in terms of [disclosing to certain colleagues and trainees] unless they were to ask, in which case I would tell them. But I wouldn't feel comfortable you know, speaking about my partner.

Though a cursory examination of the above quote could make this man seem more Interpersonal in constructive-developmental level, based on all statements in his interview, I assessed that this participant made meaning in the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition.

It seems important to clarify that this type of care related to the individual's deep meaning is important in any SOI process, either standard or focused. As noted in Chapter 2, it can be easy to mistake an individual's relational approach to problem solving for a lack of internal authorship of the self. However, the current participants, and likely any members of an oppressed group, struggled with the disapproval of others and at times had to ensure that their jobs, their loved ones, or even their personal safety would not be threatened. For example, one participant said:

Well, in the case of Matthew Shephard... that this kind of stuff can still happen. That, that, you know, I would really have liked to have hoped that we were somehow beyond this. And it's, it's just because it makes me feel vulnerable because people are still capable of doing that to somebody just because they're gay.

The individual who made this comment made meaning in the Institutional Balance. The fact is that in the current climate, many gay men would have some concern at times about personal safety. Another participant noted:

I am always monitoring my environment for safety. And I'm quite aware that I do that, and particularly when I travel, you know, visiting a new location, I'm always, you know, the gaydar is always up, trying to find some other gay people to affiliate with, or at least know that other GLBT are around. And if I have a sense that it's a hostile environment, I'll pass as straight to the best of my ability. I'm not going to put myself in a dangerous situation if I don't have to.

The person who stated this made meaning in the Institutional/Interindividual Transition.

It is my opinion that such concerns are not necessarily related to constructive



development, though of course the meaning the individual makes of such a concern could be related to meaning-making stage, depending on the individual and the situation.

A kind of inverse concern also occurred when using the focused SOI. Several participants had majored in gay-related studies in college or were very involved in gay concerns politically. Therefore, when they spoke about gay issues, they spoke with a great deal of knowledge and could sound very self-authored. However, several of these participants made meaning in the Interpersonal Balance, and the knowledge that they communicated, though sound and thoughtful, was therefore largely externally authored. For example, one Interpersonal meaning maker said:

Right now it's the issue of I guess what is important to me related to being gay and how I situate myself within whatever community we like to think exists, or doesn't... I'm torn because of stereotypes that are rampant and that manifest themselves in people and in actions against people... I know I am past like the rainbow beads and highlighting my hair and over accentuating what one would consider to be feminine characteristics. I'm trying to just be who I am comfortable being.

In my opinion, if I were reading only this passage, I would probably think that the person speaking made meaning in the Institutional Balance, because he seems to be identifying with a self he has authored and a system he has created for viewing the world. Though I have noted that a careful reading of SOI transcripts is necessary to gather the depth needed for competent constructive-developmental assessment, I contend that a focused SOI with participants who are members of an oppressed group requires even more care and consideration.

#### *Advances to Research and Theory on Gay Identity Development*

In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature on gay identity development, focusing primarily on the works of Cass (1979) and Fassinger and her colleagues (McCarn &

Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). The results of the current study are consistent with elements of each of these conceptualizations of gay identity in certain ways, though the current results support the model articulated by Fassinger and her colleagues most precisely. As noted earlier, the current participants traveled through the general stages of gay identity development as suggested by both of these and other conceptualizations (e.g., Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) of gay identity. Cass (1979) argued that individuals who struggle with accepting a gay identity may cope by attempting to avoid this identity or restrict awareness of or exposure to gay persons. This was certainly consistent with the findings of the current study. Both Cass and Fassinger and Miller (1996) suggested that as individuals struggle less with internalized heterosexism and connect more with supportive others, they begin to accept themselves more fully as gay and begin to integrate a gay identity into other life contexts. This was also a finding in the current study, further confirming the research on a general process of gay identity development. However, the process of gay identity development described by the participants in the current research was less linear than is suggested by the Cass model, and is more consistent with the phase-model approach of Fassinger and her colleagues, who suggested that in the process of development, individuals revisit earlier phases in the process of development. This was consistent with the lived experience of the current participants and was demonstrated through the findings chapters and in the arrows on the concept map of the emergent grounded theory that suggested a cyclical process through the categories of the grounded theory (see Figure 4.1). Therefore, the model presented by Fassinger and her colleagues appears to more accurately represent the

experiences of the current participants than does the more linear model presented by Cass.

Fassinger and colleagues' (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996) notion of two pathways or branches of gay identity development (the experience of both group and individual elements of identity) appeared to be generally consistent with the lived experience described by all participants in the current study. However, some individuals described important elements of identity that were concerned with both group and individual experience, while others focused primarily on either individual or group identity concerns. Therefore, the current research adds neither conforming nor disconfirming evidence to existing literature that suggests gay identity development is experienced through separate, but related, individual and group identity pathways.

*Gay identity development as a process of meaning-making development.* The above consistencies with existing literature notwithstanding, the current study extends knowledge on the process of gay identity development in several specific ways. First, the participants who made meaning fully or partially in the Institutional or Interindividual Balances (Kegan, 1982, 1994) did not struggle with being gay like the participants who made meaning in less complex constructive-developmental levels. Specifically, the more developmentally advanced participants struggled with living in an oppressive context, but they did not struggle with issues of internalized heterosexism in the same ways as other participants did. The move to Institutional meaning making seemed to allow them to accept themselves as gay men in deeper or more integrated ways. Though they at times may fear or doubt what their experiences would be while living in a homonegative context, they did not internalize these fears in the same ways as less developed

participants. It was the Institutional and Interindividual participants who appeared to be most comfortable in their own gay identities, even when the social context was oppressive.

Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (in press, b) reported that internalized heterosexism has been tied in the research literature to more conflict concerning sexual orientation, more attempts to hide being gay and pass as a heterosexual, less disclosure to others, and a lack of support from gay friends and the gay community. These findings are consistent with constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Specifically, individuals who make meaning at the Interpersonal Balance would have difficulty accepting a sexual minority identity, make more attempts to avoid or hide this identity, struggle to disclose to others, and struggle to connect with gay others, because the very definition of the Interpersonal Balance is that the individual is made up of the psychological surround, rather than self-authored as a person. Because the individual has, in most cases, grown up in a homonegative or heterosexist society and has in many cases developed in a homonegative family, church, or community, it is difficult if not impossible to fully accept being gay when the reference group, which defines the person, does not approve of a gay identity. This was true for the current participants, and the research literature is extended by the current study's demonstration that it is a constructive-developmental transition that allowed the participants to begin to more fully accept themselves and start to integrate their gay identity into their overall life contexts.

It is also important to clarify that, further consistent with constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994), the participants who made meaning primarily at the Interpersonal Balance still voiced a thorough self-acceptance related to being gay.

To voice this is not surprising, because even though the individual's self-acceptance may be externally authored, it still feels like the person's own voice in their internal experience. The participants in the current study had disclosed their sexual orientations in many life contexts, even if they struggled to accept this orientation or identity in some significant way. This is consistent with recent literature (e.g., Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, in press, a) that suggests that gay men are coming out earlier than in the past, perhaps because of an increase in overall social support and more visibility of and encouragement for sexual minority individuals in the media.

The current study advances the literature by providing a more complex conceptualization of the identity development process. Specifically, though some individuals may enter the exploration stage of gay identity development at younger ages than in the past because of the increased presence of support, they do not necessarily transition through all stages of gay identity any more quickly than individuals did historically. The younger participants in the current study may have entered the exploration stage earlier than the older cohort for a specific reason. These younger participants described friendship networks that were supportive or at least were not necessarily negative related to gay issues. This increase in social support may allow Interpersonal meaning makers (who are defined by the psychological surround) to come out earlier and explore gay identity concerns more freely and publicly. Generally, the older cohort in the current study did not experience social support when they were younger and when they were more Interpersonal in their meaning making.

Further, for the current participants, it was the transition to Institutional meaning making that was consistent with an integrated self-acceptance and a transition to the final stages of gay identity development. Therefore, the entrance to the process of gay identity development may be somewhat quickened by social changes, but it was still the individual's transition to the Institutional Balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994) that was most related to integrated gay identity with the current participants. This transition to the Institutional Balance was not brief for the participants, which is consistent with theory on constructive development (Kegan, 1994). It should be noted that the struggles several individual participants experienced related to being gay appeared to lead to a relatively faster process of constructive development. In much developmental literature, the presence of pain or crisis indeed serves as an impetus for some type of development. However, this was not true for all participants, and the composition of the sample in terms of stage of constructive development was very similar to adults who have participated in other studies related to Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of meaning making. Therefore, because these participants still live in a homonegative context and often receive specific negative messages from valued others about being gay, the process of gay identity development appears to be one life experience that can lead to constructive development, but does not necessarily guarantee a specific timetable for advancement in constructive development to the Institutional Balance.

*Men of color and gayness.* The identity development experiences of non-white gay men have not been represented in depth in existing literature. Though the sample in the current study is diverse in relation to much research focused on the experiences of gay men, the current study was not intended to explore the experiences of gay men of

color in particular. It seems important to note, however, that the non-white participants in the present study described a similar process of development overall as related to the other participants. I therefore attempted throughout the results to clarify situations in which the experiences of these men differed from that of white gay men. Specifically, the men of color noted how the presence and support of others from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds was vitally important in their own self-acceptance. Though this may seem intuitive in some ways, to my knowledge it has not been clearly stated in research findings. Further, though not clearly elucidated by all participants of color and therefore not described as a separate category in the results chapters, several participants described how they struggled to integrate the demands of conflicting cultural identities. David said:

It's very difficult just because I feel like that [my different] identities really conflict with each other at times... being a part of any community color, even if you're gay you're supposed to be very masculine... it can be difficult and it can cause some conflict because you're still supposed to be a certain way. Then a lot of times there's homophobia, and so I think for me that definitely hindered my coming out process a lot more. I know for a fact that a lot of people of color who are gay or lesbian won't ever come out because of that, because of these very strict rules. Oftentimes it's viewed as like it's such an American thing to come out of the closet in an official way. So then there's that, and the intersections with the other sense, so in the overall general gay and lesbian community just feeling that there's a lot of racism in the community and no one really acknowledging that. So oftentimes feeling marginalized in the community... I think that seems to be a struggle for a lot of gay people of color because you feel just so like stuck in the middle, and oftentimes you probably have to choose. If you want to be accepted in the gay community or the general gay community you probably have to assimilate into that culture and not maintain your relationships with your heterosexual friends of your same race or ethnicity. Or you choose if you want to still hold onto your ethnicity. You can be gay, however, you're probably not going to have as many gay friends... what's become actually very helpful and even inspiring is that lately there have been a lot of queer people of color groups that have been coming out. So that's been supportive because in that sense you finally find other people that understand you in both ways.

David's experience is consistent with Fassinger and Arseneau's (2008) argument that race and ethnicity influence the experience of LGBT persons, and suggests that though

support may be important for all men in developing a gay identity, the multiple oppressions experienced by gay men of color may require support that includes other elements or looks somehow different than the support needed by white men.

*Ongoing struggle.* A final specific advancement the current study adds to existing gay identity literature is related to the grounded theory category of *Ongoing Struggle in an Oppressive Context*. Though perhaps this is implied in the model conceptualized by Fassinger and her colleagues (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996), the current study suggests that even those participants who have fully integrated their gay identities in their overall experience still struggle. They appear to struggle less with being gay internally and with internalized heterosexism than do less developmentally advanced participants, but they still struggle nonetheless. Even with the noted advances in social support for sexual minority individuals and concerns in recent years, many people still experience families and religions that remain less than supportive. Many sexual minority individuals understandably fear that coming out would affect their careers, particularly when they work in certain industries or positions. The current study suggested that it is the way individuals made meaning of these concerns that determined how they would struggle and how much the struggle affected them. However, all the participants continued to struggle in some way as a result of living in a homonegative, or at least heterocentric, context. Therefore, it is important to recognize in the existing gay identity development literature that integration and synthesis of a gay identity does not imply that sexual minority individuals are done with their struggle in the current societal context.



*Advances to Research and Theory on Gay Men and Religion or Spirituality*

Because of the diversity of participants in relation to current religious/spiritual affiliation, it was difficult to draw conclusions about the whole sample that were specifically related to religious/spiritual beliefs or experience. The only unified experience for participants related to these concerns was the distress and struggle they felt because of the negative messages that were communicated by their earlier religious/spiritual contexts. Since the participants were diverse in relation to their religious experiences, I initially found it somewhat surprising that they described a similar movement through the categories of the grounded theory related to these issues. Upon reflection however, I considered that the whole process of constructive development is a journey of ever-changing relationship with the way one views the self in interaction with the world (Kegan, 1982, 1994). This is consistent with the experiences the participants described, in that these men talked about a shifting relationship with their religious/spiritual identities over time, which was not related to membership in a particular religious or spiritual group. What these men communicated was that their understanding of their religious/spiritual identities changed over time, and the relationship between being a gay man and being a religious or spiritual man shifted as their meaning making developed. For some men, the interrelationship of gay identity development and constructive development meant a shift away from religion or spirituality altogether. For others, this development led to joining a more accepting faith group. Several individuals moved away from their religious beliefs and embraced non-religious spirituality instead. A minority of participants described an integration of earlier religious and sexual minority identities as both possible and helpful, though these

men described how they no longer believed or agreed with the homonegative doctrines of their faith. The reader is directed to Chapter 3 for details on how the participants self-identified their current and past religious and/or spiritual identities.

The current study extends existing research related to gay men and their experiences of religion or spirituality in several ways. Bartoli and Gillem (2008) have suggested that both sexual minority and religious groups have had to battle for recognition in the field of psychology. For individuals who claim both a sexual minority and religious identity, it can be difficult to integrate these identities and painful or impossible to sever connection to one of them. When a person attempts to limit or minimize his or her religious orientation, that person also limits a primary community that could provide nurture and belonging. Those who attempt to avoid or limit their sexual identities risk losing what could be some of their most profound connections with other human beings. For some of the current participants, an integration of religious and sexual minority identities was both possible and helpful. For several men, this meant finding a spiritual or faith community that was accepting of gayness. For other men, the earlier faith community was too important to abandon, even if that community was not accepting. In such cases, participants chose to remain in their respective religious groups and to disagree with the tenets of their religion related to sexual orientation concerns. For some participants, the gay identity was embraced and centralized over time and the religious identity was rejected.

Roseborough (2006) theorized that the developmental approach conceptualized by Kegan (1982, 1994) can be useful in helping gay men to integrate their religious and sexual minority identities. He contended that the process of coming out may lead many

gay men to “realize that they no longer stand in the same relation to their religion” (p.48). Roseborough argued that the “tension” between religious and gay identities has the potential to lead to constructive-developmental transformation, which was true for the participants in the current study. However, Roseborough theorized that this development leads to a reintegration or new comfort with faith, which was true for only a small minority of participants in the current research. The majority of participants either left their earlier religious faith entirely as they embraced their gay identities, they found an affirming religious or spiritual group, or they began to disagree with certain tenets of their religious faith over time. Therefore, the current research suggests that the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development in the lives of the participants may have offered an opportunity for reintegration of religious beliefs, but does not necessarily imply such reintegration.

*Conversion therapy.* The current study also extends the literature on conversion therapy in several ways. First, for many gay or bisexual men who attempt conversion therapy, the centrality of a religious identity is fundamental in the desire to become heterosexual (Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko, 2007). This was consistent with the participants in the current study. An addition to existing literature is the intentionally lengthy quotations of current participants who did attempt conversion treatment. Though each of the participants who attempted conversion therapy did so through paraprofessional groups rather than through the help of mental health professionals, it is valuable to have more in-depth examples of the lived experience of conversion treatment in existing literature. Also consistent with literature, conversion therapy was not helpful for the current participants in changing sexual orientation, though it did help some individuals to

change their sexual behavior for a time as they tried to become heterosexual before realizing that would not be possible (Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko, 2007). Perhaps seemingly counterintuitive in action, for some participants it was conversion treatment that helped them to fully realize that change was not possible and helped them to more fully accept themselves as gay men (Bieschke, in press; Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko, 2007). As noted earlier, for the participants in the present study, it was the transition to the Institutional Balance that allowed them to more fully accept themselves as gay men and to begin to integrate a gay identity into an overall identity. This was true for the men who participated in conversion therapy as well. Their earlier Interpersonal meaning making led to an attempt to convert to heterosexuality, but over time their emerging Institutional meaning making led to an ability to begin to accept themselves as gay men.

Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (in press, b) reviewed existing research literature and suggested that internalized heterosexism appears to lead individuals to seek conversion therapy more than the presence of a valued religious identity in gay men. This research is consistent with the current study in that it is not whether men who accept and celebrate a gay identity are or are not religious. Szymanski and colleagues further explained that research studies have suggested that individuals who belonged to a non-affirming (presumably heterosexist) religious institution may have had significantly higher levels of internalized heterosexism than individuals who belonged to a gay-affirmative religious group or persons who did not belong to a religious institution. For the current participants, it was the presence of internalized heterosexism, which was tied to membership in a non-affirming religious group and personal value in their earlier religious identities that was connected to an attempt to seek conversion. The current

study is consistent with the above summarized research findings, suggesting that gay-affirmative religious and gay identities can coexist and be integrated, but non-affirming religious identities may be difficult or impossible to integrate with a self-accepting gay identity.

### *Rigor and Credibility of the Current Study*

Strauss and Corbin (1998) contended that a grounded theory must be conducted with rigor and have credibility and trustworthiness. In the present study, several measures were undertaken to achieve these goals. First, efforts were made to recruit participants from a range of racial/ethnic and religious experiences. Much existing literature on gay men has centered on the experiences of white participants, who have many times also come from Judeo-Christian backgrounds (Bieschke, Paul, & Blasko, 2007). The data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology, and research notes and memos were kept throughout the process, along with participation in ongoing conversations with my research advisor. My research advisor also read the narratives of several participants and we discussed the ways I was analyzing the data and the ways I was integrating individual narratives in the constant comparative approach. The voices of the participants were central in the data analysis, and as noted earlier, all participants were offered the chance to read and offer comments on their narratives, beginning the data triangulation process as discussed in Chapter 3. All but one participant confirmed his narrative, and that remaining participant voiced his interest in doing so in multiple email communications, even though he did not respond with comments in the end. Because the constructive-developmental theory of Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) is unfamiliar to many professionals and the participants were not asked to comment on their

own development, two professionals who are familiar with both constructive-developmental theory and literature on gay identity development were asked to triangulate data. They reviewed the initial version of the current study and made comments before the results and discussion were finalized. Each of these steps was taken to ensure that the theory fit with the participants' lived experience, that the investigation process was rigorous, and that the credibility of the findings would be enhanced.

#### Limitations of the Current Study

Though I discussed the strengths of the current research at some length, there are of course limitations to any study. One drawback is that all participants identified as religious or spiritual at some time in their lives. If the emergent theory were applied to individuals with different experiences, it is likely that some modifications would have to be made. Also, if a larger number of participants were included and this represented even wider diversity, it is possible that adjustments to the theory would occur.

The current sample was self-selected, and since recruitment either occurred via email, listserv, or in advertisements, potential participants were directed to a website to begin study participation. The study was therefore limited to individuals who had access to the Internet. This may be connected to the fact that though the sample was diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and type of religious/spiritual involvement, it was not diverse in terms of socioeconomic status. Also, though participants had many levels of post-baccalaureate education, there were no participants who had not at least attended some college or technical school.

I did not collect information on how participants were directed to the study. Therefore, I am unsure how many participants were actually recruited through certain

types of listservs or websites and how many participants were contacted through friendship networks. It seems that friendship networks were useful in recruitment, in that I often noticed that after I interviewed a participant in one specific area of the country, several other participants from that area would quickly sign up to be interviewed. Since some listservs/websites I contacted were related to LGBT religious/spiritual concerns and some were focused on other LGBT issues, it is unclear how the eventual sample could be limited in this regard. For example, it is conceivable that the sample could be limited by representing primarily gay men who are somewhat resolved about their religious beliefs and are connected to like-minded others through the Internet or in friendship networks.

Finally, because study recruitment was advertised in gay-affirmative outlets, there may have been a higher than average level of outness and more gay community connection with the current participants than for many other persons. All the men in the current study had disclosed their sexual orientation to important people in their lives, and the inclusion of more individuals who had not disclosed such information to valued others may have altered the theory in some way. Further, it is theoretically possible that there are same-sex attracted men who make meaning in the Institutional Balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994) who also have determined that they will not accept or integrate a gay identity. I could imagine this possibility with men for whom several other social identities are highly valued, such as perhaps conservative religious and racial/ethnic identities. Such persons could decide that a gay identity is acceptable for some people, but not acceptable for themselves. Therefore, it should be noted that the men I sampled could be individuals who are committed to exploring and working through gay identity issues and therefore others with dissimilar viewpoints did not volunteer for this study.

### Directions for Future Research

Future research would be useful in exploring the transferability of the theoretical model to other populations of sexual minority individuals. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is not the responsibility of the grounded theorist to provide a guide for or index of transferability or generalizability of the findings of a study, but instead to supply a description of the data that is rich and thick enough so that potential users of the theory could make their own judgments about transferability. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to consider ways the categories of the emergent theory could be operationalized and tested and make their own decisions about the generalizability of the theory. With that noted, I provide several specific ways the theory could be transferred to other populations or specific concerns. For example, would the experience described by the theory be similar for lesbian women? It would also be interesting to consider if a sample of only sexual minority participants of color would describe their experiences in ways consistent with the current model. Since the results of the current study did suggest that support for participants of color may include different elements than support for white men, an area of fruitful research could be related to exploring more specifically how non-white gay men navigate multiple oppressions and integrate their gay identities with other cultural identities. Further, because the current sample had been religiously identified at some point in their lives, it would be useful to consider how a non-religious sample would describe their lived experience and if that description would alter the model in some way. It would also be interesting to explore in more detail what the current participants described as a change in their relationship to religion/ spirituality as



they transitioned through the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development.

In the same vein, it would be useful for future researchers to gather a wider sample of participants, in regard to constructive-developmental level. Only one participant made meaning fully or partially in the Imperial Balance, so it difficult to say much about how his experience informed the overall theoretical model. Though it would be nice to have more participants who made meaning in the Interindividual Balance as well, it is consistent across studies of constructive development to have difficulty finding participants who make meaning at this advanced stage (Kegan, 1994).

Another particular area for future research would be a more thorough examination of the influence of constructive development on an individual's decision to pursue conversion therapy. As noted earlier, many participants wanted to change that they were gay and many of these men tried to make personal change through religious means or through talking to a professional. However, only a minority of the current participants actually pursued conversion therapy. It would be useful to explore that phenomenon specifically. With the current participants, it was the constructive-developmental transition to the Institutional Balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994) that led to acceptance of a gay identity. Though this may be consistent with a larger sample of individuals who sought conversion therapy, it would be interesting to understand that process in more depth. How is it that the other-defined nature of the Interpersonal Balance begins to transition, specifically when that nature is so thoroughly defined in a minority of gay men that they attempt to change their sexual orientations? Also, though numerous gay men may want

to change their same-sex attraction initially, how do many of them very quickly realize that change is not possible?

#### Implications of the Current Research for Practice

The development of an internally-authored self and therefore a truly internal locus of control is a recurring theme in this grounded theory of meaning-making development and gay identity development. In *The Evolving Self* (1982), Kegan provided the example of a young gay man who feared what it would mean to be gay. This man struggled primarily with how his gay identity could disappoint valued others, since in an Interpersonal Balance meaning-making system, he could not bear to disappoint the people who externally authored his identity. Kegan noted that when an individual engages in just such a struggle and has the proper support, constructive development can be facilitated. In the current study, as the participants advanced in constructive development, they also accepted themselves more deeply as gay men. Though they continued to struggle while living in a homonegative context, they struggled less with being gay or internalizing the negative views of others related to their sexual identities as this development occurred. Therefore, a clear implication of the current study is that for men who struggle with accepting themselves as gay or integrating a gay identity into their overall experience, constructive development, or development in how they make meaning globally, appears to be helpful.

How is this information useful for those who work with gay men? It is clear from the stories of the current participants and from other examples of the process of constructive development (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 2001; Hammerman, 2002; Kegan, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2005), such development is lengthy and may not occur in

the course of one educational experience or psychotherapy participation that is relatively brief in duration. Readers are encouraged to consider the examples provided in Appendix G for detailed information about how individuals at different stages of constructive development may describe the experience of being gay. However, Kegan (1982, 1994) has argued that a holding environment which balances support for the individual's current Subject-Object Balance with challenge that encourages the individual to consider the next order of mind is an environment that can encourage constructive development.

Therefore, for individuals working with gay men who are struggling with what it means to be gay, psychotherapists or educators can consider how that person's constructive development informs the meaning the individual makes of gayness. Then support for that meaning-making system, along with a challenge for the individual to consider more complex ways of making meaning, can therefore encourage the person toward a more full self-acceptance. In an article focused on a career counseling case example (Paul, 2008), I provided an example which may be helpful to readers in illustrating the process of assessing for an individual client's constructive-developmental level and creating a developmentally appropriate holding environment.

Another implication related to Kegan's (1982, 1994) suggested holding environment may be beneficial to those who work with gay men who struggle with their sexual identities. As is clear from the narratives provided by the participants in the current study, the process of self-acceptance is often lengthy. For some men, such as those who attempted conversion therapy or those who still struggle to disclose their sexuality to certain valued others, the fear of what it would mean to stand outside the expectations and approval of important reference groups was immobilizing. As a

psychotherapist, I have worked with gay men who could not imagine fully accepting their feelings for other men or coming out to certain people in their lives. I contend that a constructive-developmental viewpoint is useful for clinicians in that clients are not pathologized for such a struggle. Kegan (1994) has suggested that when an individual does not make meaning at a certain Subject-Object Balance, that Balance is simply “over their heads.” In other words, individuals are only expected to make meaning in a way that is developmentally appropriate. Any other expectation would be akin to expecting a child to understand the world in the way an adolescent is able to, or expecting a teenager to make meaning in the way an adult is likely able to. Therefore, as a clinician, I can sit with clients in their struggles and understand how hard it is for them to make meaning of the world in a way that is over their heads. I can refrain from pathologizing them for simply being where they are in terms of development.

A constructive-developmental approach to gay identity concerns is also useful in considering specific ways to intervene with psychotherapy clients. Kashubeck-West and Szymanski (in press) have argued that gay men internalize negative attitudes and assumptions about their sexuality as a result of living in a society that communicates prejudice, stigma, and discrimination related to gayness. The participants in the current study described receiving such negative messages and internalizing them. From a constructive-developmental standpoint, how could individuals who make meaning in the Interpersonal Balance not internalize such messages? However, the participants who made meaning in at least the Institutional Balance were, by definition of that meaning-making stage, more able to self-author their experience and struggle less with internalized homonegative messages. For clinicians, it is important to consider that clients who make

meaning in the Interpersonal Balance are essentially made up of these external voices and may need much support and gentle but appropriate challenge to begin to experience such messages differently. This is consistent with Bieschke's (in press) argument that it may be difficult for some struggling sexual minority individuals to be challenged too directly in relation to their own internalized heterosexism, which could be seen as disrespectful to individuals who are struggling with the competing demands of other valued identities, such as religious or racial/ethnic group beliefs, expectations, and values.

A final implication of the current study is that even though constructive-developmental transformation was helpful for these men in their gay identity development, the ongoing struggle of living in an oppressive society should not be minimized. Research has demonstrated that both societal and internalized heterosexism are related to mental health concerns for sexual minority individuals (Meyer, 1995; Szymanski, 2005). However, even the most developmentally advanced men in the current study struggled in some ongoing ways because of the oppression they experienced. Personal advancement in constructive development has not been tied to mental health in research, and the ongoing pressures of being gay in a homonegative society at best weigh on the individual and could certainly complicate other existing or emergent mental health concerns. It seems important to attend to an oppressed individual's experience in society without necessarily confounding that experience with pathology.

#### Situating the Researcher in Relation to the Study: Revised

In closing, I would like to once again situate myself in relation to the study. First, I want to say how thankful I am to the participants for sharing their voices, which I have

tried to honor throughout the grounded theory process. I appreciate their authenticity and how they were willing to share their successes and encouragement along with their struggles and disappointments. It was a gift to be welcomed into their stories, to share our discussions, and to sit with the data they provided over the course of this study. I am touched by being able to know their stories and I thank them.

It seems important to also note how this work relates to me personally. The idea of this study came from my own experience as a gay man who found constructive-developmental theory a useful way to understand my individual process of development. After the final model had emerged from the data, I paused to consider how the concept map of the model presented in Figure 4.1 applied to me. I realized that there were elements of the theory that I had not experienced and therefore did not consider or predict in study planning. Other categories of the emergent theory were consistent with my own development. Like many participants, I did not seek or participate in conversion therapy, though I did want to stop being gay early in my distress and struggle related to that identity. I tried to change myself to other-sex attracted through prayer and hope for a time. Also similar to the emergent model, I found support, began to disclose to others, became fearful, and attempted to hide again. I eventually realized that accepting others were readily available. However, as a white, gay man, I could easily locate supportive individuals in my own racial/ethnic group, unlike the participants of color in the current study. Further, though I knew that I currently struggle at times with what it means to be gay in this society, I had not conceptualized this for myself as it was described in the model (related to ongoing struggle in an oppressive context). It was useful to realize and then consider how this ongoing struggle category created a framework for my own

experience. I have disclosed my sexuality in generally all life contexts and certainly in all ongoing relationships, but I still sometimes become aware that my physical or emotional safety could be threatened if I were to disclose in certain situations. What I do in such situations varies, according to the situation itself, my internal reaction, my needs or energy at the time, and so on, but it is still sad and angering to have to make these choices. Even though I knew that I live in a context that I sometimes experience as oppressive, this category of the model was an opportunity to consider my experience in a new way.

Brown (1994) contended that the heterosexism in this society has led sexual minority individuals to struggle to know themselves and to remain in silence, rather than to speak their truth. It is my hope that this research will be helpful to gay men and to those who work with them, so that we will continue to create more spaces in society in which the voices of sexual minority individuals do not have to be silenced. With that point in mind, I offer one final quote from each participant who wanted to share an answer to a particular question. I do not offer these quotes as further results and therefore I do not offer thoughts or interpretations. Instead, I let the words of these men stand alone. For the last question of each interview, I asked the participants what they felt would be important to share with other gay men or what would be helpful for other gay men to know in their own journeys of self-acceptance. It seems appropriate that the participants speak again in their responses to close this chapter:

You have to deal with your emotions, with how you really feel about other men... it comes back to haunt you later in your life.

Being gay is just a part of who I am and I was born that way... even though you're having these hardships... you'll come out better for going through the struggle and not giving up and not trying to kill yourself or not getting involved in

drugs and alcohol to try to suppress those feelings, and that if you ultimately look at what you want and not look at what society is wanting you to do, that you can be a lot more happier.

I think the main thing is realizing that you don't have a problem. It's the world, or a lot of the world... You're who you are. You're how you're created. You can't really change your own nature, you know?

I would just say if you get angry... and you want to change something then play the game better than they can because that's like how I was taught... approach it from another side... I'll give you the same respect that you give me....If you have a problem, like I'll show you I can do things better than you do ... it's just basically if you're the underdog you've got to work harder. That's what I think. And don't give up.

I just can't let other people bother me when it comes to my sexuality, and I just need to be for myself and I need to be happy... just living for yourself instead of living for other people.

You've got to learn to love yourself before anybody else can... I don't think I'll ever know everything about myself. But just to know that I am open to learning about myself. I'm on this journey to learn about me, and not about what other people want me to be.

Listen to yourself... oftentimes "yourself" is deluded with what others say... What it comes down to is, I feel, no matter what struggles you're facing, what support you do or do not have, you must believe in yourself, and if you don't the whole thing will be more hell than it's worth.

I think that the most important thing is being comfortable with yourself, and how to become comfortable with yourself is such a difficult thing to do... Because I think what prevents people from coming out is that they see being gay as a very stereotypical universal experience. So if you don't fit that, that might lead to a cycle of people not coming out ever or not fully being accepting of their identities.

No matter where you are right now, you may feel like [being gay] is the most important thing in your life, but at some point something else will come up that will be much more; some other identity will be much more important to you... It comes and goes... You are made up of many different things but being gay is just one part of that. So you also should not let it be just who you are... define what it means for you, don't let it define who you are... I feel like everyone has to do this. I feel like it's important... It's not fair that we have to do it, but that's not the issue. This is what needs to be done... I think it's our responsibility to fight.



I would tell them that they can be gay and be a Christian and that I know that because of personal experience. You know, I think the biggest thing that they can do is just really study for themselves and not take someone's word for it... I believe if you really seek truth and really seek God, He's going to show you what is the truth and that He is okay with you.

Don't give up. Honor your feelings. Work with those feelings. Find support. Find other queers that are supporters. Find straight people that are supporters. Just don't give up.

Religion or spirituality... has been helpful... Knowing that I have the support of my family has been very helpful, even though it's been hard for them. And having people to talk to, you know, people that I can trust and talk to, and that really helps... sometimes you don't need any feedback or you don't want any feedback. You just want to empty yourself... Just to be heard, and hearing also other stories.

I would say if you're thinking about it make sure that you find someone that you feel safe with and really make sure that you're doing what you doing what you want. Be in charge of what's going on... Try to be comfortable with who you are first... basically the message is don't do what I did.

I think that ultimately you just have to listen to your heart and you have to know yourself. You have to listen to yourself and you have to then trust yourself to be able to hear what you're actually saying on the inside... I mean we're a society that is driven by what other people think we should do or what's the latest thing. I think ultimately you have to be able to look at yourself in the mirror everyday.

I think something that has been very important is having a big circle of people around you... Establish a network of friendships, not exclusively gay. Just find people that you have something in common with, or see the good in people, or see where you can meet someone, and just try to nurture relationships because, you know, life's journey is ups and downs, and you're going to fall, and you're going to be hurt... Continue to dream, to not be limited by anything in society or by anything that anyone would put on you.

Try to think more about how being gay could bring different meaning to your life... there are more possibilities, at least then we are all free, and we can lead our life without limitation... I think we have the potential to lead a more fulfilling life than other people could be, and just be honest to yourself.

I completely believe that gay, straight, black, white, we were all created for a purpose, and it's a matter of knowing what that purpose is and knowing how to figure out that purpose and doing that purpose because that, I think, is where wholeness is. And I think that purpose includes a relationship with Christ. I think that purpose includes betterment of the world and reaching out to other people,

but unfortunately, in the gay community they're pushed down and attacked and ridiculed and just everything awful, and you've got to be able to stand up under that, which is not fair, but you just have to be able to do it.

I would say that God loves them. You know, I think that everybody needs to hear that because I think people find it hard, have a hard time believing it sometimes. But I would tell them that and I would tell them you know, don't believe people who try to tell you otherwise... I think the true thing with me is that for gay people with faith that, what it shows is that the interior experience has to be, is compelling and it has to be stronger than all of these external voices... I think that's the significant point of just overcoming all of the external authority voices that are saying that this can't be true, it's impossible.

I think that you will eventually, if you're fortunate, you will come to enough self awareness that you're at the place where it's okay that they're assholes. And that takes a while. It took me a long time. And maybe I'm not entirely there yet. So that's what I would say.

Having a support system in place... I think that's the most important thing is having somebody that you can turn to who's not going to abandon you just because you tell them you're gay.

We keep telling these untruths about our lives, or keep taking these isolated incidents and telling them like they're our stories or like that's the norm... There are people that will literally tell you, "No, my Grandmother is going to die if I tell her I'm gay." And then Grandma is sitting there, actually probably already knowing, and she ain't dead. Like I said, I think it's to have the courage, give it a try because the outcome may be very different than what you think it's going to be. I mean, that is one thing I would definitely say. And then the other thing I would definitely say is get connected to people who are doing it, who've traveled down roads that you've already traveled down because they have a story to tell.

It is so much better to be genuine and authentic than it is to try and live your life to please others. I'm convinced that that's what I've learned from all of this. Sometimes it can heal the hurt. I've had a real problem with that one... I guess I'm really, really angry that people that don't get it that it's about who we love. It's not perversion. When they're telling me who to hate, I just tell them who I want to love.

I would ask people in the closet to check to see if people already know. You know, you'll find out by just asking people about you, or little things they say without going directly to the point in many cases. They understand that you're gay... I don't think I'm perfect or even close to it. So I would spend more of my dealing with my own issues, and let other people spend their time dealing with their issues. I think if people do that, everybody will get further along the road towards perfection.

Be true to yourself and listen to your heart and be yourself. That's not only about being truthful, as I talked about how truth is important to me, but I think the whole thing about being insular and adopting a whole group's identity as opposed to your own identity is not healthy for our culture. I think we should love each other for our individualism and accept each other for our separateness and not be so judgmental of each other if we're not quite following each other's cookie cutter kind of rule book... The other thing, I think, is there's still a lot of work out there that needs to be done on getting the rest of society to accept what being gay means. And we all have a certain amount of responsibility in doing that, you know? So I think that's the other side of what I would say to people.

I think the biggest thing I have learned is that most of my fears were unfounded. You know, before I started telling people [that he was gay], I had envisioned a world in which I had no friends... that there was going to be this huge demarcation in my life, where all my friends and family prior to that were gone and now I had to create this whole new world and it didn't happen... But the earth did not, you know, split in two. Meteors did not rain down upon me. Nobody burned crosses on my lawn. You know, there's just, nothing really changed... Most of the things that I feared have never come to pass... I think if we all, if every gay person just came out completely, 99% of the discrimination would end tomorrow. When you saw how many members of the military are gay, how many members of congress are gay, how many neighbors and people you never even thought are gay, at some point you just go, what was the problem here?... People are afraid if we were surrounded by gay people, oh my god, I moved into a gay neighborhood. These people will be trying to convert my children and turn them gay. But if they already knew that they already live in a gay neighborhood.

I would say, you know, to be happy with who you are and understand that that's how you were born and created, and it has nothing to do with anything abnormal or against nature but that we're all created differently. And some of us are born heterosexual, some of us are born homosexual, and I know that people, I guess, felt that it was not good to be born homosexual, but you were not given a choice when you were born and I just feel you gotta accept who are and be happy with it. And that's not easy, I know.

I think perhaps if there was one crime that I committed against myself in earlier years, it was to try to believe that a healthy relationship could be found with someone who would give me value... It was an attempt to abrogate the meaning of another person's life for it to be my own. And frankly I think that's probably one of the things that gay men are tempted to do anyway. We grow up trying to figure out how to fit in, trying to be like other people, at least that's what I read and what I see and how I understand myself, but they are fears. You know you recognize yourself as different and that is bad and it can be dangerous. You try to find out how to be like someone else, the next step is to be someone else... the damage that is done from that is just tremendous and I just think that for me all

those years trying to figure out how to adopt the meaning of someone else's meaning... I would be a liar if I said that I am substantially along that journey, all the journey, I have no idea how to gauge where I am or what progress has been made... but I know that I'm satisfied and I can say I am on the journey.

I think the first thing if they have any religious background is that they need to let it go. They have to let that go first before any acceptance will occur even within themselves... maybe that will make you feel better about yourself, you know, later on ... What makes some people different and what makes me sad is that some people can never come out of that.

From a spiritual perspective, I'm no less an emanation of the divine force of the universe than anybody else, and don't let anyone ever rob from you your divine inheritance. Now for people who have no belief whatsoever in a force or a power greater than themselves, that probably won't cut it. But for me, the recognition that just as I am as a gay man, I am a unique emanation of the divine being. And I believe that at the core of my being... Being a sexual minority in this culture, and my own personal experience of it, it hasn't been a cake walk. However, at the vantage point that I'm at now, I wouldn't have wanted it any different. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. And, I mean, I'm hell on wheels at this point in terms of strength.

The main thing I would talk about is the price that one pays for not being themselves, but pretending to be something that they're not. That even, whenever you're trying to put out an image that you hope people will like and you hope people will accept or whatever, the cost to your own sense of self is I think the highest cost that anybody can pay - to deny who you are and to pretend to be someone else. The gift of knowing that people love you for who you are, not who you want them to think you are or who you want them to believe you are, but just for who you really are, is probably the most wonderful gift that you can receive from other people.

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Appendix A  
Recruitment Documents

Email via Listservs  
and  
Script for Recruitment (Letters/Emails to Healthcare  
Professionals and Telephone/Classroom/Etc.)

My name is Parrish Paul and I am a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology at Penn State. I am currently doing research on how meaning making (or how people understand their experience of themselves, others, and the world) may affect their gay identity development. As a gay man myself, I want to understand more about how some people come to celebrate their gay identities while others struggle profoundly to accept themselves. I am seeking research volunteers to participate in this study. Volunteers must be 18 years old to participate, unless parental consent is provided. In particular, I am interested in talking with gay men from a range of ages who are currently or were formerly religiously- or spiritually-affiliated. I am interested in hearing from these men about the ongoing experience of developing a gay identity in a culture that is less than supportive and may be experienced as harmful or oppressive. Participation in this study will involve completing two brief questionnaires and then being part of an approximately two-hour interview. The interview will be conducted in person or on the telephone, but the questionnaires can be completed online or through postal mail. The interviews will be audio-taped, but the information received will be kept confidential. If you are interested in participating, please email me at [Parrishlpaul@aol.com](mailto:Parrishlpaul@aol.com) or call me at 814-769-3931. Also, if you know anyone who has these experiences and would be interested in participating, then please pass this information along.

This study is being supervised by Dr. Kathleen Biechke. She can be reached at (814) 865-3296 if you have questions or concerns. Dr. Bieschke's address is 327 CEDAR Building, University Park, PA, 16802.

### Newspaper/Magazine Advertisements

Seeking gay male participants for a research study exploring how meaning making (or how people understand their experience of themselves, others, and the world) informs gay identity development. Research volunteers must be 18 years old to participate. If you are interested in participating and you are currently or were formerly religiously- or spiritually-affiliated, then please contact Parrish Paul at [Parrishlpaul@aol.com](mailto:Parrishlpaul@aol.com) or at 814-769-3931 for more information. If you know anyone who has these experiences and would be interested in participating, then please pass this information along.

Parrish Paul is a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at Penn State, and this study is his doctoral dissertation research. This study is being supervised by Dr. Kathleen Biechke. She can be reached at (814) 865-3296 if you have questions or concerns. Dr. Biechke's address is 327 CEDAR Building, University Park, PA, 16802.



Appendix B  
Informed Consent

## Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research

The Pennsylvania State University

**Title of Project:** Gay Identity Development as a Process of Meaning-Making Development

**Principal Investigator:** Parrish L. Paul  
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The Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, PA 16801  
(814)769-3931; Parrishlpaul@aol.com

**Advisor:** Dr. Kathleen J. Bieschke  
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1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore how gay identity develops and to examine how overall meaning making informs this process. Forty participants will be involved in this study.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to complete two brief questionnaires and participate in one qualitative interview. The questionnaires may be completed online, through postal mail, or in person, depending on what is convenient for you. In the interview, you will be asked about your experience of gay identity development. You will also be asked to describe how you understand and experience recent events in your life. This interview will be audio-taped and will be conducted in person or by telephone. If you are interested in doing so, you will also be invited to review a summary of this interview and offer your further thoughts on our discussion. At the completion of the data analysis stage of this research project, you will be invited to review the near-final results and offer your feedback, if you are interested in doing so. You may choose to end your participation at any time.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** The potential for discomforts and risks is minimal. You will choose what you want to share in the interview and in the questionnaires. Though it is possible in any interview situation that the discussion could touch upon areas that you find uncomfortable or embarrassing, this is not my intent or a goal of this study.
4. **Benefits:** The benefit to you is the experience of the interview. You will have the opportunity to explore your thoughts and feelings related to gay identity development and your own meaning-making style. For some persons, such an experience may be meaningful. The potential benefits to society are linked to how psychotherapy is provided to gay men. If this research helps explain more about the process of gay identity development for diverse individuals, then psychotherapists and educators

will be better prepared to offer sensitive, ethical, and competent care to their clients and similar training to their students.

5. **Duration/Time:** The two questionnaires will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The interview will last approximately two hours. You will be contacted so that this interview fits your schedule. These interviews will be completed between January 2007 and May 2008.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. Code numbers and pseudonyms will be assigned to the data, and only the person in charge will know your identity. The data will be stored and secured at that person's home in a locked file cabinet, and no other person will have a key to that file cabinet. All computerized information will be password protected and only the person in charge of this study and the research advisor listed above will have access to this data. A transcriptionist will have limited access to this data, by listening to the audio-tapes of interviews for transcription purposes. Finally, a research auditor will review the conclusions of the principal researcher, so that person will review only transcriptions, questionnaires, and notes made by the researcher. The research auditor, the transcriptionist, and the research advisor will not have access to information about your identity. Those persons will only see code numbers and pseudonyms and should not be able to connect you to the information you provide. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Audio-tapes used in this study will be destroyed by the end of the year 2009. The following may review and copy records related to this research: The Office of Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Penn State University's Social Science Institutional Review Board, and Penn State University's Office for Research Protections. Please know that researchers are bound by ethical obligations to report any information shared during the course of research that is related to illegal activity, potential threat to self or others, or that raises concern for human wellbeing. If this type of information were to be discovered during the course of this study, then the researcher is ethically bound to report it to the appropriate agencies or authorities.
7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about this research. Contact Parrish L. Paul at (814) 769-3931 or his research advisor, Kathleen Bieschke at (814) 865-3296 with questions or concerns. You can also call this number if you have complaints or feel you have been harmed by this research. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or you have concerns or general questions about the research, contact Penn State University's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else.
8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form for your records.

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

---

Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date

Appendix C  
Demographic Information

## Demographic Information

1. What is your sex? \_\_\_\_\_
  
  2. Does your gender identity differ from your sex? Please explain if so.
  
  3. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
  
  4. What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
  
  5. What is your sexual orientation?
  
  - 6.
- 
- |                          |   |   |   |   |                        |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|------------------------|
| 0                        | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                      |
| Exclusively heterosexual |   |   |   |   | Exclusively homosexual |

7. What is your current source of income?
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Employment
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Partner
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Social Security of General Assistance
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Unemployment Insurance
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Loans
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Please check the box below beside the highest level of education you have completed:

Some High School  
 High School Graduate  
 Some College or Technical School  
 College Graduate  
 Technical School Graduate  
 Some Graduate School  
 Master's Degree  
 Doctoral Degree  
 Other (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

9. What state do you live in currently?

10. Please describe your current relationship status:

Single  
 Dating (Please specify sex of partner: \_\_\_\_\_)  
 Partnered (Please specify sex of partner: \_\_\_\_\_)  
 Civil Union (Please specify sex of partner: \_\_\_\_\_)  
 In a state-recognized marriage  
     (Please specify sex of partner: \_\_\_\_\_)  
 In a marriage that is not state-recognized  
     (Please specify sex of partner: \_\_\_\_\_)  
 Other (Please explain and specify sex of partner:  
     \_\_\_\_\_  
     \_\_\_\_\_)

11. How long have you been in your current relationship?

Not applicable  
 Less than one year  
 1 to 2 years  
 3 to 5 years  
 5 to 10 years  
 Longer than 10 years

12. Do you have children? Please note the age and sex of your children.

13. If you do not have children, do you plan to have any? Or, if you do have children, do you plan to have more? Please describe.



Appendix D  
Subject-Object Interview

## The Subject-Object Interview (SOI)

(Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988)

### MATERIALS:

Ten (10) subject cards (3" X 7"); pencil; tape recorder; and ninety (90) minute audio-tapes

### PREPPING THE SUBJECT:

Subject needs to know he/she:

- (a) is participating in a 90-minute interview
- (b) the goal of the interview is to learn "how you think about things," "how you make sense of your own experience," etc.
- (c) doesn't have to talk about anything he/she doesn't want to.

### PART 1: Generating Content: The Inventory

The subject is handed the ten (10) index cards. Each card has a title printed on it, to wit:

1. Angry
2. Anxious, Nervous
3. Success
4. Strong stand, conviction
5. Sad
6. Torn
7. Moved, Touched
8. Lost something
9. Change
10. Important to me

The subject is told that the cards are for his/her use only, that you won't see them, and that he/she can take them with him/her or throw them away after the interview. The cards are just to help the subject jot down things we might want to talk about in the interview.

The subject is told, "We will spend the first 15-20 minutes with the cards and then talk together for an hour or so about those things you jotted down on the cards which you choose to talk about. We do not have to talk about anything you don't want to talk about."

- (1) "Now let's take the first card" (Angry)

"If you were to think back over the last several weeks, even the last couple of months, and you had to think about times you felt really angry about something, or times you got really mad or felt a sense of outrage or violation – are there two or three things that come to mind? Take a minute to think about it, if you like, and just jot down on

the card whatever you need to remind you of what they were.” (If nothing comes to mind for a particular card, skip it and go on to the next card)

(2) (Anxious, Nervous)

“...if you were to think of some times where you found yourself being really scared about something, nervous, anxious about something....”

(3) (Success)

“...if you were to think of some times when you felt kind of triumphant, or that you had achieved something that was difficult for you, or especially satisfying that you were afraid might come out another way, or a sense that you had overcome something...”

(4) (Strong stand, Conviction)

“...if you were to think of some times when you had to take a strong stand, or felt very keenly ‘this is what I think should or should not be done about this,’ times when you became aware of a particular conviction that you held....”

(5) (Sad)

“...felt really sad about something, perhaps something that even made you cry, or left you feeling on the verge of tears....”

(6) (Torn)

“...felt really in conflict about something, where someone or some part of you felt one way or was urging you on in one direction, and someone else or some other part of you was feeling another way; times when you really felt kind of torn about something....”

(7) (Moved, Touched)

“...felt quite touched by something you saw, or thought or heard, perhaps something that even caused your eyes to tear up, something that moved you....”

(8) (Lost something)

“...times you had to leave something behind, or were worried that you might lose something or someone; ‘goodbye’ experiences, the ends of something important or valuable; losses....”

(9) (Change)

“As you look back at your past, if you had to think of some ways in which you think you’ve changed over the last few years – or, even months – if that seems right – are there some ways that come to mind?”

(10) (Important to me)

“If I were just to ask you, ‘What is it that is most important to you?’ or ‘What do you care deepest about?’ or ‘What matters most?’ – are there one or two things that come to mind?”

## PART II

“Now we have an hour or so to talk about some of these things you’ve recalled or jotted down. You can decide where we start. Is there one card you felt more strongly about than the others? (or a few cards, etc.?...”

(Now the probing-for-structure part of the interview begins....)

(Subject keeps selecting the cards)

### What the interviewer should keep in mind:

1. Don’t worry about getting through all the cards; you never do. The idea is to let the subject introduce personally salient content, and for you to try to understand it. It doesn’t matter how many cards you do. (Though it can be useful to know which cards are the most salient.)
2. The subject will give you the “whats” (what is important, what felt successful); you must learn the “whys” (why is it important, why does this constitute success?). The answer to the whys helps you to understand how the person’s subject-object construction is shaping real life, the goal of the interview.
3. Since you are probing for internal structure you need to keep asking “why?” (like any structural interview), but since you are probing real-life experience, often deeply felt, care must be taken to frame the “whys” in such a way that does not seem to suggest that the person is somehow wrong to be caring so deeply (e.g., maybe if he fails his father won’t buy him an Alfa Romeo; or maybe if I fail I feel I will be letting down the family, or maybe, if she fails she feels she is letting herself down – all conceivable different structures). But we don’t want to ask a question like, “Why are you so worried about that?” because it can unintentionally suggest we have doubts about the appropriateness of worrying about such a thing. Each interviewer must find his/her own way to convey that he/she is not trying to understand why it should be that the subject has this worry but in what sense it is a worry.
4. The interviewer must wear “two hats” in the conduct of the interview – that of empathic, receptive listener, and that of active inquirer. Ignoring the first on behalf of the second leaves most interviewees feelings grilled, and not well

understood; the interview will become unpleasant at best, and unproductive at worst. Ignoring the second on behalf of the first leaves most interview unscorable; people rarely spontaneously speak in an epistemologically unambiguous fashion.

5. The central activity in the interviewer's own head is the forming of hypotheses during the interview itself. The more familiar a person is with the 21 epistemological distinctions the interview can make, the easier it is to generate hypotheses. One excellent way of becoming more familiar with these distinctions is the activity of analyzing (or "scoring") subject-object interviews.
6. Further information, advice, and sympathy about all these activities can be found in great quantity in The Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Its Administration and Interpretation (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988).

Appendix E  
Semi-Structured Interview

### Semi-Structured Interview Format

1. What stands out for you in your journey as a gay man?
2. Have there been positive or negative consequences to this journey for you?
3. What has been especially helpful or especially harmful in this process for you?
4. Are there things that you would share with other gay men that you think would be helpful in their journeys?
5. How has your experience as a gay man influenced your career development?
6. How has your spiritual or religious affiliation informed your experience as a gay man?
7. Have you ever considered or pursued conversion therapy in an attempt to change your sexual orientation?

Appendix F

Category and Sub-Theme Development



Because I did not use a computer program to develop themes in the current research, I used a system of thematic Post-It notes placed on large poster boards that were grouped and regrouped over time. For example, many participants described how they feared that their families would not be accepting of the participants' gayness. Some participants had not yet come out to parents and some were talking about this struggle in the past. Therefore, I had separated this theme into current and past struggle in one respect. However, this issue was also related to other participant themes, such as if these men were concerned because of the family's religious views, the family's racial/ethnic mores, or other issues. This led to many earlier versions of the concept map of the final grounded theory that was presented in Figure 4.1, with themes being related to one another in changing ways over the course of time. Many of these earlier concept maps were never even finished, as I would realize for some reason that a way I had thought the theory was developing from the data would not fit together. These earlier attempts would eventually be viewed (by me and in conversation with my research advisor) as lacking in some way, perhaps because they did not fit the story of all participants appropriately or they left out important thematic elements. I look back now and wish that I had created a computer-generated version of each of these earlier attempts at the emergent theory instead of quickly drawing them out by hand before abandoning them. It would have been useful for readers to see each of these early attempts at a matrix. I also wish I had made more notes about the related ongoing dialogue my research advisor and I conducted throughout the course of the study. What I can provide is an example of the eventual subthemes that developed into the major categories of the theory. On the following

pages, themes, subthemes, and supporting quotations for each of the major categories of the theory are presented in tables F.1 through F.7.

Table F.1

*Realization of Being Gay in a Homophobic Context*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
"I always knew"	<p>I first started having the feelings and that feeling of differentness, attraction to other guys, when I was around six, very young.</p> <p>I kind of knew I was gay since like puberty... I was attracted to men and that's where I felt comfortable... there's nothing wrong with women or anything like that.</p> <p>I fell in love with a boy in my first grade class... I spent the next... [large number of] years in denial...</p>
"I realized later"	<p>I was figuring out my sexuality my senior year of high school because I had had girlfriends forever...</p> <p>At first I thought, does everybody feel this way? Are all the guys in gym class feelings this? And when is this going to stop?</p> <p>At the age of 18, I really came to the full consciousness of this is who I am and this is what it is and this is what people think of it. You want to run. It's just not pretty.</p>
The Homophobic Context	<p>My mother seems to be more accepting than my father right now, and I wish they would feel more comfortable asking about this part of my life... ... like why aren't you happy for me that I'm in a relationship?</p> <p>Everyone in my church was telling me the same things... They kind of confirmed for me how negative many people in the church can be about this issue.</p> <p>We did have the experience one night walking back to the car [from a gay bar], and then kids calling out to us names, and then throwing eggs at us. Well, that's very, very hurtful, you know, and I got in the car and started crying. Why would they do tha</p>

Table F.2

*Distress and Struggle Lead to Constructive Development and Gay Identity Development*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
General Struggle and Distress	<p>I'm still not very comfortable being different, and it's probably part of my growing up and part of my educational background and my cultural. We don't want people to be different from us.</p> <p>I was getting really depressed... It was this hopeless, helpless feeling that really bogged me down... For years I grappled with how people would react. Would they reject me? Would they not? It was always the worst scenario most of the time.</p> <p>I didn't know there were normal gay people out there to connect with... the only person who I knew was gay was the hairdresser down the street... and that was what was queer to me....</p>
Related to Family	<p>I have mixed feelings about the time it is taking my family to deal with my coming out... Sometimes I tell myself, okay, why don't they go faster or why don't they go a little bit more with it?</p> <p>My coming out experience with my family was intense and protracted... My family relationships have changed in the last few years that we're still kind of working through some of the issues.</p> <p>I sort of kept going to the church that my mother went to, the very conservative church that I grew up in, for a long time but until I left for college... just sort of pretending or doing it to make her happy because I was sort of scared of what she would</p>
Related to Religion/Spirituality	<p>Suddenly everyone in my church was telling me the same things... They were worrying about it as an issue with my faith. They kind of confirmed for me how negative many people in the church can be about this issue.</p> <p>Everyone in my church was telling me the same things... They kind of confirmed for me how negative many people in the church can be about this issue.</p> <p>Because of the fact that it was going against religion and against everything that they believed and so I was never open with my family because I was afraid of saying something or doing something that would give myself away.</p>

Table F.3

*Attempts to Avoid, Hide, or Change Being Gay*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
Attempts to Avoid or Hide	<p>Until about three years ago, I really didn't worry that much about sexuality. I was focusing on my career and I had lots of friends... I think I hadn't really paid enough attention before that point, just focusing on everything else in my life.</p> <p>[I had been working at] a very evangelical church and it was, you know, they would have never hired me in the first place if they had known I was gay.</p> <p>[My girlfriend and I] would make out and it was like nothing. There was no feeling on my end whatsoever. She finally said, "Do you have another girlfriend?" And I said, "No. It's just me. It's not you. It's me"... After that, I stopped trying...</p>
Individual Attempts to Change	<p>The only thing I remember is at one point I did get some cassette tapes from people who said that they used to be gay and they were like changed and now they're married to women. But I'm younger and so I don't think I ever listened to them, but I did see</p> <p>I got married to a woman. So in some respects I thought I was trying to do [conversion therapy] myself. In those years I probably would have changed myself if I could have...</p> <p>When I was younger I would go to the priest in confession and confess any sexual thoughts and behaviors that I had had, and in the hope that by confessing it would go away.</p>
Professional Attempts to Change (Short Term and Conversion Therapy)	<p>A psychologist asked me if I wanted to go into a conversion program to become straight. I was actually really offended, even though I was really depressed and I had low self-esteem and I didn't have a good self-identity at that point.</p> <p>I did meet with a pastor, though, to talk about trying to change. I went to like a two-week thing with people, and we'd meet once a week.</p> <p>[The conversion group was] such an intense spiritual thing... The program was for 30 weeks, and we would meet for three and a half hours [per week]. We would sing and pray and there would be teaching. We would also meet in small groups so that we could ho</p>

Table F.4

*Finding Support*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
From Friends	<p>I think it really depends on if my friends are around me or not. If I'm with them, the anxiety is not as present...</p> <p>There are several gay couples, one [couple] that I kind of see as my gay fathers. They have supported me and been willing to listen to me... they give me encouragement when I struggle...</p> <p>My friends were really helpful and supportive when I told them though, and they even helped me to begin to accept myself after I said you know, I think I am, I started talking to friends about the possibility of being gay. They said you know what, if tha</p>
From Intimate Partners or Family	<p>My partner and I have always been very close, and it has always been a caring and understanding relationship... One's relationship is first and foremost... I think ultimately that brings you great happiness.</p> <p>I have been with my partner for over 20 years, and that has been a really important and meaningful to me.</p> <p>My family is my baseline for everything. I don't know what I'd do without them... They've always supported me no matter what I've done... When you're home, everything is fine and you know it's fine, and you can say or do anything and you know you're fine...</p>
From Same Race or Ethnicity	<p>...just kind of like spending time with him, I just thought that it was possible to be black and gay and still have integrity about yourself as a man and still have a good circle of friends and be connected and be loved and be successful and be okay.</p> <p>Being a part of any community of color... it can be difficult and it can cause some conflict because you're still supposed to be a certain way... oftentimes feeling marginalized in the community... what's become actually very helpful and even inspiring is th</p> <p>It was also really helpful to find other gay people [from my racial/ethnic group]... We have the same stories. We come from the same background. I guess the sense of community as in not feeling alone...</p>

Table F.5

*Disclosure to Others*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
<p>Examples From All Constructive-Developmental Levels</p>	<p>I think one day I just kind of got sick of it. Something had happened around gay people, and they were going off with all these Bible verses and stuff. So I was just kind of like well, you know what? And I told them. Then you know, of course, you're a</p> <p>It was tricky telling [my siblings] just because of my own fear, but as the conversations developed they were just very welcoming and very accepting and they were just like you should have told us sooner, like we don't care. But it was a really great rea</p> <p>I found somebody attractive in gym class, and I told him towards the end of the year, and it was really, really foolish because I wrote him a note, which was really dumb... It was during second to last period. My last period, I think half of the school k</p> <p>My dad asked me first, and my dad was actually really cool. He wasn't a Christian... he had a lot of gay friends... so it was never a big deal to him... He was just really great about it. My mom found out when I was a teenager and I accidentally left a magazi</p> <p>I talked to my wife about it probably like two years after I began to accept myself. Then two weeks after that, my wife and I told my parents and my father. It was liberating. It was wonderful. It was hard, but when I was able to actually verbalize th</p> <p>My parents were just horrified initially when I came out. They also struggled with how I began to question the Catholic church... Fortunately I stood my ground, even with them, but I maintained my convictions and eventually they came around...</p>

Table F.6

*Accepting Self as Gay*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
Examples From All Constructive-Developmental Levels	<p>The year before I came out, I was part a conference and I heard all these out and proud gay people talking about their lives, [and I was] getting this whole concept of homophobia and that that's what was making me feel guilty and ashamed... The meaning shif</p> <p>We walked into the bar and this guy saw an old friend of his and he ran up to him and kissed him right on the mouth... I just hit myself on the head and said this is who I am, this is where I belong, these are the people I want to be with, people like me.</p> <p>...The AIDS epidemic. People were dying. There wasn't anything they could do... and I did say yes [to working with a local AIDS group] even though I was embarrassed. I mean, I was embarrassed for awhile to tell people that I was doing it, because obviousl</p> <p>I decided that the God I believed in was different from everybody else's God because my God wouldn't judge somebody for loving... I felt like God and I were fine... It was after my faith deepened that I began to take on how to reconcile my faith and my sex</p> <p>I really felt more stable and comfortable once I got more into the gay community... I think that's just allowed me to be freer about who I am and be more open...if I was just by myself, I don't know that it would have ended up so happy.</p> <p>I think that one of the things that really helped me in the coming out process was to begin seeing a therapist.. He helped me to think through things I never would have considered on my own.</p>



Table F.7

*Continued Struggle in an Oppressive Context*

Sub-Theme	Examples of Quotations
Examples From All Constructive-Developmental Levels	<p>If you can predict the date on which I'm going to die, I guess that will be the day that stops the struggle... You know, for gay and lesbian people who just believe that they're perfectly content, and everything is wonderful, and nothing could be better, a</p> <p>I think, because of our age, that I don't care anymore [about people knowing I'm gay]. However, when I think about telling the local Catholic priests, I hesitate because I don't want us to lose connections with them.</p> <p>We can tolerate gay people as long as they're these caricatures... wouldn't bother me so much if, you know, there were gay fighter pilots on TV, and gay doctors and gay lawyers and things like that. There are so few gay people on TV that it seems that the</p> <p>I don't think there's anything wrong with being gay and that's a loaded statement. Because while I accept it, I'm also living in, at least right now, in a community that doesn't. I live in reality in terms of, you know, the administration of this countr</p> <p>I think a lot of my anger comes from, it's all related to religion... it's just very frustrating to know that someone feels they have the power to either judge you, or impose on you their values, or to decide what you can or can't be, or whether or not you</p> <p>Being [from a particular racial/ethnic group], I usually get very angry when I come across white gay men who think that they can just only date little boys who are [from my cultural group]... They kind of just objectify us... they have no respect for the cult</p>

Appendix G

The Interrelated Processes of Constructive Development  
and Gay Identity Development

THE INTERRELATED PROCESSES OF CONSTRUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT  
AND GAY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

In the results chapters, I presented how the participants transitioned through the interrelated processes of constructive development and gay identity development. I illustrated that constructive development influenced how these men understood and therefore informed how they behaved related to tasks of gay identity development. In this appendix, I do not present new results. Instead, I provide examples of how the phases of McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model of gay identity development were discussed by participants, in specific relation to each stage of constructive development (Kegan, 1982, 1994) that was represented in this research. It is my hope that by presenting the model that emerged from the grounded theory in this way, readers will be provided with an extensive example of how meaning-making stage is related to gay identity concerns. The quotations in this appendix did not appear in the results chapters.

The Imperial Balance and Gay Identity Development

Dean was the only participant making meaning in the Imperial Balance. As a reminder, in this constructive-developmental level, experiences are negotiated so that the person's needs are fulfilled (Kegan, 1982, 1994). The individual needs to know from others what they think and feel, so that he or she can evaluate the consequences inherent in a specific situation. When it came to understanding the experiences of sexual minority people as a whole, Dean felt that his experience would not be that similar to that of others. He also seemed to struggle to take perspective on the oppression that others suffer because of being gay, and he appeared to have little insight into how his choices as an individual gay man may inform his experience in relationships. In one particular

quotation, Dean gave a clear example of the Imperial Balance. He described how he was unable to take the perspective of another person and understand what that person may be feeling in reaction to Dean's comments and behaviors. This inability to take the perspective of another person is in many ways the defining factor of the Imperial Balance:

When I first came out to [a straight friend I fell in love with], the straw that broke the camel's back there was, see, we were doing business trips together... and for me emotionally and physically, to be in the same vehicle on the road and share a hotel room with [he names the man] turned me on sexually so much, and the sight of him, and the smell of him, I thought gee, I really like guys here... He turned me on that much, and I think he had a hard time accepting that, and I think he wanted to distance himself. I don't think he wanted to pursue that kind of a physical relationship with me. So I think that bothered him that I jerked off with him around. I don't think he could accept that. So one time he left without me. I felt that he should have done a better job in saying that I could go with him to supervise a project, and one time he put in a very, very sloppy effort, and he just left without me. And when I found out that he had left without me, I knew it was because of that, the sexuality kind of a thing. And he thought well, maybe we could just get different hotel rooms or something. I thought well, that just wouldn't work for me. He either accepts me or he doesn't. But I don't think he could deal with that, and when he left without me, I let it rip with an axe. I took an axe, and I smashed the answering machine to a million pieces. I could have done a lot of damage that day. I was getting really violent and angry. I remember that day, and I spent the rest of the day crying, and I called up my friend [names a friend], and I said, "Get over here! Something really bad is going to happen here if I don't get somebody to talk to me right now"... That was the angriest I ever was. The guy at that point in my life that I loved the most and that I wanted the most and wanted to be with, when I couldn't have that; when you want somebody so bad and you can't have it, and it comes back to bite you in the ass, that made me so angry.

Dean's approach to gay identity development was best explained through his constructive development. He identified individually as a gay man but he seemed to struggle to connect to the larger gay community. According to Fassinger and Miller's (1996) model, this description of his individual gay identity seemed most similar to the Deepening/Commitment Phase, as he tended to reject elements of heterosexual society

while identifying primarily as gay at the time of the interview. For example, he wore several gay-themed articles of clothing when interviewed and included many gay-affirmative symbols and quotations on his emails. Dean's group gay identity appeared most consistent with the Exploration phase, in which he was exploring his attitudes and possible membership in the reference group, though he stated several times in our discussions that he did not feel understood by gay people generally: "I don't have a lot of gay friends. Pretty much all my friends are straight... I want gay role models in my life." Dean's constructive development influenced his gay identity development. His struggles to take the perspective of others led to difficulty in interpersonal relationships and struggle in group identity tasks in particular.

#### The Interpersonal Balance and Gay Identity Development

As a brief review, individuals who make meaning in the Interpersonal Balance are no longer embedded in their own needs, as in the earlier Imperial Balance (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Instead the person can begin to integrate personal needs with the needs of others, since he or she can now hold differing points of view inside the self. This new ability to internalize the points of view of other persons coincides with the ability to simultaneously experience the feelings of both self and others, now taking the other person's feelings into account. The individual begins to care greatly about what other persons may think, so the person makes decisions based on the values of the reference group.

The way the Interpersonal Balance participants made meaning influenced the way they made meaning related to their gay identity development. Because Interpersonal meaning makers struggle to define themselves separately from their reference groups, I

expected that they would struggle with gay identity when confronted with disapproving others and would struggle less with being gay when they located support. Ryan gave an example of this Interpersonal Balance struggle when he said, “It helps when I can be with like-minded others - there’s a common understanding that this is our safe space to do whatever.”

Ryan’s comment just above could be used as a summary of what these men said about their gay identity development and how that process was conceptualized from a particular stage of constructive development. The participants described a firm commitment to their identities as gay men, but they struggled to accept themselves fully when they were without support. When the Interpersonal participants in the current study described their experiences, overall they seemed to describe Fassinger and Miller’s (1996) Deepening/Commitment phase of both individual and group identity. These men described what Fassinger and Miller conveyed was a growing dedication to personal connections with other gay men and to group connections with the larger gay community. They were developing more awareness of the oppression sexual minority people experience and realizing how that could affect their own lives. These men also communicated a sense of pride and commitment with their gay identities, consistent with the model Fassinger and Miller proposed.

For example, Bryce offered a clear example of an Interpersonal meaning maker’s externally defined self in terms of his exploration of Deepening or Commitment to a gay identity. He described being more able to hold on to his self-acceptance when there were others around him who were also accepting, which let him also begin to explore his gay

identity more deeply. However, he struggled when people he trusted disagreed with the idea that it was okay to be gay:

[There were people who supported me] who said that it was okay that I was able to be okay with it, or begin to be okay with it... They helped me to reconcile Christianity with being gay... I still get confused about what I believe all the time. I still do. I used to be very okay with it and fine with it, and so it just happened where I met this [gay] guy who was telling me that it was wrong and I guess, you know, I hear it all time from straight people so I just brush them off with oh you're just straight and you don't know what you're talking about. But to hear gay people say we are wrong, that hurt me and it made me question my whole faith and my whole outlook. I broke down and I was like crying and I was like oh my God, what if I'm wrong. It is very hard. But in the end I came back around and through like talking to my friends and through prayer I realized that I'm not wrong.

Jake's Interpersonal meaning making was clear when he described how uncomfortable he was with people knowing he is gay at times. He talked about checking to make sure that people approve of him before broaching the topic of sexuality. Participants could choose to be careful in this way for many reasons that are not necessarily related to a constructive-developmental level, such as to maintain personal safety or for fear they may lose their jobs. However, in Jake's case, he seemed to make these choices because he found it difficult to fully accept himself in the face of disapproval from others. He voiced a commitment to a gay identity, but struggled to integrate that identity into all life contexts:

It's important to me that I choose friends who are really open and positive about sexuality. When people can joke about it in a positive way and show that they really care about me, then I can feel comfortable with them... It's hard for me to always be comfortable being recognized as gay. It depends on the situation. If I find myself comfortable enough with somebody that I'm gay then that's fine, but usually I start getting uncomfortable and my friends start like making jokes about it when I'm with strangers and I haven't told them myself yet, but they usually are the ones to tell them... I decide who I'm going to tell or not tell by usually engaging in kind of a joking manner where I can say things that kind of give me a hint of what kind of person they are, and the way they respond is either positive or

negative so I can tell if they are a very open liberal person or they're very conservative and they have very hardcore views about certain topics.

Brad gave a clear example of Interpersonal meaning making as related to gay identity development. He talked about feeling more able to celebrate his own gay identity when he was sure he would be accepted by others, feeling a deepening commitment to that identity but not being able to fully synthesize it in all life contexts:

If I'm supposedly more emotional than guys are supposed to be, or more feminine in some aspect... I tend to feel more like I'm sticking out because suddenly I'm not really a guy, and I'm not really a girl. It's like what is that person over there?... I start becoming aware that [other people are] seeing this, and they're judging me, and they're having whatever thoughts they are, and that just makes me like oh, crap. Let's settle down and try to butch it up and you know. You're trying to save yourself from more ridicule because you know if you do it for too long you will be ridiculed. There will be some kind of fag remark or something that's said. You know, then you try to like butch it up or try to blend in more... When I'm around other gays and stuff I feel a very flamboyant type gay... I kind of fight with myself... We live in a small town... So you always have to worry about all the conservative ideas and closed mindedness here. [However], just being told from these people who've grown up in small towns, they've actually told us, you know, you're not the gay guys that we were taught about. We were always taught that gay people, you know, try to sodomize little boys... It's just really cool to hear them say that you're normal people and you're cool... especially from straight people... telling you hey, you're pretty normal. We like hanging out with you. You're not that different. It's kind of like a little success because you know that you're not sticking out like a sore thumb.

Jason described a similar struggle in both constructive-developmental and gay identity terms. He seemed to be spending a good deal of time monitoring the reactions of others, to ensure that they would not disapprove of him:

The most helpful thing is having the support group, somebody that I can turn to when I don't want to be by myself. That's the one thing, the biggest thing that has helped me come to terms with myself. The hardest thing probably would be me being able to let go of the people who aren't okay with who I am... I think there are people who know about me, but I don't think they're comfortable. They haven't come to terms with it yet. So I kind of just wait, and when I feel like they're more comfortable with it I'll bring up subjects about homosexuality and topics like that. Depending on how they react to that, I kind of go on. Sometimes if I get a good reaction or a good feeling then I start talking about, I bring up



myself and say you know, well, I am. This is who I am. Then we start talking about it... Lots of the time people are okay with it because most of the time they already know and they'll just go oh, he is. Let's just talk about it. Every once in a while you get some of those people who are like oh, or like eww... I also don't want others to feel like I flaunt being gay... With the media and just the stereotypes and stuff, people do express themselves and be that way, to flaunt it in people's faces. I'm scared about that. I can live this life without actually being in their face about it, you know?

For James, it was the voices of others that remain instrumental in his knowing that it is “normal” to be gay. He was clearly committed to his gay identity, but he talked about ongoing struggles and doubts, and he clarified that it was the voices of others that allowed him to hold on to his beliefs about sexuality at times:

There are sometimes when I have a hard time with coming out... times where I get very down with my family and there's times when I'm like, you know what, it would be easier to be straight just so I can follow what they want and end all this fighting as a problem... But then again I have friends and I have this support system that says, you know what... what you're doing and how you're doing it is perfectly normal and a lot of people do feel that. And I was very able to get through it with that support from other people.

#### The Interpersonal/Institutional Transition and Gay Identity Development

As another brief reminder, persons who make meaning in the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition will interpret and understand their experiences with each of those Subject-Object Balances, depending on their current situation and the particular reference group they may be relating to at a given time (Lahey et al., 1988). Therefore, these meaning makers will make sense of some concerns in ways similar to the Interpersonal Balance, as reviewed above, and some concerns in ways similar to the Institutional Balance, as briefly described in the next section. In terms of Fassinger and Miller's (1996) model of gay identity development, the group of participants making meaning at the Interpersonal/Institutional Transition were the most diverse of all the men interviewed for the current study. Some men struggled to identify as gay in a group identity or

individual identity way, while a small number of this group of participants described experiences most similar to Fassinger and Miller's Internalization/Synthesis phase (see the next section for a review of that phase). It was the constructive-developmental level of the participants that seemed to explain how the individuals differed in these ways.

Each of these participants struggled with self-acceptance on some level, which is unsurprising when considered from a constructive-developmental standpoint.

Specifically, when someone struggles to author his own system for understanding the world and that world communicates that being gay is wrong, then he likely cannot help but struggle with accepting himself in at least some ways. It was the transitional participants whose Interpersonal meaning making was primary who seemed to struggle most with the tasks of gay identity development and identified primarily with Fassinger and Miller's (1996) Deepening/Commitment phase. For example, Cameron wanted to speak about his sexuality to others, but he feared what the reaction would be. This fear about the disapproval of others led him to stay silent, even when his personal values were to accept himself and to speak more openly about these issues so he could help people in their own struggles:

The part of me that sometimes gets stopped from pushing my parents more or telling more people about myself - it's just fear. I feel comfortable telling people who are close to me, but I struggle with people that may not understand. I also struggle with the idea that telling people could make my work situation uncomfortable. I would like to tell people so that they would know this part of me. I also would really like to help others with this issue, especially in regard to how people integrate their sexuality and spirituality. I have wanted to work with groups on this issue, but it would mean coming out more widely.

Kade described an Interpersonal/Institutional struggle in the reactions to his engagement.

He talked about how he was excited, but when he felt that others would not care about this event in the way that he did, the excitement he felt was somehow diminished. His

transitional meaning making allowed him to examine his own internally-authored views about this issue, while also feeling so torn in reaction to the voices of others that he at times struggled to remember his own thoughts and feelings about the issue at hand. Kade demonstrated a Deepening/Commitment to his gay identity, in that he accepted who he was and he was excited about that identity, but he was unsure how to fully integrate it into all parts of his life:

My partner and I recently became engaged, and it was so different than the straight people I know who are engaged and who have this fairy tale, storybook engagement. Our engagement story is that we talked about it, we decided we were ready, and we bought rings. So I feel like it's not special... I'm very happy... just the response I was anticipating and the ways to deliver that message, like my exciting news, I just feel like no one is going to care about it... What bothers me is it's not that I feel like it's not special to others, but I feel like somehow it's not as special to me... I don't know how to tell people [about the engagement]. It felt weird. I feel like they're going to ask, well, how did it happen? And I was going to have this really lame story. I just feel like it was very not monumental. So I was like, I'll just put it on Facebook. People can find out that way... I think on a meta-societal level, I feel like it just isn't as important. That's what has been conveyed to me, and so that's kind of the excitement with which I've approached it to other people... I was like, who's going to care?"

Tom described a similar struggle with integration of a gay identity in his transitional meaning making. He talked about his struggle with fully incorporating his gay and Christian identities. Though he had strong views on how he felt both gay people and Christians should be more accepting of one another, he struggled with how to represent both parts of himself at times:

What has been hard for me though, is that since I identify so strongly as Christian, I feel like I understand and hold common ground with Christians more than I do with gay people at times... I feel frustrated with how the church has handled the gay issue. People are constantly making gay people feel as though they are not welcome in the church, that Jesus doesn't want them there, that they're condemned to hell... and it's ridiculous. It frustrates me to see people misrepresenting Jesus, especially considering that most of the gay population does not know the church. As a matter of fact, they move away from the church because of what they're hearing, and that just makes me so angry... But it's not

just the church. Unfortunately, the gay community and the Christian community have both done such a terrible job of representing themselves to the other that it's very polarizing. So if I were to walk into a room and identify myself as a Christian, I'm automatically turning the gay people off just the same as if I were to walk into a Christian room and identify myself as gay, I'm turning the Christians off... And the gay community had to find a way to feel accepted, because they've been forced to. They're not accepted in certain areas. They're not allowed to do certain things, and so they've had to create this community where they can do things. They can be safe, and they can be loved and accepted... Unfortunately, the ones who've done the most damage are the church... What's interesting about these meetings that I have with pastors... is that I usually have to be right upfront in the beginning. I'm gay. Now that we've got that on the table, this is why I'm here. And I don't really like necessarily doing it that way, but there's really not another way to do it. I don't want to be deceptive, and I don't want to skirt the issue.

Taylor struggle similarly with his religious beliefs. He was committed to a gay identity, but had difficulty fully integrating it because he struggled to know "for sure" that it was okay to be gay:

I am a born again Christian, and sometimes yeah, I am torn, you know, as far as the Bible goes and homosexuality in the Bible. I mean, I really don't think when two people are really, really in love with each other, I just don't see how that can be wrong. Maybe it's the fact that I'm sitting here alone and not in love with anybody right now. I have just the usual conflicts over the Bible. Like I'm not 100% certain either way. Is this right? Is it wrong? Actually, I think the Bible, when it's talking about homosexuality, I think it's been exaggerated. I think it's talking about just pure whoredom when everybody was having sex with anybody and everybody. I don't think it was referring to a one-on-one love relationship, but I don't know that for sure.

Ronald's transitional meaning making was demonstrated in his struggle to integrate his sexual orientation or identity with his hopes for the future. He seemed able to accept himself and identify himself as a gay man in some ways, but he struggled to believe he could have the family he wanted if he was in a gay relationship. Though Ronald talked about the consistency of his attraction to men throughout his interview, he also talked about wondering if he should marry a woman because of how hard it felt to maintain his own cultural and familial expectations. Interestingly, Ronald demonstrated a

commitment to a sexual minority identity that was beyond initial exploration, but it coexisted with ongoing questioning and uncertainty about that identity:

I think one benefit of being a sexual minority is our life is not so easy to anticipate because we don't have a blueprint so in this sense we are freer than straight people because there are more opportunities for us to think of... I think I'm pretty much a person who wants to establish a family with children, you know?... the continuation of raising children, to bring up the next generation this kind of thing. I'm thinking of having a family with children, but I don't know if it's possible to have this kind of family with another male. This is the part that I'm still kind of confused and still wondering... So I know it's possible, and I know there might be some gay male couple who has children, but it's very rare... I think sometimes I'm over sensitive to other people's reaction to my behavior or what I have said. That's part of the reason why I chose to not be socially active or involved with so many people... I would say I'm pretty much certain that I won't establish a normal heterosexual relationship without letting the other person know my past relationships and my sexual orientation... [Also,] being alone could be also equally fulfilling than in a relationship... So I think I'm trying to be open to both possibilities, being alone or being in a relationship I think I'm pretty comfortable being with myself and being alone and enjoying the single life. So in this perspective, I don't know if getting married would be a good idea.

Miles described a transitional meaning-making struggle in terms of disclosing his sexual orientation, especially to his extended family and to his parents' neighbors. Though he was certain in his own gay identity, it was hard for him to fully integrate it into his life because of fear about how others would react and fear that he would never be fully accepted, a clearly Interpersonal concern:

I always feel kind of torn in terms of telling some of my extended family because I don't know if they have the capacity to deal with it. And I also really worry when I'm at home visiting, because on the one hand I don't have any problem with being gay... but on the other, my folks live there and so when people ask me, you know, are you seeing anyone, typically I'll say, you know, no or yes, and they'll say well what's she like and then I'll explain who I'm talking about without actually giving names, just say you know, she's great as opposed to he's great. And it's more because my parents have to live there and my parents have to deal with their neighbors, and a lot of them, I think if they knew would feel differently about my family than they do... So on the one hand it's like I'm lying, but on the other hand it's so that my family can feel comfortable where they live... I don't think there's anything wrong with being gay and that's a loaded statement. Because while I accept it, I'm also living in, at least right now, in a

community that doesn't. I live in reality in terms of, you know, the administration of this country right now that doesn't. There are things that I struggle with everyday, in terms of wouldn't life be easier if I wasn't gay. So there's something there in terms of my own acceptance because if I was accepting fully, you know, completely okay with it, I wouldn't be thinking oh well, I wish things were different. It would be well things aren't different. Why would you want them to be because you should be happy with who you are. So I think, you know, as years go by I become more accepting because it's a part of my life, and because [it's a] more active part of my life. In terms of when I first came out, [my focus] was [to] find a relationship, that's the only thing that matters... We live in this country where everybody talks about freedom and liberty and being who you are and how anyone can make it and how we should treat each other equally and then you have these institutions that don't want to change... Even if you find someone you want to spend the rest of your life with, and you do find that person, it's not going to be seen as legitimate by a number of people, whereas if I weren't gay there wouldn't be the same issue... And then I get angry because it's like why don't they accept it. I try to accept people for who they are... I'm not hopeless about it, I hope things change, then otherwise I wouldn't be studying what I'm hoping to study and kind of work to make change. But I have some hope that things will change, but I think I won't see the benefits of it. I won't be around.

Justin described a transitional meaning-making struggle with disclosure of his sexual orientation. Though he was out in many contexts and often in an advocate role with others, he struggled in certain contexts to fully integrate his gay identity into his whole life, especially when he was surrounded by negative voices and messages:

I get angry at the indifference of my family – my immediate family... the fact that I'm the only one that is without someone at family gatherings and all that sort of thing and nobody ever asks are you seeing anybody. I'm sort of the white elephant in the room... Probably an area where I continue to struggle and continue to find my way... the whole concept of really being comfortable with who I am and in being more open about that is something that I think a lot about. I think, you know, I wonder if that's something that's in the grand scheme of things for me. The concept of being an out gay man, you know, I meet people who are just completely open and completely out and that can be problematical if you're trying to start a relationship and you're not. I wonder sometimes if that's something that I'm ever going to be. I don't know that it's wrapped up, if it's all wrapped up in the whole spirituality thing, or if it's wrapped up in the sort of veiled disapproval of my mom, or if I'm trying to be all things to all people and that sort of things. Those are things that I struggle with at this point in my life.

It was the transitional participants whose Institutional meaning making system was primary that identified with Fassinger and Miller's (1996) Internalization/Synthesis phase and that appeared to struggle somewhat less with tasks of gay identity development. Because these participants are speaking as Institutional meaning makers in the following quotes, the transitional struggle they experienced and the sometimes Interpersonal Balance voices they held in their interviews are not always apparent in these gay-identity-related quotations. For example, David described his frustration with how people adopt the viewpoints of others. In essence, as he talked from an Institutional perspective, he voiced how frustrating the earlier external authoring of the Interpersonal Balance felt to him. For David, his gay identity was becoming integrated in his religious beliefs, which had been a difficult area for him in the past:

I think a lot of my anger comes from, it's all related to religion... whether it be religion as an institution or individuals who are religious and try to impose their views on people... I remember reading last week I thought it was a statement or something about how the Catholic church had said that gay marriage is evil.... it's just very frustrating to know that someone feels they have the power to either judge you, or impose on you their values, or to decide what you can or can't be, or whether or not you actually have value as a person, as a human being... any time I have interactions with very religious people, or even just religious people in general, and just not understanding how people can rely so much on an institution to define what's fit for people or what's right or wrong... I think other times I feel angry is just when I feel like that people just don't quite get it. Like when friends of mine just don't understand the privilege or the dominance that they have, heterosexual friends don't understand the privilege that they have, and just wanting them to be a little bit more empathetic to gays and lesbians in general; not even to gays and lesbians as a community, but even just to me as your friend to want to understand.

Ken also described how accepting himself as a gay man allowed him to begin to integrate that identity into his life more fully and begin to advocate for others:

After I was able to really accept myself, I decided okay, if I'm really okay with this, and God's really okay with me, then I just need to be the best gay person that I can be... basically with that epiphany [I] just fully came out, and was like well,

if you don't like it, that's okay... I became active in my work with developing LGBT inclusive policies and procedures, and I am proud of the changes we made. I was able to help educate people, and I always tried to make it funny cause we always talked about coming out and why people feel the need to be mad. So I thought it just helps you be able to be yourself more, and it helps you to be more productive at work. And I said, "You want to talk about coming out issues? I'm a right wing conservative Republican and born again Christian who happens to be gay." You know, toss that around in your head for a little while and talk about a coming out issue. You know, I said, "The gays don't want you because you're a Republican, and Republicans don't want you cause you're gay, and Christians don't want you cause you're gay." It helped kind of break the ice, and the people I had went to church with were like, "Well, that takes a lot of guts to get up there."

Scott described a struggle with deciding to confront others on important issues. He conveyed a certainty about his personal acceptance of a gay identity and an integration of that identity in his life. However, in transitional meaning making fashion, he talked about sometimes doubting himself when he was unsure if he was going to be supported or if he felt unsure that he was willing to create the conflict that seemed imminent if he were to force certain discussions about sexuality with his friends:

I don't want to be seen as the angry person all the time, the oversensitive one... Calling things out or confronting people leads to some conflict in relationships. So the question is, the battle inside is do I want to cause conflict in this relationship? Is it worth it? Can I put this aside and just enjoy the night? And even sometimes even just questioning myself. Am I being oversensitive? Is it really that big of a deal?... There are definitely a lot of emotions that come with this process. There's a lot of disappointment and a lot of false expectations and things like that, and hurt...I've lost a lot of friends I think through this process, not in a blatant way, not with anyone who said you're gay, I don't want to be your friend anymore... friends who pretty much phased me out of their lives, and I didn't quite know why. Then I heard through the grapevine that they just didn't agree with me going out and all these different types of things.

Randy gave an example of the struggles inherent in transitional meaning making. He talked about his role as an advocate at times, but how he would also begin to feel confused somehow in the presence of conflicting information about gay issues. He seemed to be able to accept himself and integrate his gay identity, likely when his



Institutional system was making meaning, but then would at times feel unable to unquestioningly hold his own viewpoint in the presence of negative or conflicting information he was receiving:

It feels as if there is this pressure on the minority to oftentimes educate the majority. And as much as I think that's really important, at times I'm just tired of it. You know, at times I'm just wanting support and encouragement instead of always having to be the educator and having to continue to provide to mainstream society, a society that has been oppressing to us... I see a lot of back and forth on the listserv at times about what is right and what is not right, and what is accurate information and what is not accurate information about the issues, gay men's issues, lesbian issues, transgender issues. And sometimes I don't know what is the truth out there, and so I'm oftentimes really confused... I deal with it in one of two extremes it seems. I either attempt to withdraw or just rage. I just point it out and say what I need to say, or I withdraw. I think it's harder for me to stay grounded and just stay mindfully present. I would like to stay much more grounded and be able to, you know, not go to one of those two extremes... my fantasy of that is a little bit, it's idealistic I guess, you know? If I could just hear at that moment what I'm hearing and at the same time be able to say what I want to say without doing either one of those two extremes.

#### The Institutional Balance and Gay Identity Development

As a person begins to make meaning fully in the Institutional Balance, that person can now take the Interpersonal system they were formerly defined by and hold it in perspective. Earlier, the person was authored by the voices of powerful others as she or he had entered into an ability to live in shared reality – to so fully understand how others felt that the person was ruled by that shared experience. Now, in Institutional meaning making, it is a self-system that organizes the feelings of the individual in the context of the expectations of others. The person now has a self that is not defined by the shared context he or she lives in. The individual can now be the judge between competing demands and can take responsibility for his or her own feelings and decisions. The person still lives in a specific and shaping context, but she or he can name personal values and self-determine preferred roles in the construction of their world.

The Institutional meaning makers described gay identity development most similarly to Fassinger and Miller's (1996) Internalization/Synthesis phase. Their identities as gay men were therefore synthesized and internalized into their overall self-concepts. They were able to maintain their gay identities across contexts and they felt contented in doing so. This description of Internalization/Synthesis is how I had expected participants who made meaning at the Institutional Balance to understand their gay identity development. Institutional meaning makers can define their own systems for viewing themselves and the world and they can hold what they believe to be true about themselves, even in the face of doubt or challenge society or valued others. These participants talked about identifying as gay men and integrating this identity into their lives in similar terms. They talked about their awareness of issues of oppression and many described social or political activist roles. Ben gave a clear example of how it was his Institutional meaning making that allowed him to fully accept himself as gay. He said that he had tried to find self-acceptance through the relationships he had at times (a possibly earlier Interpersonal Balance attempt at self-acceptance), and though relationships were meaningful, they could not make him fully accept himself. For Ben, the important part of the journey seemed to be when he could define and hold his own system for understanding what it meant to be gay, which led to deeper synthesis of his gay identity:

Until you begin that journey in a solid way you can never hope to have a healthy relationship with someone else... I think perhaps if there was one crime that I committed against myself in earlier years, it was to try to believe that a healthy relationship could be found with someone who would give me value. And that was, and from my perspective now I can see that that was an attempt to attenuate the whole journey. But it was an attempt to abrogate the meaning of another person's life for it to be my own. And frankly I think that's probably one of the things that gay men are tempted to do anyway. We grow up trying to figure out

how to fit in, trying to be like other people, at least that's what I read and what I see and how I understand myself, but they are fears. You know you recognize yourself as different and that is bad and it can be dangerous. You try to find out how to be like someone else, the next step is to be someone else. And I fear that gay men probably do that successfully, whether it's be straight, to be married, to be a father, to be a husband, I've seen the energy that goes into that is enough to absorb many lifetimes... the damage that is done from that is just tremendous and I just think that for me all those years trying to figure out how to adopt the meaning of someone else's meaning... I spent a lot of time and a lot of energy and an awful lot of years trying to do that... I would be a liar if I said that I am substantially along that journey, all the journey, I have no idea how to gauge where I am or what progress has been made... but I know that I'm satisfied and I can say I am on the journey.

Mark described Institutional meaning making when he talked about his decision to come out. He described an internally-authored system about his sexuality that would not change, even if important people in his life were disapproving or less than accepting. He was able to capture the moment, now past, when he began to fully internalize his gay identity into all parts of his life:

[Coming out is like] being on the ledge of a burning building. At some point you ask yourself which is going to hurt more, burning to death or jumping... [I] had decided at some point I'm going to have to jump because I'm really tired of living my life, you know, in two places at once, and it's not a fun place to be and it's not at all conducive to sleeping well. And so I had kind of decided at some point that if I end up losing everybody who was in my life before this because of it, then I'm ready to start over. If I do lose them, then I also haven't lost very much because they really couldn't have meant much to me, or I couldn't have meant much to them if they were willing to let this dictate, you know, everything about our relationship... I just, you know, decided I'm just going to be out pretty much, and was... I knew that I couldn't go on living my life the way it was. And it was more of a choice of which is gonna be less painful in the long run. Cause I wasn't, you know, 100% sure that things were going to be fine once I came out, but I knew [I was] completely miserable the way things were now... so I would take that choice and see what happened.

Aaron's Institutional meaning making was apparent when he described his complete comfort with who he is, even if others struggled with him. He talked about what he knew

was right for him, and it was clearly an internally-authored system. He described a gay identity that was synthesized/internalized into his whole life:

Today it's not even a consideration anymore [whether I will come out to others or not]. Like I am so me, I am so me wherever I go that... it just feels odd to even think about it anymore, or to talk about it, or the ways that I talk about it is just like telling my story. So I guess there are points in my life where I identified that gift... but I'm so much settled in being who I am now that it's not even a consideration otherwise... I mean, I don't even know the spaces. It just seems so odd... I'm going to be me. I will walk down the street holding hands with my partner. I will, you know, talk about being gay, or some aspect of being gay, or maybe not talk about it, just depending upon what the conversation is. But certainly, if the conversation comes up I don't stifle what I say... Like ultimately, I just live... I probably would be called an activist somewhat today... but like it's not a title that I early on embraced, but I guess that some of the activism was born there too because it was just this anger about something just not being right about that... an anger about how it impacted me and anger about how many people it probably is going to still impact. And probably learning to tell my truth was something about other people being able to access their truth and be able to do something with it or learn from it or to feel something from it earlier than I was able to... being able to be told enough so that a young kid gets it so that someone is not at six years old praying to die and has a resource for an outlet, or someone at 12 not feeling so alone, or even having thoughts of suicide, or self esteem issues, or not feeling good about themselves.

Rick described an Institutional meaning making system when he talked about his ability to hold his beliefs in the face of powerful others who disagreed with him. As his identity as a gay man was integrated in his life, he became active in advocacy for social justice issues:

I don't think we're flaunting this when we're asking for this right [or gay marriage]. I don't think it's a special [right] at all. I just think it's what everybody else has. They have it. Why can't we have it? What makes us different? But, yet, they don't see it that way... certain things and I don't think we should have to go through, jump through hoops to do this anyway. And I feel resentful that we do so. Britney Spears can get married overnight with all the benefits in the world of being married. But we can't... We felt it was important to talk to state leaders about this issue... I don't know that we changed his mind, but at least I felt that we had done something by meeting with him and talking with him... we felt strong and kind of like advocates, doing something instead of just sitting about. I think if [we were] younger, we might have been afraid to do this. But we have nothing to lose... The state leaders say things like they are just

representing the feelings of most of their constituents, and I said, “You’re supposed to maybe make decisions that are not popular... I think sometimes you have to go against what a lot of people think, and that’s the only way things will change... We had this separation of church and state and I don’t know what happened to that. I hate the gay population being used as a pawn in elections...that you can rally a group against a group of people. I just don’t understand what’s happening... It’s almost like Nazi Germany... That we have a group here that we can get people against and unite and win. And unfortunately, I feel that they were successful.

Rodney described an Institutional meaning making system when he talked about how he was eventually able to trust what he believed about religion, even if valued others believed differently. He said this led to less worry about what others think and therefore a more full integration of his gay identity:

You know, it’s almost like, somewhat like comparing it to, um, I’ll just say like the Christian Right think that their, that that’s the only religion that there is and I had a friend in the past who was very religious and it just, well, maybe a couple, ah, they just could not understand that there could be other religions and that these people aren’t going to go to hell because they don’t believe in what you’re believing. Or accepting whatever it is that you’re accepting here... So I think when the acceptance finally, understanding all that was finally, I’m not going to go to hell... I wonder sometimes if that... being strong is to stick with what you know is right for you... just continually wanting acceptance from everybody else, I mean that’s important, but you have to decide whether you’re going to be happy with that or not. It’s not a fulfillment.

Zach’s Institutional meaning making was described when he talked about how hard it was for him to deal with the fact that he had hurt his former wife and his family in his gay identity process. He was able to voice a clearly internally-authored system when he spoke about how unwilling he was to lie to himself or others any longer about his sexuality, which also communicate his ongoing internalization of gay identity:

As hard as it is, I’m willing to deal with the fact that I was dishonest, that I hurt another human being and brought pain and, in a sense, destroyed my family. Those are very hard things for me to deal with, and there are days when I go through depression about that. There’s probably not a single day that I don’t think about my ex-wife... There are some nights I wake up having dreamt about her, seeing her or holding her hand, remembering the sound of her voice. And it’s

a weird thing to say because there's still often a greater sense of peace within myself than I had before -- I don't feel that I have to lie about who I am. There's no conflict with trying to prove myself to other people over time. Of course, every day a gay man or lesbian woman has to prove themselves in a way that puts them in that position.

Daniel described Institutional meaning making when he talked about his system for understanding discrimination related to diversity. He was unwilling to lose his voice, even if it meant he would lose connections with other people. Daniel was also able to synthesize his experience of oppression as a gay man and use that to understand the experience of other minorities:

I don't think it's right to punish anybody or begrudge anybody, and that's really what I don't like that's done to gay people. If you turn around and do it to other people, and I think that happens with minorities. You know, oh, how can somebody treat black people bad? But then you can treat gay people bad? You can treat women bad? Or you can treat children bad? The list just goes on. That's what I'm saying with that. I don't feel like I need to punish anybody for being who they are because I don't know how they got there. If I knew how they got there maybe I could even help them to change. It wouldn't be necessary to punish them... Anybody who is behaving homophobically, I probably wouldn't want to be around them... Not only is it their problem, but why would I want to be around them? Because that's all those people were doing was separating themselves from me. So I felt like I was being rejected and denied. I probably should have said I appreciate you separating yourself from me. If that's how you feel I don't want you around me either.

Bob's Institutional meaning making system was clear in his unwillingness to deny his value as a gay man, even if it meant that he would not be able to have the relationships with his children that he had longed for over many years. This is also relevant to how he was fully integrated in his gay identity and was unwilling to deny it in any life context:

About two or three years ago my... son looked me up, and he then invited me over... I was able to meet them and talk to them, but they; we can't make a connection. They're very, very LDS, and I'm very atheist and very anti-religion... When [my other sons] looked me up then at first I was even invited over to their homes and stuff, and then they started sending me messages on the church's stand on gays and how if you have a gay son and the church's policy is that if you have a gay son and they ask you if they can bring their partner home you should tell

them no, and then especially if there are young children in the home you don't want to have them exposed to these people and that kind of stuff. And my [children] started sending me this kind of stuff. It makes me so completely sad that I waited for [many] years to reconnect with them and I really feel like not only can I not reconnect with them, but after wanting to for so long now I kind of don't want to because they want me to be something that I'm not and I will not... I will not try to be something I'm not just to make somebody else comfortable.

Perry demonstrated an Institutional meaning making system in relation to Civil Union laws. He talked about an occurrence at a rally related to this cause. He was able to take perspective on his disappointment at the way he had behaved at that rally, and then he further considered how he would like to continue to shape his system for understanding the world. This example also demonstrates a gay identity in which the individual is able to continually consider how he is integrating gayness into all parts of his life and how he wants to continue to do so:

Though the results of the legal issues we were supporting were positive and were gay affirmative, there was a guy for... the protection of the family, who came out to make the announcement... He was saying this was a horrible decision... People were booing him and hissing him and yelling at him... But this little toad said, be quiet, this isn't a rally, this is a press conference... and I think gay people are inculcated to just be good boys and girls... And you know, in retrospect, I am very ashamed and angry at myself for not having had the balls to just get mad... We just didn't have the presence of mind to just tell him to go fuck himself... We had just been told to be good little boys and girls and just shut up and don't rock the boat, and 150 of us did... It should have been a joyous day for us, but we went home absolutely demoralized... And I just say to myself, I will never allow that to happen again.

Steve's Institutional meaning making was apparent in his decision to talk to his pastor when his church asked him to become a deacon. He talked about knowing that he could integrate his sexuality and spirituality, but he was unwilling to hide that he was gay, even if it meant that he would not be able to serve in that capacity in his church:

I was called to become a deacon... and you're not supposed to have sex outside of marriage if you're going to do this... So I went and talked to the senior pastor and

said, “Hey buddy, you know what? I’m gay... I don’t have anybody to have sex with today, but it could happen.”

#### The Institutional/Interindividual Transition and Gay Identity Development

Similar to the group above, the two men who made meaning in the Institutional/Interindividual Balance described gay identity development most consistently with Fassinger and Miller’s (1996) Internalization/Synthesis phase. Their sexuality seemed fully integrated in both their personal and public experiences and connections. They described being gay as an incredibly important part of themselves that had impact on their global experience. They also talked about the multiple life contexts that their gay identities impacted and commented on how other expressions of identity were impacted by being members of a sexual minority group. These two participants, of all participants interviewed, seemed to struggle less with the experience of being gay, which is what I had expected for any participants who made meaning in at least a partially Interindividual way. This is because while Institutional meaning makers formulate their own systems for understanding the world and focus on a single, self-determined form of the self, the Intertindividual person instead sees the potential of having many forms or understandings of the self (Kegan, 1982, 1994). The Interindividual person experiences the self in ongoing transformation, since the earlier, singularly-authored way of viewing the world now seems too limiting. It is in realizing that the meaning making systems of other persons have also been individually conceived and constructed that allows the Interindividual meaning maker to now identify with who he or she can become rather than how he or she must be defined.

For these two men, even as they each worked to make societal change related to how sexual minority individuals are treated in this country, they struggled less personally



and were less defined by living in a homonegative context than the other participants.

Because their meaning making is transitional, they did not describe a purely

Interindividual approach to gay identity development. Therefore, there are elements of the following quotations that are similar to the last group presented in some ways.

However, these two men also demonstrated an increased ability to take perspective on the meaning making systems they have created and sustained. For example, Mason described an Institutional/Interindividual transition meaning making system in the way he talked about issues of power in American politics. He demonstrated an ability to take perspective on his own belief system and argued that the personal belief systems of other people have been developed through their own experiences or histories, and are therefore no more or less valid than his own. Though Mason argued for the inappropriateness of using power to deny the rights of some people, his meaning making allowed him to take perspective on these systems of power in a way that many participants could not. His identity as a gay man appeared clearly integrated throughout this topic and others he discussed:

One thing I struggle with is when people with power use that power to enforce their own beliefs. The fact that [a particularly powerful political figure] brings in his own personal beliefs, that the person who has the kind of authority that he has is able to use his own personal belief system to make those kinds of judgments, that impact the lives of an entire nation. And also that his belief system grows out of a particular religious philosophy, and that he can't see or doesn't understand this, and the people supporting him don't understand the narrowness of that particular philosophy, that like the whole world is either Christian or wrong. I consider myself a Christian, so it isn't that I take exception to people that are Christians, but it's that I take exception to people who don't realize that there are Hindus, and Muslims, and Jews... It just makes me realize that out of fear or ignorance is a strong need on the part of those individuals to hold onto a false belief system, because in some way they're threatened, in some way they're filled with fear, whether it has to do with the real reason her husband doesn't want to have sex with her anymore, or whether it's because he's afraid he might be gay, or whether it's because they're afraid their children might be gay, and that as long

as they hold to their religious beliefs none of this is going to happen. I mean, I don't know. I think it's just fear and ignorance.

Jerry talked about his Institutional beliefs in his currently transitional meaning making.

However, like Mason, he was also able to demonstrate perspective-taking ability related to the way his system for viewing the world had developed. He demonstrated an ability to consider how negative messages about being gay and living in a homonegative context still affected him at times, even though he has fully accepted and integrated his own gay identity:

I have recently realized that my negative cognition continues to this day, and I see part of my gay identity as, "I'm not good enough." That's the negative cognition. But I've dealt with that over the years, the feeling that I'm not good enough has propelled me into overcompensation... And so that compensatory behavior, for me, has worked to my advantage. But it's also been, kind of reinforced the belief that I'm not good enough so I have to do more and more and more... And I got in touch with [inaudible] and realized, you know, god dammit, I am good enough. I'm good just the way I am right now. There's no need for me to continue this feverish quest to keep proving to myself and other people that I'm good enough. Because I'm a gay man, it has been so woven into my psyche that still at some level of operating, I'm not good enough... The sadness is always there in a subterranean sort of way. It's just below the surface, at least the way I experience it... an existential sadness that is more related to the fact that the world that we're in is not in any way, shape, or form ideal.

For the participants, the processes of gay identity development and constructive development were interrelated. The ways these men struggled or felt successful with tasks of gay identity development seemed best conceptualized through their global meaning making, which was discussed in the results chapters.

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### EDUCATION

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<b>The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA</b>	2003-2008
<i>Doctor of Philosophy in APA-Accredited Counseling Psychology Program</i>	
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<b>Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN</b>	2001-2003
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<b>Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN</b>	1995-1996
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The College of Education of The Pennsylvania State University	
<b>University Fellow</b>	August 25, 2003
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### PUBLICATIONS

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- Paul, P. L. & Frieden G. (2008). The lived experience of gay identity development: A phenomenological study. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 2(1)*, Available online at <http://jlc.haworthpress.com>.
- Paul, P. L. (2008). Applying a constructive-developmental approach to issues of sexual orientation and religion in career counseling. *The Career Development Quarterly, 58*, 344-352.
- Bieschke, K. J., Paul, P. L., & Blasko, K. A. (2007). Review of empirical research focused on the experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients in counseling and psychotherapy. In K. J. Bieschke, R. M. Perez, & K. A. Debord (Eds.), *Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender clients* (2nd ed., pp. 293-315). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Counseling and Psychological Services, The Pennsylvania State University	
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### SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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- Paul, P. L., Bieschke, K. J., Blasko, K. A., & Pepper, S. M. (2007, August). *Constructive development and training for multicultural awareness*. Poster session presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Paul, P. L., Bieschke, K. J., & Blasko, K. A. (2007, August). *Addressing intersecting identities when working with issues of sexual orientation*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA.